Sax Rohmer Anthology Vol 2
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Sax Rohmer Anthology

Vol 2

by

Sax Rohmer

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Gaston Max Series

Book 1 — The Yellow Claw

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Paul Harvey Series

Book 1 — Bat-Wing

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The Yellow Claw

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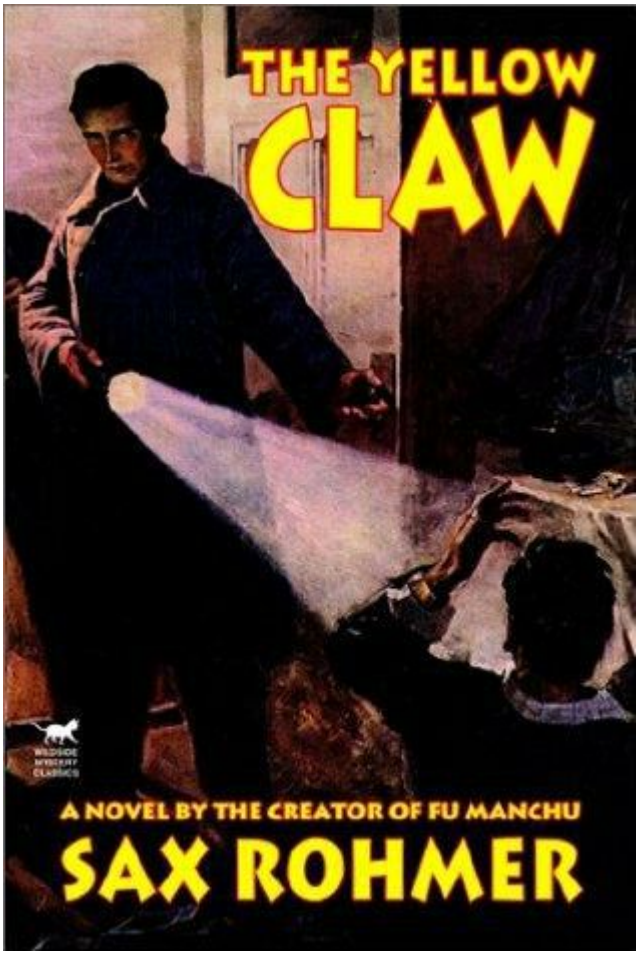

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I. The Lady of the Civet Furs

Henry Leroux wrote busily on. The light of the table-lamp, softened and enriched by its mosaic shade, gave an appearance of added opulence to the already handsome appointments of the room. The little table-clock ticked merrily from half-past eleven to a quarter to twelve.

Into the cozy, bookish atmosphere of the novelist's study penetrated the muffled chime of Big Ben; it chimed the three-quarters. But, with his mind centered upon his work, Leroux wrote on ceaselessly.

An odd figure of a man was this popular novelist, with patchy and untidy hair which lessened the otherwise striking contour of his brow. A neglected and unpicturesque figure, in a baggy, neutral-colored dressing-gown; a figure more fitted to a garret than to this spacious, luxurious workroom, with the soft light playing upon rank after rank of rare and costly editions, deepening the tones in the Persian carpet, making red morocco more red, purifying the vellum and regilding the gold of the choice bindings, caressing lovingly the busts and statuettes surmounting the book-shelves, and twinkling upon the scantily-covered crown of Henry Leroux. The door bell rang.

Leroux, heedless of external matters, pursued his work. But the door bell rang again and continued to ring.

"Soames! Soames!" Leroux raised his voice irascibly, continuing to write the while. "Where the devil are you! Can't you hear the door bell?"

Soames did not reveal himself; and to the ringing of the bell was added the unmistakable rattling of a letter-box.

"Soames!" Leroux put down his pen and stood up. "Damn it! he's out! I have no memory!"

He retied the girdle of his dressing-gown, which had become unfastened, and opened the study door. Opposite, across the entrance lobby, was the outer door; and in the light from the lobby lamp he perceived two laughing eyes peering in under the upraised flap of the letter-box. The ringing ceased.

"Are you VERY angry with me for interrupting you?" cried a girl's voice.

"My dear Miss Cumberly!" said Leroux without irritation; "on the contrary—er—I am delighted to see you—or rather to hear you. There is nobody at home, you know."…

"I DO know," replied the girl firmly, "and I know something else, also. Father assures me that you simply STARVE yourself when Mrs. Leroux is away! So I have brought down an omelette!"

"Omelette!" muttered Leroux, advancing toward the door; "you have—er—brought an omelette! I understand—yes; you have brought an omelette? Er—that is very good of you."

He hesitated when about to open the outer door, raising his hands to his dishevelled hair and unshaven chin. The flap of the letter-box dropped; and the girl outside could be heard stifling her laughter.

"You must think me—er—very rude," began Leroux; "I mean—not to open the door. But"…

"I quite understand," concluded the voice of the unseen one. "You are a most untidy object! And I shall tell Mira DIRECTLY she returns that she has no right to leave you alone like this! Now I am going to hurry back upstairs; so you may appear safely. Don't let the omelette get cold. Good night!"

"No, certainly I shall not!" cried Leroux. "So good of you—I—er—do like omelette… Good night!"

Calmly he returned to his writing-table, where, in the pursuit of the elusive character whose exploits he was chronicling and who had brought him fame and wealth, he forgot in the same moment Helen Cumberly and the omelette.

The table-clock ticked merrily on; SCRATCH—SCRATCH—SPLUTTER—SCRATCH—went Henry Leroux's pen; for this up-to-date litterateur, essayist by inclination, creator of "Martin Zeda, Criminal Scientist" by popular clamor, was yet old-fashioned enough, and sufficient of an enthusiast, to pen his work, while lesser men dictated.

So, amidst that classic company, smiling or frowning upon him from the oaken shelves, where Petronius Arbiter, exquisite, rubbed shoulders with Balzac, plebeian; where Omar Khayyam leaned confidentially toward Philostratus; where Mark Twain, standing squarely beside Thomas Carlyle, glared across the room at George Meredith, Henry Leroux pursued the amazing career of "Martin Zeda."

It wanted but five minutes to the hour of midnight, when again the door bell clamored in the silence.

Leroux wrote steadily on. The bell continued to ring, and, furthermore, the ringer could be heard beating upon the outer door.

"Soames!" cried Leroux irritably, "Soames! Why the hell don't you go to the door!"

Leroux stood up, dashing his pen upon the table.

"I shall have to sack that damned man!" he cried; "he takes too many liberties—stopping out until this hour of the night!"

He pulled open the study door, crossed the hallway, and opened the door beyond.

In, out of the darkness—for the stair lights had been extinguished—staggered a woman; a woman whose pale face exhibited, despite the ravages of sorrow or illness, signs of quite unusual beauty. Her eyes were wide opened, and terror-stricken, the pupils contracted almost to vanishing point. She wore a magnificent cloak of civet fur wrapped tightly about her, and, as Leroux opened the door, she tottered past him into the lobby, glancing back over her shoulder.

With his upraised hands plunged pathetically into the mop of his hair, Leroux turned and stared at the intruder. She groped as if a darkness had descended, clutched at the sides of the study doorway, and then, unsteadily, entered—and sank down upon the big chesterfield in utter exhaustion.

Leroux, rubbing his chin, perplexedly, walked in after her. He scarcely had his foot upon the study carpet, ere the woman started up, tremulously, and shot out from the enveloping furs a bare arm and a pointing, quivering finger.

"Close the door!" she cried hoarsely—"close the door!… He has… followed me!"…

The disturbed novelist, as a man in a dream, turned, retraced his steps, and closed the outer door of the flat. Then, rubbing his chin more vigorously than ever and only desisting from this exercise to fumble in his dishevelled hair, he walked back into the study, whose Athenean calm had thus mysteriously been violated.

Two minutes to midnight; the most respectable flat in respectable Westminster; a lonely and very abstracted novelist—and a pale-faced, beautiful woman, enveloped in costly furs, sitting staring with fearful eyes

straight before her. This was such a scene as his sense of the proprieties and of the probabilities could never have permitted Henry Leroux to create.

His visitor kept moistening her dry lips and swallowing, emotionally.

Standing at a discreet distance from her:—

"Madam," began Leroux, nervously.

She waved her hand, enjoining him to silence, and at the same time intimating that she would explain herself directly speech became possible. Whilst she sought to recover her composure, Leroux, gradually forcing himself out of the dreamlike state, studied her with a sort of anxious curiosity.

It now became apparent to him that his visitor was no more than twenty-five or twenty-six years of age, but illness or trouble, or both together, had seared and marred her beauty. Amid the auburn masses of her hair, gleamed streaks, not of gray, but of purest white. The low brow was faintly wrinkled, and the big—unnaturally big—eyes were purple shaded; whilst two heavy lines traced their way from the corner of the nostrils to the corner of the mouth—of the drooping mouth with the bloodless lips.

Her pallor became more strange and interesting the longer he studied it; for, underlying the skin was a yellow tinge which he found inexplicable, but which he linked in his mind with the contracted pupils of her eyes, seeking vainly for a common cause.

He had a hazy impression that his visitor, beneath her furs, was most inadequately clothed; and seeking confirmation of this, his gaze strayed downward to where one little slippered foot peeped out from the civet furs.

Leroux suppressed a gasp. He had caught a glimpse of a bare ankle!

He crossed to his writing-table, and seated himself, glancing sideways at this living mystery. Suddenly she began, in a voice tremulous and scarcely audible:—

"Mr. Leroux, at a great—at a very great personal risk, I have come to-night. What I have to ask of you—to entreat of you, will… will"…

Two bare arms emerged from the fur, and she began clutching at her throat and bosom as though choking—dying.

Leroux leapt up and would have run to her; but forcing a ghastly smile, she waved him away again.

"It is all right," she muttered, swallowing noisily. But frightful spasms of pain convulsed her, contorting her pale face.

"Some brandy—!" cried Leroux, anxiously.

"If you please," whispered the visitor.

She dropped her arms and fell back upon the chesterfield, insensible.

II. Midnight and Mr. King

Leroux clutched at the corner of the writing-table to steady himself and stood there looking at the deathly face. Under the most favorable circumstances, he was no man of action, although in common with the rest of his kind he prided himself upon the possession of that presence of mind which he lacked. It was a situation which could not have alarmed "Martin Zeda," but it alarmed, immeasurably, nay, struck inert with horror, Martin Zeda's creator.

Then, in upon Leroux's mental turmoil, a sensible idea intruded itself.

"Dr. Cumberly!" he muttered. "I hope to God he is in!"

Without touching the recumbent form upon the chesterfield, without seeking to learn, without daring to learn, if she lived or had died, Leroux, the tempo of his life changed to a breathless gallop, rushed out of the study, across the entrance hail, and, throwing wide the flat door, leapt up the stair to the flat above—that of his old friend, Dr. Cumberly.

The patter of the slippered feet grew faint upon the stair; then, as Leroux reached the landing above, became inaudible altogether.

In Leroux's study, the table-clock ticked merrily on, seeming to hasten its ticking as the hand crept around closer and closer to midnight. The mosaic shade of the lamp mingled reds and blues and greens upon the white ceiling above and poured golden light upon the pages of manuscript strewn about beneath it. This was a typical work-room of a literary man having the ear of the public—typical in every respect, save for the fur-clad figure outstretched upon the settee.

And now the peeping light indiscreetly penetrated to the hem of a silken garment revealed by some disarrangement of the civet fur. To the eye of an experienced observer, had such an observer been present in Henry Leroux's study, this billow of silk and lace behind the sheltering fur must have proclaimed itself the edge of a night-robe, just as the ankle beneath had

proclaimed itself to Henry Leroux's shocked susceptibilities to be innocent of stocking.

Thirty seconds were wanted to complete the cycle of the day, when one of the listless hands thrown across the back of the chesterfield opened and closed spasmodically. The fur at the bosom of the midnight visitor began rapidly to rise and fall.

Then, with a choking cry, the woman struggled upright; her hair, hastily dressed, burst free of its bindings and poured in gleaming cascade down about her shoulders.

Clutching with one hand at her cloak in order to keep it wrapped about her, and holding the other blindly before her, she rose, and with that same odd, groping movement, began to approach the writing-table. The pupils of her eyes were mere pin-points now; she shuddered convulsively, and her skin was dewed with perspiration. Her breath came in agonized gasps.

"God!—I… am dying… and I cannot—tell him!" she breathed.

Feverishly, weakly, she took up a pen, and upon a quarto page, already half filled with Leroux's small, neat, illegible writing, began to scrawl a message, bending down, one hand upon the table, and with her whole body shaking.

Some three or four wavering lines she had written, when intimately, for the flat of Henry Leroux in Palace Mansions lay within sight of the clock-face—Big Ben began to chime midnight.

The writer started back and dropped a great blot of ink upon the paper; then, realizing the cause of the disturbance, forced herself to continue her task.

The chime being completed: ONE! boomed the clock; TWO!… THREE!… FOUR!…

The light in the entrance-hall went out!

FIVE! boomed Big Ben;—

SIX!… SEVEN!…

A hand, of old ivory hue, a long, yellow, clawish hand, with part of a sinewy forearm, crept in from the black lobby through the study doorway and touched the electric switch!

EIGHT!…

The study was plunged in darkness!

Uttering a sob—a cry of agony and horror that came from her very soul—the woman stood upright and turned to face toward the door, clutching the sheet of paper in one rigid hand.

Through the leaded panes of the window above the writing-table swept a silvern beam of moonlight. It poured, searchingly, upon the fur-clad figure swaying by the table; cutting through the darkness of the room like some huge scimitar, to end in a pallid pool about the woman's shadow on the center of the Persian carpet.

Coincident with her sobbing cry—NINE! boomed Big Ben; TEN!…

Two hands—with outstretched, crooked, clutching fingers—leapt from the darkness into the light of the moonbeam.

"God! Oh, God!" came a frenzied, rasping shriek—"MR. KING!"

Straight at the bare throat leapt the yellow hands; a gurgling cry rose—fell—and died away.

Gently, noiselessly, the lady of the civet fur sank upon the carpet by the table; as she fell, a dim black figure bent over her. The tearing of paper told of the note being snatched from her frozen grip; but never for a moment did the face or the form of her assailant encroach upon the moonbeam.

Batlike, this second and terrible visitant avoided the light.

The deed had occupied so brief a time that but one note of the great bell had accompanied it.

TWELVE! rang out the final stroke from the clock-tower. A low, eerie whistle, minor, rising in three irregular notes and falling in weird, unusual cadence to silence again, came from somewhere outside the room.

Then darkness—stillness—with the moon a witness of one more ghastly crime.

Presently, confused and intermingled voices from above proclaimed the return of Leroux with the doctor. They were talking in an excited key, the voice of Leroux, especially, sounding almost hysterical. They created such a disturbance that they attracted the attention of Mr. John Exel, M.P., occupant of the flat below, who at that very moment had returned from the House and was about to insert the key in the lock of his door. He looked up the stairway, but, all being in darkness, was unable to detect anything. Therefore he called out:—

"Is that you, Leroux? Is anything the matter?"

"Matter, Exel!" cried Leroux; "there's a devil of a business! For mercy's sake, come up!"

His curiosity greatly excited, Mr. Exel mounted the stairs, entering the lobby of Leroux's flat immediately behind the owner and Dr. Cumberly—who, like Leroux, was arrayed in a dressing-gown; for he had been in bed when summoned by his friend.

"You are all in the dark, here," muttered Dr. Cumberly, fumbling for the switch.

"Some one has turned the light out!" whispered Leroux, nervously; "I left it on."

Dr. Cumberly pressed the switch, turning up the lobby light as Exel entered from the landing. Then Leroux, entering the study first of the three, switched on the light there, also.

One glance he threw about the room, then started back like a man physically stricken.

"Cumberly!" he gasped, "Cumberly"—and he pointed to the furry heap by the writing-table.

"You said she lay on the chesterfield," muttered Cumberly.

"I left her there."…

Dr. Cumberly crossed the room and dropped upon his knees. He turned the white face toward the light, gently parted the civet fur, and pressed his ear to the silken covering of the breast. He started slightly and looked into the glazing eyes.

Replacing the fur which he had disarranged, the physician stood up and fixed a keen gaze upon the face of Henry Leroux. The latter swallowed noisily, moistening his parched lips.

"Is she"… he muttered; "is she"…

"God's mercy, Leroux!" whispered Mr. Exel—"what does this mean?"

"The woman is dead," said Dr. Cumberly.

In common with all medical men, Dr. Cumberly was a physiognomist; he was a great physician and a proportionately great physiognomist. Therefore, when he looked into Henry Leroux's eyes, he saw there, and recognized, horror and consternation. With no further evidence than that furnished by his own powers of perception, he knew that the mystery of this woman's death was as inexplicable to Henry Leroux as it was inexplicable to himself.

He was a masterful man, with the gray eyes of a diplomat, and he knew Leroux as did few men. He laid both hands upon the novelist's shoulders.

"Brace up, old chap!" he said; "you will want all your wits about you."

"I left her," began Leroux, hesitatingly—"I left"…

"We know all about where you left her, Leroux," interrupted Cumberly; "but what we want to get at is this: what occurred between the time you left her, and the time of our return?"

Exel, who had walked across to the table, and with a horror-stricken face was gingerly examining the victim, now exclaimed:—

"Why! Leroux! she is—she is… UNDRESSED!"

Leroux clutched at his dishevelled hair with both hands.

"My dear Exel!" he cried—"my dear, good man! Why do you use that tone? You say 'she is undressed!' as though I were responsible for the poor soul's condition!"

"On the contrary, Leroux!" retorted Exel, standing very upright, and staring through his monocle; "on the contrary, YOU misconstrue ME! I did not intend to imply—to insinuate—"

"My dear Exel!" broke in Dr. Cumberly—"Leroux is perfectly well aware that you intended nothing unkindly. But the poor chap, quite naturally, is distraught at the moment. You MUST understand that, man!"

"I understand; and I am sorry," said Exel, casting a sidelong glance at the body. "Of course, it is a delicate subject. No doubt Leroux can explain."…

"Damn your explanation!" shrieked Leroux hysterically. "I CANNOT explain! If I could explain, I"…

"Leroux!" said Cumberly, placing his arm paternally about the shaking man—"you are such a nervous subject. DO make an effort, old fellow. Pull yourself together. Exel does not know the circumstances—"

"I am curious to learn them," said the M.P. icily.

Leroux was about to launch some angry retort, but Cumberly forced him into the chesterfield, and crossing to a bureau, poured out a stiff peg of brandy from a decanter which stood there. Leroux sank upon the chesterfield, rubbing his fingers up and down his palms with a curious nervous movement and glancing at the dead woman, and at Exel, alternately, in a mechanical, regular fashion, pathetic to behold.

Mr. Exel, tapping his boot with the head of his inverted cane, was staring fixedly at the doctor.

"Here you are, Leroux," said Cumberly; "drink this up, and let us arrange our facts in decent order before we—"

"Phone for the police?" concluded Exel, his gaze upon the last speaker.

Leroux drank the brandy at a gulp and put down the glass upon a little persian coffee table with a hand which he had somehow contrived to steady.

"You are keen on the official forms, Exel?" he said, with a wry smile. "Please accept my apology for my recent—er—outburst, but picture this thing happening in your place!"

"I cannot," declared Exel, bluntly.

"You lack imagination," said Cumberly. "Take a whisky and soda, and help me to search the flat."

"Search the flat!"

The physician raised a forefinger, forensically.

"Since you, Exel, if not actually in the building, must certainly have been within sight of the street entrance at the moment of the crime, and since Leroux and I descended the stair and met you on the landing, it is reasonable to suppose that the assassin can only be in one place: HERE!"

"HERE!" cried Exel and Leroux, together.

"Did you see anyone leave the lower hall as you entered?"

"No one; emphatically, there was no one there!"

"Then I am right."

"Good God!" whispered Exel, glancing about him, with a new, and keen apprehensiveness.

"Take your drink," concluded Cumberly, "and join me in my search."

"Thanks," replied Exel, nervously proffering a cigar-case; "but I won't drink."

"As you wish," said the doctor, who thus, in his masterful way, acted the host; "and I won't smoke. But do you light up."

"Later," muttered Exel; "later. Let us search, first."

Leroux stood up; Cumberly forced him back.

"Stay where you are, Leroux; it is elementary strategy to operate from a fixed base. This study shall be the base. Ready, Exel?"

Exel nodded, and the search commenced. Leroux sat rigidly upon the settee, his hands resting upon his knees, watching and listening. Save for the merry ticking of the table-clock, and the movements of the searchers

from room to room, nothing disturbed the silence. From the table, and that which lay near to it, he kept his gaze obstinately averted.

Five or six minutes passed in this fashion, Leroux expecting each to bring a sudden outcry. He was disappointed. The searchers returned, Exel noticeably holding himself aloof and Cumberly very stern.

Exel, a cigar between his teeth, walked to the writing-table, carefully circling around the dreadful obstacle which lay in his path, to help himself to a match. As he stooped to do so, he perceived that in the closed right hand of the dead woman was a torn scrap of paper.

"Leroux! Cumberly!" he exclaimed; "come here!"

He pointed with the match as Cumberly hurriedly crossed to his side. Leroux, inert, remained where he sat, but watched with haggard eyes. Dr. Cumberly bent down and sought to detach the paper from the grip of the poor cold fingers, without tearing it. Finally he contrived to release the fragment, and, perceiving it to bear some written words, he spread it out beneath the lamp, on the table, and eagerly scanned it, lowering his massive gray head close to the writing.

He inhaled, sibilantly.

"Do you see, Exel?" he jerked—for Exel was bending over his shoulder.

"I do—but I don't understand."

"What is it?" came hollowly from Leroux.

"It is the bottom part of an unfinished note," said Cumberly, slowly. "It is written shakily in a woman's hand, and it reads:—'Your wife'"…

Leroux sprang to his feet and crossed the room in three strides.

"Wife!" he muttered. His voice seemed to be choked in his throat; "my wife! It says something about my wife?"

"It says," resumed the doctor, quietly, "'your wife.' Then there's a piece torn out, and the two words 'Mr. King.' No stop follows, and the line is evidently incomplete."

"My wife!" mumbled Leroux, staring unseeingly at the fragment of paper. "MY WIFE! MR. KING! Oh! God! I shall go mad!"

"Sit down!" snapped Dr. Cumberly, turning to him; "damn it, Leroux, you are worse than a woman!"

In a manner almost childlike, the novelist obeyed the will of the stronger man, throwing himself into an armchair, and burying his face in his hands.

"My wife!" he kept muttering—"my wife!"…

Exel and the doctor stood staring at one another; when suddenly, from outside the flat, came a metallic clattering, followed by a little suppressed cry. Helen Cumberly, in daintiest deshabille, appeared in the lobby, carrying, in one hand, a chafing-dish, and, in the other, the lid. As she advanced toward the study, from whence she had heard her father's voice:—

"Why, Mr. Leroux!" she cried, "I shall CERTAINLY report you to Mira, now! You have not even touched the omelette!"

"Good God! Cumberly! stop her!" muttered Exel, uneasily. "The door was not latched!"…

But it was too late. Even as the physician turned to intercept his daughter, she crossed the threshold of the study. She stopped short at perceiving Exel; then, with a woman's unerring intuition, divined a tragedy, and, in the instant of divination, sought for, and found, the hub of the tragic wheel.

One swift glance she cast at the fur-clad form, prostrate.

The chafing-dish fell from her hand, and the omelette rolled, a grotesque mass, upon the carpet. She swayed, dizzily, raising one hand to her brow, but had recovered herself even as Leroux sprang forward to support her.

"All right, Leroux!" cried Cumberly; "I will take her upstairs again. Wait for me, Exel."

Exel nodded, lighted his cigar, and sat down in a chair, remote from the writing-table.

"Mira—my wife!" muttered Leroux, standing, looking after Dr. Cumberly and his daughter as they crossed the lobby. "She will report to—my wife."…

In the outer doorway, Helen Cumberly looked back over her shoulder, and her glance met that of Leroux. Hers was a healing glance and a strengthening glance; it braced him up as nothing else could have done. He turned to Exel.

"For Heaven's sake, Exel!" he said, evenly, "give me your advice—give me your help; I am going to 'phone for the police."

Exel looked up with an odd expression.

"I am entirely at your service, Leroux," he said. "I can quite understand how this ghastly affair has shaken you up."

"It was so sudden," said the other, plaintively. "It is incredible that so much emotion can be crowded into so short a period of a man's life."…

Big Ben chimed the quarter after midnight. Leroux, eyes averted, walked to the writing-table, and took up the telephone.

III. Inspector Dunbar Takes Charge

Detective-Inspector Dunbar was admitted by Dr. Cumberly. He was a man of notable height, large-boned, and built gauntly and squarely. His clothes fitted him ill, and through them one seemed to perceive the massive scaffolding of his frame. He had gray hair retiring above a high brow, but worn long and untidily at the back; a wire-like straight-cut mustache, also streaked with gray, which served to accentuate the grimness of his mouth and slightly undershot jaw. A massive head, with tawny, leonine eyes; indeed, altogether a leonine face, and a frame indicative of tremendous nervous energy.

In the entrance lobby he stood for a moment.

"My name is Cumberly," said the doctor, glancing at the card which the Scotland Yard man had proffered. "I occupy the flat above."

"Glad to know you, Dr. Cumberly," replied the detective in a light and not unpleasant voice—and the fierce eyes momentarily grew kindly.

"This—" continued Cumberly, drawing Dunbar forward into the study, "is my friend, Leroux—Henry Leroux, whose name you will know?"

"I have not that pleasure," replied Dunbar.

"Well," added Cumberly, "he is a famous novelist, and his flat, unfortunately, has been made the scene of a crime. This is Detective-Inspector Dunbar, who has come to solve our difficulties, Leroux." He turned to where Exel stood upon the hearth-rug—toying with his monocle. "Mr. John Exel, M.P."

"Glad to know you, gentlemen," said Dunbar.

Leroux rose from the armchair in which he had been sitting and stared, drearily, at the newcomer. Exel screwed the monocle into his right eye, and likewise surveyed the detective. Cumberly, taking a tumbler from the bureau, said:—

"A scotch-and-soda, Inspector?"

"It is a suggestion," said Dunbar, "that, coming from a medical man, appeals."

Whilst the doctor poured out the whisky and squirted the soda into the glass, Inspector Dunbar, standing squarely in the middle of the room, fixed his eyes upon the still form lying in the shadow of the writing-table.

"You will have been called in, doctor," he said, taking the proffered tumbler, "at the time of the crime?"

"Exactly!" replied Cumberly. "Mr. Leroux ran up to my flat and summoned me to see the woman."

"What time would that be?"

"Big Ben had just struck the final stroke of twelve when I came out on to the landing."

"Mr. Leroux would be waiting there for you?"

"He stood in my entrance-lobby whilst I slipped on my dressing-gown, and we came down together."

"I was entering from the street," interrupted Exel, "as they were descending from above"…

"You can enter from the street, sir, in a moment," said Dunbar, holding up his hand. "One witness at a time, if you please."

Exel shrugged his shoulders and turned slightly, leaning his elbow upon the mantelpiece and flicking off the ash from his cigar.

"I take it you were in bed?" questioned Dunbar, turning again to the doctor.

"I had been in bed about a quarter of an hour when I was aroused by the ringing of the door-bell. This ringing struck me as so urgent that I ran out in my pajamas, and found there Mr. Leroux, in a very disturbed state—"

"What did he say? Give his own words as nearly as you remember them."

Leroux, who had been standing, sank slowly back into the armchair, with his eyes upon Dr. Cumberly as the latter replied:—

"He said 'Cumberly! Cumberly! For God's sake, come down at once; there is a strange woman in my flat, apparently in a dying condition!'"

"What did you do?"

"I ran into my bedroom and slipped on my dressing-gown, leaving Mr. Leroux in the entrance-hall. Then, with the clock chiming the last stroke of midnight, we came out together and I closed my door behind me. There was

no light on the stair; but our conversation—Mr. Leroux was speaking in a very high-pitched voice"…

"What was he saying?"

"He was explaining to me how some woman, unknown to him, had interrupted his work a few minutes before by ringing his door-bell."…

Inspector Dunbar held up his hand.

"I won't ask you to repeat what he said, doctor; Mr. Leroux, presently, can give me his own words."

"We had descended to this floor, then," resumed Cumberly, "when Mr. Exel, entering below, called up to us, asking if anything was the matter. Leroux replied, 'Matter, Exel! There's a devil of a business! For mercy's sake, come up!'"

"Well?"

"Mr. Exel thereupon joined us at the door of this flat."

"Was it open?"

"Yes. Mr. Leroux had rushed up to me, leaving the door open behind him. The light was out, both in the lobby and in the study, a fact upon which I commented at the time. It was all the more curious as Mr. Leroux had left both lights on!"…

"Did he say so?"

"He did. The circumstances surprised him to a marked degree. We came in and I turned up the light in the lobby. Then Leroux, entering the study, turned up the light there, too. I entered next, followed by Mr. Exel—and we saw the body lying where you see it now."

"Who saw it first?"

"Mr. Leroux; he drew my attention to it, saying that he had left her lying on the chesterfield and NOT upon the floor."

"You examined her?"

"I did. She was dead, but still warm. She exhibited signs of recent illness, and of being addicted to some drug habit; probably morphine. This, beyond doubt, contributed to her death, but the direct cause was asphyxiation. She had been strangled!"

"My God!" groaned Leroux, dropping his face into his hands.

"You found marks on her throat?"

"The marks were very slight. No great pressure was required in her weak condition."

"You did not move the body?"

"Certainly not; a more complete examination must be made, of course. But I extracted a piece of torn paper from her clenched right hand."

Inspector Dunbar lowered his tufted brows.

"I'm not glad to know you did that," he said. "It should have been left."

"It was done on the spur of the moment, but without altering the position of the hand or arm. The paper lies upon the table, yonder."

Inspector Dunbar took a long drink. Thus far he had made no attempt to examine the victim. Pulling out a bulging note-case from the inside pocket of his blue serge coat, he unscrewed a fountain-pen, carefully tested the nib upon his thumb nail, and made three or four brief entries. Then, stretching out one long arm, he laid the wallet and the pen beside his glass upon the top of a bookcase, without otherwise changing his position, and glancing aside at Exel, said:—

"Now, Mr. Exel, what help can you give us?"

"I have little to add to Dr. Cumberly's account," answered Exel, offhandedly. "The whole thing seemed to me"…

"What it seemed," interrupted Dunbar, "does not interest Scotland Yard, Mr. Exel, and won't interest the jury."

Leroux glanced up for a moment, then set his teeth hard, so that his jaw muscles stood out prominently under the pallid skin.

"What do you want to know, then?" asked Exel.

"I will be wanting to know," said Dunbar, "where you were coming from, to-night?"

"From the House of Commons."

"You came direct?"

"I left Sir Brian Malpas at the corner of Victoria Street at four minutes to twelve by Big Ben, and walked straight home, actually entering here, from the street, as the clock was chiming the last stroke of midnight."

"Then you would have walked up the street from an easterly direction?"

"Certainly."

"Did you meet any one or anything?"

"A taxi-cab, empty—for the hood was lowered—passed me as I turned the corner. There was no other vehicle in the street, and no person."

"You don't know from which door the cab came?"

"As I turned the corner," replied Exel, "I heard the man starting his engine, although when I actually saw the cab, it was in motion; but judging by the sound to which I refer, the cab had been stationary, if not at the door of Palace Mansions, certainly at that of the next block—St. Andrew's Mansions."

"Did you hear, or see anything else?"

"I saw nothing whatever. But just as I approached the street door, I heard a peculiar whistle, apparently proceeding from the gardens in the center of the square. I attached no importance to it at the time."

"What kind of whistle?"

"I have forgotten the actual notes, but the effect was very odd in some way."

"In what way?"

"An impression of this sort is not entirely reliable, Inspector; but it struck me as Oriental."

"Ah!" said Dunbar, and reached out the long arm for his notebook.

"Can I be of any further assistance?" said Exel, glancing at his watch.

"You had entered the hall-way and were about to enter your own flat when the voices of Dr. Cumberly and Mr. Leroux attracted your attention?"

"I actually had the key in my hand," replied Exel.

"Did you actually have the key in the lock?"

"Let me think," mused Exel, and he took out a bunch of keys and dangled them, reflectively, before his eyes. "No! I was fumbling for the right key when I heard the voices above me."

"But were you facing your door?"

"No," averred Exel, perceiving the drift of the inspector's inquiries; "I was facing the stairway the whole time, and although it was in darkness, there is a street lamp immediately outside on the pavement, and I can swear, positively, that no one descended; that there was no one in the hall nor on the stair, except Mr. Leroux and Dr. Cumberly."

"Ah!" said Dunbar again, and made further entries in his book. "I need not trouble you further, sir. Good night!"

Exel, despite his earlier attitude of boredom, now ignored this official dismissal, and, tossing the stump of his cigar into the grate, lighted a cigarette, and with both hands thrust deep in his pockets, stood leaning back against the mantelpiece. The detective turned to Leroux.

"Have a brandy-and-soda?" suggested Dr. Cumberly, his eyes turned upon the pathetic face of the novelist.

But Leroux shook his head, wearily.

"Go ahead, Inspector!" he said. "I am anxious to tell you all I know. God knows I am anxious to tell you."

A sound was heard of a key being inserted in the lock of a door.

Four pairs of curious eyes were turned toward the entrance lobby, when the door opened, and a sleek man of medium height, clean shaven, but with his hair cut low upon the cheek bones, so as to give the impression of short side-whiskers, entered in a manner at once furtive and servile.

He wore a black overcoat and a bowler hat. Reclosing the door, he turned, perceived the group in the study, and fell back as though someone had struck him a fierce blow.

Abject terror was written upon his features, and, for a moment, the idea of flight appeared to suggest itself urgently to him; but finally, he took a step forward toward the study.

"Who's this?" snapped Dunbar, without removing his leonine eyes from the newcomer.

"It is Soames," came the weary voice of Leroux.

"Butler?"

"Yes."

"Where's he been?"

"I don't know. He remained out without my permission."

"He did, eh?"

Inspector Dunbar thrust forth a long finger at the shrinking form in the doorway.

"Mr. Soames," he said, "you will be going to your own room and waiting there until I ring for you."

"Yes, sir," said Soames, holding his hat in both bands, and speaking huskily. "Yes, sir: certainly, sir."

He crossed the lobby and disappeared.

"There is no other way out, is there?" inquired the detective, glancing at Dr. Cumberly.

"There is no other way," was the reply; "but surely you don't suspect"…

"I would suspect the Archbishop of Westminster," snapped Dunbar, "if he came in like that! Now, sir,"—he turned to Leroux—"you were alone, here,

to-night?"

"Quite alone, Inspector. The truth is, I fear, that my servants take liberties in the absence of my wife."

"In the absence of your wife? Where is your wife?"

"She is in Paris."

"Is she a Frenchwoman?"

"No! oh, no! But my wife is a painter, you understand, and—er—I met her in Paris—er—… Must you insist upon these—domestic particulars, Inspector?"

"If Mr. Exel is anxious to turn in," replied the inspector, "after his no doubt exhausting duties at the House, and if Dr. Cumberly—"

"I have no secrets from Cumberly!" interjected Leroux. "The doctor has known me almost from boyhood, but—er—" turning to the politician —"don't you know, Exel—no offense, no offense"…

"My dear Leroux," responded Exel hastily, "I am the offender! Permit me to wish you all good night."

He crossed the study, and, at the door, paused and turned.

"Rely upon me, Leroux," he said, "to help in any way within my power."

He crossed the lobby, opened the outer door, and departed.

"Now, Mr. Leroux," resumed Dunbar, "about this matter of your wife's absence."

IV. A Window is Opened

Whilst Henry Leroux collected his thoughts, Dr. Cumberly glanced across at the writing-table where lay the fragment of paper which had been clutched in the dead woman's hand, then turned his head again toward the inspector, staring at him curiously. Since Dunbar had not yet attempted even to glance at the strange message, he wondered what had prompted the present line of inquiry.

"My wife," began Leroux, "shared a studio in Paris, at the time that I met her, with an American lady a very talented portrait painter—er—a Miss Denise Ryland. You may know her name?—but of course, you don't, no! Well, my wife is, herself, quite clever with her brush; in fact she has

exhibited more than once at the Paris Salon. We agreed at—er—the time of our—of our—engagement, that she should be free to visit her old artistic friends in Paris at any time. You understand? There was to be no let or hindrance… Is this really necessary, Inspector?"

"Pray go on, Mr. Leroux."

"Well, you understand, it was a give-and-take arrangement; because I am afraid that I, myself, demand certain—sacrifices from my wife—and—er—I did not feel entitled to—interfere"…

"You see, Inspector," interrupted Dr. Cumberly, "they are a Bohemian pair, and Bohemians, inevitably, bore one another at times! This little arrangement was intended as a safety-valve. Whenever ennui attacked Mrs. Leroux, she was at liberty to depart for a week to her own friends in Paris, leaving Leroux to the bachelor's existence which is really his proper state; to go unshaven and unshorn, to dine upon bread and cheese and onions, to work until all hours of the morning, and generally to enjoy himself!"

"Does she usually stay long?" inquired Dunbar.

"Not more than a week, as a rule," answered Leroux.

"You must excuse me," continued the detective, "if I seem to pry into intimate matters; but on these occasions, how does Mrs. Leroux get on for money?"

"I have opened a credit for her," explained the novelist, wearily, "at the Credit Lyonnais, in Paris."

Dunbar scribbled busily in his notebook.

"Does she take her maid with her?" he jerked, suddenly.

"She has no maid at the moment," replied Leroux; "she has been without one for twelve months or more, now."

"When did you last hear from her?"

"Three days ago."

"Did you answer the letter?"

"Yes; my answer was amongst the mail which Soames took to the post, to-night."

"You said, though, if I remember rightly, that he was out without permission?"

Leroux ran his fingers through his hair.

"I meant that he should only have been absent five minutes or so; whilst he remained out for more than an hour."

Inspector Dunbar nodded, comprehendingly, tapping his teeth with the head of the fountain-pen.

"And the other servants?"

"There are only two: a cook and a maid. I released them for the evening—glad to get rid of them—wanted to work."

"They are late?"

"They take liberties, damnable liberties, because I am easy-going."

"I see," said Dunbar. "So that you were quite alone this evening, when"—he nodded in the direction of the writing-table—"your visitor came?"

"Quite alone."

"Was her arrival the first interruption?"

"No—er—not exactly. Miss Cumberly…"

"My daughter," explained Dr. Cumberly, "knowing that Mr. Leroux, at these times, was very neglectful in regard to meals, prepared him an omelette, and brought it down in a chafing-dish."

"How long did she remain?" asked the inspector of Leroux.

"I—er—did not exactly open the door. We chatted, through—er—through the letter-box, and she left the omelette outside on the landing."

"What time would that be?"

"It was a quarter to twelve," declared Cumberly. "I had been supping with some friends, and returned to find Helen, my daughter, engaged in preparing the omelette. I congratulated her upon the happy thought, knowing that Leroux was probably starving himself."

"I see. The omelette, though, seems to be upset here on the floor?" said the inspector.

Cumberly briefly explained how it came to be there, Leroux punctuating his friend's story with affirmative nods.

"Then the door of the flat was open all the time?" cried Dunbar.

"Yes," replied Cumberly; "but whilst Exel and I searched the other rooms—and our search was exhaustive—Mr. Leroux remained here in the study, and in full view of the lobby—as you see for yourself."

"No living thing," said Leroux, monotonously, "left this flat from the time that the three of us, Exel, Cumberly, and I, entered, up to the time that Miss Cumberly came, and, with the doctor, went out again."

"H'm!" said the inspector, making notes; "it appears so, certainly. I will ask you then, for your own account, Mr. Leroux, of the arrival of the

woman in the civet furs. Pay special attention"—he pointed with his fountain-pen—"to the TIME at which the various incidents occurred."

Leroux, growing calmer as he proceeded with the strange story, complied with the inspector's request. He had practically completed his account when the door-bell rang.

"It's the servants," said Dr. Cumberly. "Soames will open the door."

But Soames did not appear.

The ringing being repeated:—

"I told him to remain in his room," said Dunbar, "until I rang for him, I remember—"

"I will open the door," said Cumberly.

"And tell the servants to stay in the kitchen," snapped Dunbar.

Dr. Cumberly opened the door, admitting the cook and housemaid.

"There has been an unfortunate accident," he said—"but not to your master; you need not be afraid. But be good enough to remain in the kitchen for the present."

Peeping in furtively as they passed, the two women crossed the lobby and went to their own quarters.

"Mr. Soames next," muttered Dunbar, and, glancing at Cumberly as he returned from the lobby:—"Will you ring for him?" he requested.

Dr. Cumberly nodded, and pressed a bell beside the mantelpiece. An interval followed, in which the inspector made notes and Cumberly stood looking at Leroux, who was beating his palms upon his knees, and staring unseeingly before him.

Cumberly rang again; and in response to the second ring, the housemaid appeared at the door.

"I rang for Soames," said Dr. Cumberly.

"He is not in, sir," answered the girl.

Inspector Dunbar started as though he had been bitten.

"What!" he cried; "not in?"

"No, sir," said the girl, with wide-open, frightened eyes.

Dunbar turned to Cumberly.

"You said there was no other way out!"

"There IS no other way, to my knowledge."

"Where's his room?"

Cumberly led the way to a room at the end of a short corridor, and Inspector Dunbar, entering, and turning up the light, glanced about the little apartment. It was a very neat servants' bedroom; with comfortable, quite simple, furniture; but the chest-of-drawers had been hastily ransacked, and the contents of a trunk—or some of its contents—lay strewn about the floor.

"He has packed his grip!" came Leroux's voice from the doorway. "It's gone!"

The window was wide open. Dunbar sprang forward and leaned out over the ledge, looking to right and left, above and below.

A sort of square courtyard was beneath, and for the convenience of tradesmen, a hand-lift was constructed outside the kitchens of the three flats comprising the house; i.e.:—Mr. Exel's, ground floor, Henry Leroux's second floor, and Dr. Cumberly's, top. It worked in a skeleton shaft which passed close to the left of Soames' window.

For an active man, this was a good enough ladder, and the inspector withdrew his head shrugging his square shoulders, irritably.

"My fault entirely!" he muttered, biting his wiry mustache. "I should have come and seen for myself if there was another way out."

Leroux, in a new flutter of excitement, now craned from the window.

"It might be possible to climb down the shaft," he cried, after a brief survey, "but not if one were carrying a heavy grip, such as that which he has taken!"

"H'm!" said Dunbar. "You are a writing gentleman, I understand, and yet it does not occur to you that he could have lowered the bag on a cord, if he wanted to avoid the noise of dropping it!"

"Yes—er—of course!" muttered Leroux. "But really—but really—oh, good God! I am bewildered! What in Heaven's name does it all mean!"

"It means trouble," replied Dunbar, grimly; "bad trouble."

They returned to the study, and Inspector Dunbar, for the first time since his arrival, walked across and examined the fragmentary message, raising his eyebrows when he discovered that it was written upon the same paper as Leroux's MSS. He glanced, too, at the pen lying on a page of "Martin Zeda" near the lamp and at the inky splash which told how hastily the pen had been dropped.

Then—his brows drawn together—he stooped to the body of the murdered woman. Partially raising the fur cloak, he suppressed a gasp of

astonishment.

"Why! she only wears a silk night-dress, and a pair of suede slippers!"

He glanced back over his shoulder.

"I had noted that," said Cumberly. "The whole business is utterly extraordinary."

"Extraordinary is no word for it!" growled the inspector, pursuing his examination… "Marks of pressure at the throat—yes; and generally unhealthy appearance."

"Due to the drug habit," interjected Dr. Cumberly.

"What drug?"

"I should not like to say out of hand; possibly morphine."

"No jewelry," continued the detective, musingly; "wedding ring—not a new one. Finger nails well cared for, but recently neglected. Hair dyed to hide gray patches; dye wanted renewing. Shoes, French. Night-robe, silk; good lace; probably French, also. Faint perfume—don't know what it is—apparently proceeding from civet fur. Furs, magnificent; very costly."…

He slightly moved the table-lamp in order to direct its light upon the white face. The bloodless lips were parted and the detective bent, closely peering at the teeth thus revealed.

"Her teeth were oddly discolored, doctor," he said, taking out a magnifying glass and examining them closely. "They had been recently scaled, too; so that she was not in the habit of neglecting them."

Dr. Cumberly nodded.

"The drug habit, again," he said guardedly; "a proper examination will establish the full facts."

The inspector added brief notes to those already made, ere he rose from beside the body. Then:—

"You are absolutely certain," he said, deliberately, facing Leroux, "that you had never set eyes on this woman prior to her coming here, to-night?"

"I can swear it!" said Leroux.

"Good!" replied the detective, and closed his notebook with a snap. "Usual formalities will have to be gone through, but I don't think I need trouble you, gentlemen, any further, to-night."

V. Doctors Differ

Dr. Cumberly walked slowly upstairs to his own flat, a picture etched indelibly upon his mind, of Henry Leroux, with a face of despair, sitting below in his dining-room and listening to the ominous sounds proceeding from the study, where the police were now busily engaged. In the lobby he met his daughter Helen, who was waiting for him in a state of nervous suspense.

"Father!" she began, whilst rebuke died upon the doctor's lips—"tell me quickly what has happened."

Perceiving that an explanation was unavoidable, Dr. Cumberly outlined the story of the night's gruesome happenings, whilst Big Ben began to chime the hour of one.

Helen, eager-eyed, and with her charming face rather pale, hung upon every word of the narrative.

"And now," concluded her father, "you must go to bed. I insist."

"But father!" cried the girl—"there is some thing"…

She hesitated, uneasily.

"Well, Helen, go on," said the doctor.

"I am afraid you will refuse."

"At least give me the opportunity."

"Well—in the glimpse, the half-glimpse, which I had of her, I seemed"…

Dr. Cumberly rested his hands upon his daughter's shoulders characteristically, looking into the troubled gray eyes.

"You don't mean," he began…

"I thought I recognized her!" whispered the girl.

"Good God! can it be possible?"

"I have been trying, ever since, to recall where we had met, but without result. It might mean so much"…

Dr. Cumberly regarded her, fixedly.

"It might mean so much to—Mr. Leroux. But I suppose you will say it is impossible?"

"It IS impossible," said Dr. Cumberly firmly; "dismiss the idea, Helen."

"But father," pleaded the girl, placing her hands over his own, "consider what is at stake"…

"I am anxious that you should not become involved in this morbid business."

"But you surely know me better than to expect me to faint or become hysterical, or anything silly like that! I was certainly shocked when I came down to-night, because—well, it was all so frightfully unexpected"…

Dr. Cumberly shook his head. Helen put her arms about his neck and raised her eyes to his.

"You have no right to refuse," she said, softly: "don't you see that?"

Dr. Cumberly frowned. Then:—

"You are right, Helen," he agreed. "I should know your pluck well enough. But if Inspector Dunbar is gone, the police may refuse to admit us"…

"Then let us hurry!" cried Helen. "I am afraid they will take away"…

Side by side they descended to Henry Leroux's flat, ringing the bell, which, an hour earlier, the lady of the civet furs had rung.

A sergeant in uniform opened the door.

"Is Detective-Inspector Dunbar here?" inquired the physician.

"Yes, sir."

"Say that Dr. Cumberly wishes to speak to him. And"—as the man was about to depart—"request him not to arouse Mr. Leroux."

Almost immediately the inspector appeared, a look of surprise upon his face, which increased on perceiving the girl beside her father.

"This is my daughter, Inspector," explained Cumberly; "she is a contributor to the Planet, and to various magazines, and in this journalistic capacity, meets many people in many walks of life. She thinks she may be of use to you in preparing your case."

Dunbar bowed rather awkwardly.

"Glad to meet you, Miss Cumberly," came the inevitable formula. "Entirely at your service."

"I had an idea, Inspector," said the girl, laying her hand confidentially upon Dunbar's arm, "that I recognized, when I entered Mr. Leroux's study, tonight"—Dunbar nodded—"that I recognized—the—the victim!"

"Good!" said the inspector, rubbing his palms briskly together. His tawny eyes sparkled. "And you would wish to see her again before we take her away. Very plucky of you, Miss Cumberly! But then, you are a doctor's daughter."

They entered, and the inspector closed the door behind them.

"Don't arouse poor Leroux," whispered Cumberly to the detective. "I left him on a couch in the dining-room."…

"He is still there," replied Dunbar; "poor chap! It is"…

He met Helen's glance, and broke off shortly.

In the study two uniformed constables, and an officer in plain clothes, were apparently engaged in making an inventory—or such was the impression conveyed. The clock ticked merrily on; its ticking a desecration, where all else was hushed in deference to the grim visitor. The body of the murdered woman had been laid upon the chesterfield, and a little, dark, bearded man was conducting an elaborate examination; when, seeing the trio enter, he hastily threw the coat of civet fur over the body, and stood up, facing the intruders.

"It's all right, doctor," said the inspector; "and we shan't detain you a moment." He glanced over his shoulder. "Mr. Hilton, M.R.C.S." he said, indicating the dark man—"Dr. Cumberly and Miss Cumberly."

The divisional surgeon bowed to Helen and eagerly grasped the hand of the celebrated physician.

"I am fortunate in being able to ask your opinion," he began…

Dr. Cumberly nodded shortly, and with upraised hand, cut him short.

"I shall willingly give you any assistance in my power," he said; "but my daughter has voluntarily committed herself to a rather painful ordeal, and I am anxious to get it over."

He stooped and raised the fur from the ghastly face.

Helen, her hand resting upon her father's shoulder, ventured one rapid glance and then looked away, shuddering slightly. Dr. Cumberly replaced the coat and gazed anxiously at his daughter. But Helen, with admirable courage, having closed her eyes for a moment, reopened them, and smiled at her father's anxiety. She was pale, but perfectly composed.

"Well, Miss Cumberly?" inquired the inspector, eagerly; whilst all in the room watched this slim girl in her charming deshabille, this dainty figure so utterly out of place in that scene of morbid crime.

She raised her gray eyes to the detective.

"I still believe that I have seen the face, somewhere, before. But I shall have to reflect a while—I meet so many folks, you know, in a casual way—before I can commit myself to any statement."

In the leonine eyes looking into hers gleamed the light of admiration and approval. The canny Scotsman admired this girl for her beauty, as a matter of course, for her courage, because courage was a quality standing high in his estimation, but, above all, for her admirable discretion.

"Very proper, Miss Cumberly," he said; "very proper and wise on your part. I don't wish to hurry you in any way, but"—he hesitated, glancing at the man in plain clothes, who had now resumed a careful perusal of a newspaper—"but her name doesn't happen to be Vernon—"

"Vernon!" cried the girl, her eyes lighting up at sound of the name. "Mrs. Vernon! it is! it is! She was pointed out to me at the last Arts Ball—where she appeared in a most monstrous Chinese costume—"

"Chinese?" inquired Dunbar, producing the bulky notebook.

"Yes. Oh! poor, poor soul!"

"You know nothing further about her, Miss Cumberly?"

"Nothing, Inspector. She was merely pointed out to me as one of the strangest figures in the hall. Her husband, I understand, is an art expert—"

"He WAS!" said Dunbar, closing the book sharply. "He died this afternoon; and a paragraph announcing his death appears in the newspaper which we found in the victim's fur coat!"

"But how—"

"It was the only paragraph on the half-page folded outwards which was in any sense PERSONAL. I am greatly indebted to you, Miss Cumberly; every hour wasted on a case like this means a fresh plait in the rope around the neck of the wrong man!"

Helen Cumberly grew slowly quite pallid.

"Good night," she said; and bowing to the detective and to the surgeon, she prepared to depart.

Mr. Hilton touched Dr. Cumberly's arm, as he, too, was about to retire.

"May I hope," he whispered, "that you will return and give me the benefit of your opinion in making out my report?"

Dr. Cumberly glanced at his daughter; and seeing her to be perfectly composed:—"For the moment, I have formed no opinion, Mr. Hilton," he said, quietly, "not having had an opportunity to conduct a proper examination."

Hilton bent and whispered, confidentially, in the other's ear:—

"She was drugged!"

The innuendo underlying the words struck Dr. Cumberly forcibly, and he started back with his brows drawn together in a frown.

"Do you mean that she was addicted to the use of drugs?" he asked, sharply; "or that the drugging took place to-night."

"The drugging DID take place to-night!" whispered the other. "An injection was made in the left shoulder with a hypodermic syringe; the mark is quite fresh."

Dr. Cumberly glared at his fellow practitioner, angrily.

"Are there no other marks of injection?" he asked.

"On the left forearm, yes. Obviously self-administered. Oh, I don't deny the habit! But my point is this: the injection in the shoulder was NOT self-administered."

"Come, Helen," said Cumberly, taking his daughter's arm; for she had drawn near, during the colloquy—"you must get to bed."

His face was very stern when he turned again to Mr. Hilton.

"I shall return in a few minutes," he said, and escorted his daughter from the room.

VI. At Scotland Yard

Matters of vital importance to some people whom already we have met, and to others whom thus far we have not met, were transacted in a lofty and rather bleak looking room at Scotland Yard between the hours of nine and ten A.M.; that is, later in the morning of the fateful day whose advent we have heard acclaimed from the Tower of Westminster.

The room, which was lighted by a large French window opening upon a balcony, commanded an excellent view of the Thames Embankment. The floor was polished to a degree of brightness, almost painful. The distempered walls, save for a severe and solitary etching of a former Commissioner, were nude in all their unloveliness. A heavy deal table (upon which rested a blotting-pad, a pewter ink-pot, several newspapers and two pens) together with three deal chairs, built rather as monuments of durability than as examples of art, constituted the only furniture, if we except an electric lamp with a green glass shade, above the table.

This was the room of Detective-Inspector Dunbar; and Detective-Inspector Dunbar, at the hour of our entrance, will be found seated in the chair, placed behind the table, his elbows resting upon the blotting-pad.

At ten minutes past nine, exactly, the door opened, and a thick-set, florid man, buttoned up in a fawn colored raincoat and wearing a bowler hat of obsolete build, entered. He possessed a black mustache, a breezy, bustling manner, and humorous blue eyes; furthermore, when he took off his hat, he revealed the possession of a head of very bristly, upstanding, black hair. This was Detective-Sergeant Sowerby, and the same who was engaged in examining a newspaper in the study of Henry Leroux when Dr. Cumberly and his daughter had paid their second visit to that scene of an unhappy soul's dismissal.

"Well?" said Dunbar, glancing up at his subordinate, inquiringly.

"I have done all the cab depots," reported Sergeant Sowerby, "and a good many of the private owners; but so far the man seen by Mr. Exel has not turned up."

"The word will be passed round now, though," said Dunbar, "and we shall probably have him here during the day."

"I hope so," said the other good-humoredly, seating himself upon one of the two chairs ranged beside the wall. "If he doesn't show up."…

"Well?" jerked Dunbar—"if he doesn't?"

"It will look very black against Leroux."

Dunbar drummed upon the blotting-pad with the fingers of his left hand.

"It beats anything of the kind that has ever come my way," he confessed. "You get pretty cautious at weighing people up, in this business; but I certainly don't think—mind you, I go no further—but I certainly don't think Mr. Henry Leroux would willingly kill a fly; yet there is circumstantial evidence enough to hang him."

Sergeant Sowerby nodded, gazing speculatively at the floor.

"I wonder," he said, slowly, "why the girl—Miss Cumberly—hesitated about telling us the woman's name?"

"I am not wondering about that at all," replied Dunbar, bluntly. "She must meet thousands in the same way. The wonder to me is that she remembered at all. I am open to bet half-a-crown that YOU couldn't remember the name of every woman you happened to have pointed out to you at an Arts Ball?"

"Maybe not," agreed Sowerby; "she's a smart girl, I'll allow. I see you have last night's papers there?"

"I have," replied Dunbar; "and I'm wondering"…

"If there's any connection?"

"Well," continued the inspector, "it looks on the face of it as though the news of her husband's death had something to do with Mrs. Vernon's presence at Leroux's flat. It's not a natural thing for a woman, on the evening of her husband's death, to rush straight away to another man's place"…

"It's strange we couldn't find her clothes"…

"It's not strange at all! You're simply obsessed with the idea that this was a love intrigue! Think, man! the most abandoned woman wouldn't run to keep an appointment with a lover at a time like that! And remember she had the news in her pocket! She came to that flat dressed—or undressed—just as we found her; I'm sure of it. And a point like that sometimes means the difference between hanging and acquittal."

Sergeant Sowerby digested these words, composing his jovial countenance in an expression of unnatural profundity. Then:—

"THE point to my mind," he said, "is the one raised by Mr. Hilton. By gum! didn't Dr. Cumberly tell him off!"

"Dr. Cumberly," replied Dunbar, "is entitled to his opinion, that the injection in the woman's shoulder was at least eight hours old; whilst Mr. Hilton is equally entitled to maintain that it was less than ONE hour old. Neither of them can hope to prove his case."

"If either of them could?"…

"It might make a difference to the evidence—but I'm not sure."

"What time is your appointment?"

"Ten o'clock," replied Dunbar. "I am meeting Mr. Debnam—the late Mr. Vernon's solicitor. There is something in it. Damme! I am sure of it!"

"Something in what?"

"The fact that Mr. Vernon died yesterday evening, and that his wife was murdered at midnight."

"What have you told the press?"

"As little as possible, but you will see that the early editions will all be screaming for the arrest of Soames."

"I shouldn't wonder. He would be a useful man to have; but he's probably out of London now."

"I think not. He's more likely to wait for instructions from his principal."

"His principal?"

"Certainly. You don't think Soames did the murder, do you?"

"No; but he's obviously an accessory."

"I'm not so sure even of that."

"Then why did he bolt?"

"Because he had a guilty conscience."

"Yes," agreed Sowerby; "it does turn out that way sometimes. At any rate, Stringer is after him, but he's got next to nothing to go upon. Has any reply been received from Mrs. Leroux in Paris?"

"No," answered Dunbar, frowning thoughtfully. "Her husband's wire would reach her first thing this morning; I am expecting to hear of a reply at any moment."

"They're a funny couple, altogether," said Sowerby. "I can't imagine myself standing for Mrs. Sowerby spending her week-ends in Paris. Asking for trouble, I call it!"

"It does seem a daft arrangement," agreed Dunbar; "but then, as you say, they're a funny couple."

"I never saw such a bundle of nerves in all my life!"…

"Leroux?"

Sowerby nodded.

"I suppose," he said, "it's the artistic temperament! If Mrs. Leroux has got it, too, I don't wonder that they get fed up with one another's company."

"That's about the secret of it. And now, I shall be glad, Sowerby, if you will be after that taxi-man again. Report at one o'clock. I shall be here."

With his hand on the door-knob: "By the way," said Sowerby, "who the blazes is Mr. King?"

Inspector Dunbar looked up.

"Mr. King," he replied slowly, "is the solution of the mystery."

VII. The Man In the Limousine

The house of the late Horace Vernon was a modern villa of prosperous appearance; but, on this sunny September morning, a palpable atmosphere of gloom seemed to overlie it. This made itself perceptible even to the toughened and unimpressionable nerves of Inspector Dunbar. As he mounted the five steps leading up to the door, glancing meanwhile at the lowered blinds at the windows, he wondered if, failing these evidences and his own private knowledge of the facts, he should have recognized that the hand of tragedy had placed its mark upon this house. But when the door was opened by a white-faced servant, he told himself that he should, for a veritable miasma of death seemed to come out to meet him, to envelop him.

Within, proceeded a subdued activity: somber figures moved upon the staircase; and Inspector Dunbar, having presented his card, presently found himself in a well-appointed library.

At the table, whereon were spread a number of documents, sat a lean, clean-shaven, sallow-faced man, wearing gold-rimmed pince-nez; a man whose demeanor of business-like gloom was most admirably adapted to that place and occasion. This was Mr. Debnam, the solicitor. He gravely waved the detective to an armchair, adjusted his pince-nez, and coughed, introductorily.

"Your communication, Inspector," he began (he had the kind of voice which seems to be buried in sawdust packing), "was brought to me this morning, and has disturbed me immeasurably, unspeakably."

"You have been to view the body, sir?"

"One of my clerks, who knew Mrs. Vernon, has just returned to this house to report that he has identified her."

"I should have preferred you to have gone yourself, sir," began Dunbar, taking out his notebook.

"My state of health, Inspector," said the solicitor, "renders it undesirable that I should submit myself to an ordeal so unnecessary—so wholly unnecessary."

"Very good!" muttered Dunbar, making an entry in his book; "your clerk, then, whom I can see in a moment, identifies the murdered woman as Mrs. Vernon. What was her Christian name?"

"Iris—Iris Mary Vernon."

Inspector Dunbar made a note of the fact.

"And now," he said, "you will have read the copy of that portion of my report which I submitted to you this morning—acting upon information supplied by Miss Helen Cumberly?"

"Yes, yes, Inspector, I have read it—but, by the way, I do not know Miss Cumberly."

"Miss Cumberly," explained the detective, "is the daughter of Dr. Cumberly, the Harley Street physician. She lives with her father in the flat above that of Mr. Leroux. She saw the body by accident—and recognized it as that of a lady who had been named to her at the last Arts Ball."

"Ah!" said Debnam, "yes—I see—at the Arts Ball, Inspector. This is a mysterious and a very ghastly case."

"It is indeed, sir," agreed Dunbar. "Can you throw any light upon the presence of Mrs. Vernon at Mr. Leroux's flat on the very night of her husband's death?"

"I can—and I cannot," answered the solicitor, leaning back in the chair and again adjusting his pince-nez, in the manner of a man having important matters—and gloomy, very gloomy, matters—to communicate.

"Good!" said the inspector, and prepared to listen.

"You see," continued Debnam, "the late Mrs. Vernon was not actually residing with her husband at the date of his death."

"Indeed!"

"Ostensibly"—the solicitor shook a lean forefinger at his vis-a-vis—"ostensibly, Inspector, she was visiting her sister in Scotland."

Inspector Dunbar sat up very straight, his brows drawn down over the tawny eyes.

"These visits were of frequent occurrence, and usually of about a week's duration. Mr. Vernon, my late client, a man—I'll not deny it—of inconstant affections (you understand me, Inspector?), did not greatly concern himself with his wife's movements. She belonged to a smart Bohemian set, and—to use a popular figure of speech—burnt the candle at both ends; late dances, night clubs, bridge parties, and other feverish pursuits, possibly taken up as a result of the—shall I say cooling?—of her husband's affections"…

"There was another woman in the case?"

"I fear so, Inspector; in fact, I am sure of it: but to return to Mrs. Vernon. My client provided her with ample funds; and I, myself, have expressed to him astonishment respecting her expenditures in Scotland. I understand that

her sister was in comparatively poor circumstances, and I went so far as to point out to Mr. Vernon that one hundred pounds was—shall I say an excessive?—outlay upon a week's sojourn in Auchterander, Perth."

"A hundred pounds!"

"One hundred pounds!"

"Was it queried by Mr. Vernon?"

"Not at all."

"Was Mr. Vernon personally acquainted with this sister in Perth?"

"He was not, Inspector. Mrs. Vernon, at the time of her marriage, did not enjoy that social status to which my late client elevated her. For many years she held no open communication with any member of her family, but latterly, as I have explained, she acquired the habit of recuperating—recuperating from the effects of her febrile pleasures—at this obscure place in Scotland. And Mr. Vernon, his interest in her movements having considerably—shall I say abated?—offered no objection: even suffered it gladly, counting the cost but little against"…

"Freedom?" suggested Dunbar, scribbling in his notebook.

"Rather crudely expressed, perhaps," said the solicitor, peering over the top of his glasses, "but you have the idea. I come now to my client's awakening. Four days ago, he learned the truth; he learned that he was being deceived!"

"Deceived!"

"Mrs. Vernon, thoroughly exhausted with irregular living, announced that she was about to resort once more to the healing breezes of the heather-land"—Mr. Debnam was thoroughly warming to his discourse and thoroughly enjoying his own dusty phrases.

"Interrupting you for a moment," said the inspector, "at what intervals did these visits take place?"

"At remarkably regular intervals, Inspector: something like six times a year."

"For how long had Mrs. Vernon made a custom of these visits?"

"Roughly, for two years."

"Thank you. Will you go on, sir?"

"She requested Mr. Vernon, then, on the last occasion to give her a check for eighty pounds; and this he did, unquestioningly. On Thursday, the second of September, she left for Scotland"…

"Did she take her maid?"

"Her maid always received a holiday on these occasions; Mrs. Vernon wired her respecting the date of her return."

"Did any one actually see her off?"

"No, not that I am aware of, Inspector."

"To put the whole thing quite bluntly, Mr. Debnam," said Dunbar, fixing his tawny eyes upon the solicitor, "Mr. Vernon was thoroughly glad to get rid of her for a week?"

Mr. Debnam shifted uneasily in his chair; the truculent directness of the detective was unpleasing to his tortuous mind. However:—

"I fear you have hit upon the truth," he confessed, "and I must admit that we have no legal evidence of her leaving for Scotland on this, or on any other occasion. Letters were received from Perth, and letters sent to Auchterander from London were answered. But the truth, the painful truth came to light, unexpectedly, dramatically, on Monday last"…

"Four days ago?"

"Exactly; three days before the death of my client." Mr. Debnam wagged his finger at the inspector again. "I maintain," he said, "that this painful discovery, which I am about to mention, precipitated my client's end; although it is a fact that there was—hereditary heart trouble. But I admit that his neglect of his wife (to give it no harsher name) contributed to the catastrophe."

He paused to give dramatic point to the revelation.

"Walking homeward at a late hour on Monday evening from a flat in Victoria Street—the flat of—shall I employ the term a particular friend?—Mr. Vernon was horrified—horrified beyond measure, to perceive, in a large and well-appointed car—a limousine—his wife!"…

"The inside lights of the car were on, then?"

"No; but the light from a street lamp shone directly into the car. A temporary block in the traffic compelled the driver of the car, whom my client described to me as an Asiatic—to pull up for a moment. There, within a few yards of her husband, Mrs. Vernon reclined in the car—or rather in the arms of a male companion!"

"What!"

"Positively!" Mr. Debnam was sedately enjoying himself. "Positively, my dear Inspector, in the arms of a man of extremely dark complexion. Mr.

Vernon was unable to perceive more than this, for the man had his back toward him. But the light shone fully upon the face of Mrs. Vernon, who appeared pale and exhausted. She wore a conspicuous motor-coat of civet fur, and it was this which first attracted Mr. Vernon's attention. The blow was a very severe one to a man in my client's state of health; and although I cannot claim that his own conscience was clear, this open violation of the marriage vows outraged the husband—outraged him. In fact he was so perturbed, that he stood there shaking, quivering, unable to speak or act, and the car drove away before he had recovered sufficient presence of mind to note the number."

"In which direction did the car proceed?"

"Toward Victoria Station."

"Any other particulars?"

"Not regarding the car, its driver, or its occupants; but early on the following morning, Mr. Vernon, very much shaken, called upon me and instructed me to despatch an agent to Perth immediately. My agent's report reached me at practically the same time as the news of my client's death"…

"And his report was?"…

"His report, Inspector, telegraphic, of course, was this: that no sister of Mrs. Vernon resided at the address; that the place was a cottage occupied by a certain Mrs. Fry and her husband; that the husband was of no occupation, and had no visible means of support"—he ticked off the points on the long forefinger—"that the Frys lived better than any of their neighbors; and—most important of all—that Mrs. Fry's maiden name, which my agent discovered by recourse to the parish register of marriages—was Ann Fairchild."

"What of that?"

"Ann Fairchild was a former maid of Mrs. Vernon!"

"In short, it amounts to this, then: Mrs. Vernon, during these various absences, never went to Scotland at all? It was a conspiracy?"

"Exactly—exactly, Inspector! I wired instructing my agent to extort from the woman, Fry, the address to which she forwarded letters received by her for Mrs. Vernon. The lady's death, news of which will now have reached him, will no doubt be a lever, enabling my representative to obtain the desired information."

"When do you expect to hear from him?"

"At any moment. Failing a full confession by the Frys, you will of course know how to act, Inspector?"

"Damme!" cried Dunbar, "can your man be relied upon to watch them? They mustn't slip away! Shall I instruct Perth to arrest the couple?"

"I wired my agent this morning, Inspector, to communicate with the local police respecting the Frys."

Inspector Dunbar tapped his small, widely-separated teeth with the end of his fountain-pen.

"I have had one priceless witness slip through my fingers," he muttered. "I'll hand in my resignation if the Frys go!"

"To whom do you refer?"

Inspector Dunbar rose.

"It is a point with which I need not trouble you, sir," he said. "It was not included in the extract of report sent to you. This is going to be the biggest case of my professional career, or my name is not Robert Dunbar!"

Closing his notebook, he thrust it into his pocket, and replaced his fountain-pen in the little leather wallet.

"Of course," said the solicitor, rising in turn, and adjusting the troublesome pince-nez, "there was some intrigue with Leroux? So much is evident."

"You will be thinking that, eh?"

"My dear Inspector"—Mr. Debnam, the wily, was seeking information —"my dear Inspector, Leroux's own wife was absent in Paris—quite a safe distance; and Mrs. Vernon (now proven to be a woman conducting a love intrigue) is found dead under most compromising circumstances—MOST compromising circumstances—in his flat! His servants, even, are got safely out of the way for the evening"…

"Quite so," said Dunbar, shortly, "quite so, Mr. Debnam." He opened the door. "Might I see the late Mrs. Vernon's maid?"

"She is at her home. As I told you, Mrs. Vernon habitually released her for the period of these absences."

The notebook reappeared.

"The young woman's address?"

"You can get it from the housekeeper. Is there anything else you wish to know?"

"Nothing beyond that, thank you."

Three minutes later, Inspector Dunbar had written in his book:—Clarice Goodstone, c/o Mrs. Herne, 134a Robert Street, Hampstead Road, N.W.

He departed from the house whereat Death the Gleaner had twice knocked with his Scythe.

VIII. Cabman Two

Returning to Scotland Yard, Inspector Dunbar walked straight up to his own room. There he found Sowerby, very red faced and humid, and a taximan who sat stolidly surveying the Embankment from the window.

"Hullo!" cried Dunbar; "he's turned up, then?"

"No, he hasn't," replied Sowerby with a mild irritation. "But we know where to find him, and he ought to lose his license."

The taximan turned hurriedly. He wore a muffler so tightly packed between his neck and the collar of his uniform jacket, that it appeared materially to impair his respiration. His face possessed a bluish tinge, suggestive of asphyxia, and his watery eyes protruded remarkably; his breathing was noisily audible.

"No, chuck it, mister!" he exclaimed. "I'm only tellin' you 'cause it ain't my line to play tricks on the police. You'll find my name in the books downstairs more'n any other driver in London! I reckon I've brought enough umbrellas, cameras, walkin' sticks, hopera cloaks, watches and sicklike in 'ere, to set up a blarsted pawnbroker's!"

"That's all right, my lad!" said Dunbar, holding up his hand to silence the voluble speaker. "There's going to be no license-losing. You did not hear that you were wanted before?"

The watery eyes of the cabman protruded painfully; he respired like a horse.

"ME, guv'nor!" he exclaimed. "Gor'blime! I ain't the bloke! I was drivin' back from takin' the Honorable 'Erbert 'Arding 'ome—same as I does almost every night, when the 'ouse is a-sittin'—when I see old Tom Brian drawin' away from the door o' Palace Man—"

Again Dunbar held up his hand.

"No doubt you mean well," he said; "but damme! begin at the beginning! Who are you, and what have you come to tell us?"

"'Oo are I?—'Ere's 'oo I ham!" wheezed the cabman, proffering a greasy license. "Richard 'Amper, number 3 Breams Mews, Dulwich Village"…

"That's all right," said Dunbar, thrusting back the proffered document; "and last night you had taken Mr. Harding the member of Parliament, to his residence in?"—

"In Peers' Chambers, Westminister—that's it, guv'nor! Comin' back, I 'ave to pass along the north side o' the Square, an' just a'ead o' me, I see old Tom Brian a-pullin' round the Johnny 'Orner,—'im comin' from Palace Mansions."

"Mr. Exel only mentioned seeing ONE cab," muttered Dunbar, glancing keenly aside at Sowerby.

"Wotcher say, guv'nor?" asked the cabman.

"I say—did you see a gentleman approaching from the corner?" asked Dunbar.

"Yus," declared the man; "I see 'im, but 'e 'adn't got as far as the Johnny 'Orner. As I passed outside old Tom Brian, wot's changin' 'is gear, I see a bloke blowin' along on the pavement—a bloke in a high 'at, an' wearin' a heye-glass."

"At this time, then," pursued Dunbar, "you had actually passed the other cab, and the gentleman on the pavement had not come up with it?"

"'E couldn't see it, guv'nor! I'm tellin' you 'e 'adn't got to the Johnny 'Orner!"

"I see," muttered Sowerby. "It's possible that Mr. Exel took no notice of the first cab—especially as it did not come out of the Square."

"Wotcher say, guv'nor?" queried the cabman again, turning his bleared eyes upon Sergeant Sowerby.

"He said," interrupted Dunbar, "was Brian's cab empty?"

"'Course it was," rapped Mr. Hamper, "'e 'd just dropped 'is fare at Palace Mansions."…

"How do you know?" snapped Dunbar, suddenly, fixing his fierce eyes upon the face of the speaker.

The cabman glared in beery truculence.

"I got me blarsted senses, ain't I?" he inquired. "There's only two lots o' flats on that side o' the Square—Palace Mansions, an' St. Andrew's

Mansions."

"Well?"

"St. Andrew's Mansions," continued Hamper, "is all away!"

"All away?"

"All away! I know, 'cause I used to have a reg'lar fare there. 'E's in Egyp'; flat shut up. Top floor's to let. Bottom floor's two old unmarried maiden ladies what always travels by 'bus. So does all their blarsted friends an' relations. Where can old Tom Brian 'ave been comin' from, if it wasn't Palace Mansions?"

"H'm!" said Dunbar, "you are a loss to the detective service, my lad! And how do you account for the fact that Brian has not got to hear of the inquiry?"

Hamper bent to Dunbar and whispered, beerily, in his ear: "P'r'aps 'e don't want to 'ear, guv'nor!"

"Oh! Why not?"

"Well, 'e knows there's something up there!"

"Therefore it's his plain duty to assist the police."

"Same as what I does?" cried Hamper, raising his eyebrows. "Course it is! but 'ow d'you know 'e ain't been got at?"

"Our friend, here, evidently has one up against Mr. Tom Brian!" muttered Dunbar aside to Sowerby.

"Wotcher say, guv'nor?" inquired the cabman, looking from one to the other.

"I say, no doubt you can save us the trouble of looking out Brian's license, and give us his private address?" replied Dunbar.

"Course I can. 'E lives hat num'er 36 Forth Street, Brixton, and 'e's out o' the big Brixton depot."

"Oh!" said Dunbar, dryly. "Does he owe you anything?"

"Wotcher say, guv'nor?"

"I say, it's very good of you to take all this trouble and whatever it has cost you in time, we shall be pleased to put right."

Mr. Hamper spat in his right palm, and rubbed his hands together, appreciatively.

"Make it five bob!" he said.

"Wait downstairs," directed Dunbar, pressing a bell-push beside the door. "I'll get it put through for you."

"Right 'o!" rumbled the cabman, and went lurching from the room as a constable in uniform appeared at the door. "Good mornin', guv'nor. Good mornin'!"

The cabman having departed, leaving in his wake a fragrant odor of fourpenny ale:—

"Here you are, Sowerby!" cried Dunbar. "We are moving at last! This is the address of the late Mrs. Vernon's maid. See her; feel your ground, carefully, of course; get to know what clothes Mrs. Vernon took with her on her periodical visits to Scotland."

"What clothes?"

"That's the idea; it is important. I don't think the girl was in her mistress's confidence, but I leave it to you to find out. If circumstances point to my surmise being inaccurate—you know how to act."

"Just let me glance over your notes, bearing on the matter," said Sowerby, "and I'll be off."

Dunbar handed him the bulging notebook, and Sergeant Sowerby lowered his inadequate eyebrows, thoughtfully, whilst he scanned the evidence of Mr. Debnam. Then, returning the book to his superior, and adjusting the peculiar bowler firmly upon his head, he set out.

Dunbar glanced through some papers—apparently reports—which lay upon the table, penciled comments upon two of them, and then, consulting his notebook once more in order to refresh his memory, started off for Forth Street, Brixton.

Forth Street, Brixton, is a depressing thoroughfare. It contains small, cheap flats, and a number of frowsy looking houses which give one the impression of having run to seed. A hostelry of sad aspect occupies a commanding position midway along the street, but inspires the traveler not with cheer, but with lugubrious reflections upon the horrors of inebriety. The odors, unpleasantly mingled, of fried bacon and paraffin oil, are wafted to the wayfarer from the porches of these family residences.

Number 36 proved to be such a villa, and Inspector Dunbar contemplated it from a distance, thoughtfully. As he stood by the door of the public house, gazing across the street, a tired looking woman, lean and anxious-eyed, a poor, dried up bean-pod of a woman, appeared from the door of number 36, carrying a basket. She walked along in the direction of the neighboring highroad, and Dunbar casually followed her.

For some ten minutes he studied her activities, noting that she went from shop to shop until her basket was laden with provisions of all sorts. When she entered a wine-and-spirit merchant's, the detective entered close behind her, for the place was also a post-office. Whilst he purchased a penny stamp and fumbled in his pocket for an imaginary letter, he observed, with interest, that the woman had purchased, and was loading into the hospitable basket, a bottle of whisky, a bottle of rum, and a bottle of gin.

He left the shop ahead of her, sure, now, of his ground, always provided that the woman proved to be Mrs. Brian. Dunbar walked along Forth Street slowly enough to enable the woman to overtake him. At the door of number 36, he glanced up at the number, questioningly, and turned in the gate as she was about to enter.

He raised his hat.

"Have I the pleasure of addressing Mrs. Brian?"

Momentarily, a hard look came into the tired eyes, but Dunbar's gentleness of manner and voice, together with the kindly expression upon his face, turned the scales favorably.

"I am Mrs. Brian," she said; "yes. Did you want to see me?"

"On a matter of some importance. May I come in?"

She nodded and led the way into the house; the door was not closed.

In a living-room whereon was written a pathetic history—a history of decline from easy circumstance and respectability to poverty and utter disregard of appearances—she confronted him, setting down her basket on a table from which the remains of a fish breakfast were not yet removed.

"Is your husband in?" inquired Dunbar with a subtle change of manner.

"He's lying down."

The hard look was creeping again into the woman's eyes.

"Will you please awake him, and tell him that I have called in regard to his license?"

He thrust a card into her hand:—

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR DUNBAR,
C. I. D.
NEW SCOTLAND YARD. S.W.

IX. The Man In Black

Mrs. Brian started back, with a wild look, a trapped look, in her eyes.

"What's he done?" she inquired. "What's he done? Tom's not done anything!"

"Be good enough to waken him," persisted the inspector. "I wish to speak to him."

Mrs. Brian walked slowly from the room and could be heard entering one further along the passage. An angry snarling, suggesting that of a wild animal disturbed in its lair, proclaimed the arousing of Taximan Thomas Brian. A thick voice inquired, brutally, why the sanguinary hell he (Mr. Brian) had had his bloodstained slumbers disturbed in this gory manner and who was the vermilion blighter responsible.

Then Mrs. Brian's voice mingled with that of her husband, and both became subdued. Finally, a slim man, who wore a short beard, or had omitted to shave for some days, appeared at the door of the living-room. His face was another history upon the same subject as that which might be studied from the walls, the floor, and the appointments of the room. Inspector Dunbar perceived that the shadow of the neighboring hostelry overlay this home.

"What's up?" inquired the new arrival.

The tone of his voice, thickened by excess, was yet eloquent of the gentleman. The barriers passed, your pariah gentleman can be the completest blackguard of them all. He spoke coarsely, and the infectious Cockney accent showed itself in his vowels; but Dunbar, a trained observer, summed up his man in a moment and acted accordingly.

"Come in and shut the door!" he directed. "No"—as Mrs. Brian sought to enter behind her husband—"I wish to speak with you, privately."

"Hop it!" instructed Brian, jerking his thumb over his shoulder—and Mrs. Brian obediently disappeared, closing the door.

"Now," said Dunbar, looking the man up and down, "have you been into the depot, to-day?"

"No."

"But you have heard that there's an inquiry?"

"I've heard nothing. I've been in bed."

"We won't argue about that. I'll simply put a question to you: Where did you pick up the fare that you dropped at Palace Mansions at twelve o'clock last night?"

"Palace Mansions!" muttered Brian, shifting uneasily beneath the unflinching stare of the tawny eyes. "What d'you mean? What Palace Mansions?"

"Don't quibble!" warned Dunbar, thrusting out a finger at him. "This is not a matter of a loss of license; it's a life job!"

"Life job!" whispered the man, and his weak face suddenly relaxed, so that, oddly, the old refinement shone out through the new, vulgar veneer.

"Answer my questions straight and square and I'll take your word that you have not seen the inquiry!" said Dunbar.

"Dick Hamper's done this for me!" muttered Brian. "He's a dirty, low swine! Somebody'll do for him one night!"

"Leave Hamper out of the question," snapped Dunbar. "You put down a fare at Palace Mansions at twelve o'clock last night?"

For one tremendous moment, Brian hesitated, but the good that was in him, or the evil—a consciousness of wrongdoing, or of retribution pending—respect for the law, or fear of its might—decided his course.

"I did."

"It was a man?"

Again Brian, with furtive glance, sought to test his opponent; but his opponent was too strong for him. With Dunbar's eyes upon his face, he chose not to lie.

"It was a woman."

"How was she dressed?"

"In a fur motor-coat—civet fur."

The man of culture spoke in those two words, "civet fur"; and Dunbar nodded quickly, his eyes ablaze at the importance of the evidence.

"Was she alone?"

"She was."

"What fare did she pay you?"

"The meter only registered eightpence, but she gave me half-a-crown."

"Did she appear to be ill?"

"Very ill. She wore no hat, and I supposed her to be in evening dress. She almost fell as she got out of the cab, but managed to get into the hall of Palace Mansions quickly enough, looking behind her all the time."

Inspector Dunbar shot out the hypnotic finger again.

"She told you to wait!" he asserted, positively. Brian looked to right and left, up and down, thrusting his hands into his coat pockets, and taking them out again to stroke his collarless neck. Then:—

"She did—yes," he admitted.

"But you were bribed to drive away? Don't deny it! Don't dare to trifle with me, or by God! you'll spend the night in Brixton Jail!"

"It was made worth my while," muttered Brian, his voice beginning to break, "to hop it."

"Who paid you to do it?"

"A man who had followed all the way in a big car."

"That's it! Describe him!"

"I can't! No, no! you can threaten as much as you like, but I can't describe him. I never saw his face. He stood behind me on the near side of the cab, and just reached forward and pushed a flyer under my nose."

Inspector Dunbar searched the speaker's face closely—and concluded that he was respecting the verity.

"How was he dressed?"

"In black, and that's all I can tell you about him."

"You took the money?"

"I took the money, yes"…

"What did he say to you?"

"Simply: 'Drive off.'"

"Did you take him to be an Englishman from his speech?"

"No; he was not an Englishman. He had a foreign accent."

"French? German?"

"No," said Brian, looking up and meeting the glance of the fierce eyes. "Asiatic!"

Inspector Dunbar, closely as he held himself in hand, started slightly.

"Are you sure?"

"Certainly. Before I—when I was younger—I traveled in the East, and I know the voice and intonation of the cultured Oriental."

"Can you place him any closer than that?"

"No, I can't venture to do so." Brian's manner was becoming, momentarily, more nearly that of a gentleman. "I might be leading you astray if I ventured a guess, but if you asked me to do so, I should say he was a Chinaman."

"A CHINAMAN?" Dunbar's voice rose excitedly.

"I think so."

"What occurred next?"

"I turned my cab and drove off out of the Square."

"Did you see where the man went?"

"I didn't. I saw nothing of him beyond his hand."

"And his hand?"

"He wore a glove."

"And now," said Dunbar, speaking very slowly, "where did you pick up your fare?"

"In Gillingham Street, near Victoria Station."

"From a house?"

"Yes, from Nurse Proctor's."

"Nurse Proctor's! Who is Nurse Proctor?"

Brian shrugged his shoulders in a nonchalant manner, which obviously belonged to an earlier phase of existence.

"She keeps a nursing home," he said—"for ladies."

"Do you mean a maternity home?"

"Not exactly; at least I don't think so. Most of her clients are society ladies, who stay there periodically."

"What are you driving at?" demanded Dunbar. "I have asked you if it is a maternity home."

"And I have replied that it isn't. I am only giving you facts; you don't want my surmises."

"Who hailed you?"

"The woman did—the woman in the fur coat. I was just passing the door very slowly when it was flung open with a bang, and she rushed out as though hell were after her. Before I had time to pull up, she threw herself into my cab and screamed: 'Palace Mansions! Westminster!' I reached back and shut the door, and drove right away."

"When did you see that you were followed?"

"We were held up just outside the music hall, and looking back, I saw that my fare was dreadfully excited. It didn't take me long to find out that the cause of her excitement was a big limousine, three or four back in the block of traffic. The driver was some kind of an Oriental, too, although I couldn't make him out very clearly."

"Good!" snapped Dunbar; "that's important! But you saw nothing more of this car?"…

"I saw it follow me into the Square."

"Then where did it wait?"

"I don't know; I didn't see it again."

Inspector Dunbar nodded rapidly.

"Have you ever driven women to or from this Nurse Proctor's before?"

"On two other occasions, I have driven ladies who came from there. I knew they came from there, because it got about amongst us that the tall woman in nurse's uniform who accompanied them was Nurse Proctor."

"You mean that you didn't take these women actually from the door of the house in Gillingham Street, but from somewhere adjacent?"

"Yes; they never take a cab from the door. They always walk to the corner of the street with a nurse, and a porter belonging to the house brings their luggage along."

"The idea is secrecy?"

"No doubt. But as I have said, the word was passed round."

"Did you know either of these other women?"

"No; but they were obviously members of good society."

"And you drove them?"

"One to St. Pancras, and one to Waterloo," said Brian, dropping back somewhat into his coarser style, and permitting a slow grin to overspread his countenance.

"To catch trains, no doubt?"

"Not a bit of it! To MEET trains!"

"You mean?"

"I mean that their own private cars were waiting for them at the ARRIVAL platform as I drove 'em up to the DEPARTURE platform, and that they simply marched through the station and pretended to have arrived by train!"

Inspector Dunbar took out his notebook and fountain-pen, and began to tap his teeth with the latter, nodding his head at the same time.

"You are sure of the accuracy of your last statement?" he said, raising his eyes to the other.

"I followed one of them," was the reply, "and saw her footman gravely take charge of the luggage which I had just brought from Victoria; and a pal of mine followed the other—the Waterloo one, that was."

Inspector Dunbar scribbled busily. Then:—

"You have done well to make a clean breast of it," he said. "Take a straight tip from me. Keep off the drink!"

X. The Great Understanding

It was in the afternoon of this same day—a day so momentous in the lives of more than one of London's millions—that two travelers might have been seen to descend from a first-class compartment of the Dover boat-train at Charing Cross.

They had been the sole occupants of the compartment, and, despite the wide dissimilarity of character to be read upon their countenances, seemed to have struck up an acquaintance based upon mutual amiability and worldly common sense. The traveler first to descend and gallantly to offer his hand to his companion in order to assist her to the platform, was the one whom a casual observer would first have noted.

He was a man built largely, but on good lines; a man past his youth, and somewhat too fleshy; but for all his bulk, there was nothing unwieldy, and nothing ungraceful in his bearing or carriage. He wore a French traveling-coat, conceived in a style violently Parisian, and composed of a wonderful check calculated to have blinded any cutter in Savile Row. From beneath its gorgeous folds protruded the extremities of severely creased cashmere trousers, turned up over white spats which nestled coyly about a pair of glossy black boots. The traveler's hat was of velour, silver gray and boasting a partridge feather thrust in its silken band. One glimpse of the outfit must have brought the entire staff of the Tailor and Cutter to an untimely grave.

But if ever man was born who could carry such a make-up, this traveler was he. The face was cut on massive lines, on fleshy lines, clean-shaven, and inclined to pallor. The hirsute blue tinge about the jaw and lips helped to accentuate the virile strength of the long, flexible mouth, which could be humorous, which could be sorrowful, which could be grim. In the dark eyes of the man lay a wealth of experience, acquired in a lifelong pilgrimage among many peoples, and to many lands. His dark brows were heavily marked, and his close-cut hair was splashed with gray.

Let us glance at the lady who accepted his white-gloved hand, and who sprang alertly onto the platform beside him.

She was a woman bordering on the forties, with a face of masculine vigor, redeemed and effeminized, by splendid hazel eyes, the kindliest imaginable. Obviously, the lady was one who had never married, who despised, or affected to despise, members of the other sex, but who had never learned to hate them; who had never grown soured, but who found the world a garden of heedless children—of children who called for mothering. Her athletic figure was clothed in a "sensible" tweed traveling dress, and she wore a tweed hat pressed well on to her head, and brown boots with the flattest heels conceivable. Add to this a Scotch woolen muffler, and a pair of woolen gloves, and you have a mental picture of the second traveler—a truly incongruous companion for the first.

Joining the crowd pouring in the direction of the exit gates, the two chatted together animatedly, both speaking English, and the man employing that language with a perfect ease and command of words which nevertheless failed to disguise his French nationality. He spoke with an American accent; a phenomenon sometimes observable in one who has learned his English in Paris.

The irritating formalities which beset the returning traveler—and the lady distinctly was of the readily irritated type—were smoothed away by the magic personality of her companion. Porters came at the beck of his gloved hand; guards, catching his eye, saluted and were completely his servants; ticket inspectors yielded to him the deference ordinarily reserved for directors of the line.

Outside the station, then, her luggage having been stacked upon a cab, the lady parted from her companion with assurances, which were returned, that she should hope to improve the acquaintance.

The address to which the French gentleman politely requested the cabman to drive, was that of a sound and old-established hotel in the neighborhood of the Strand, and at no great distance from the station.

Then, having stood bareheaded until the cab turned out into the traffic stream of that busy thoroughfare, the first traveler, whose baggage consisted of a large suitcase, hailed a second cab and drove to the Hotel Astoria—the usual objective of Americans.

Taking leave of him for the moment, let us follow the lady.

Her arrangements were very soon made at the hotel, and having removed some of the travel-stains from her person and partaken of one cup of China tea, respecting the quality whereof she delivered herself of some caustic comments, she walked down into the Strand and mounted to the top of a Victoria bound 'bus.

That she was not intimately acquainted with London, was a fact readily observable by her fellow passengers; for as the 'bus went rolling westward, from the large pocket of her Norfolk jacket she took out a guide-book provided with numerous maps, and began composedly to consult its complexities.

When the conductor came to collect her fare, she had made up her mind, and was replacing the guidebook in her pocket.

"Put me down by the Storis, Victoria Street, conductor," she directed, and handed him a penny—the correct fare.

It chanced that at about the time, within a minute or so, of the American lady's leaving the hotel, and just as red rays, the harbingers of dusk, came creeping in at the latticed widow of her cozy work-room, Helen Cumberly laid down her pen with a sigh. She stood up, mechanically rearranging her hair as she did so, and crossed the corridor to her bedroom, the window whereof overlooked the Square.

She peered down into the central garden. A common-looking man sat upon a bench, apparently watching the labors of the gardener, which consisted at the moment of the spiking of scraps of paper which disfigured the green carpet of the lawn.

Helen returned to her writing-table and reseated herself. Kindly twilight veiled her, and a chatty sparrow who perched upon the window-ledge pretended that he had not noticed two tears which trembled, quivering, upon the girl's lashes. Almost unconsciously, for it was an established custom,

she sprinkled crumbs from the tea-tray beside her upon the ledge, whilst the tears dropped upon a written page and two more appeared in turn upon her lashes.

The sparrow supped enthusiastically, being joined in his repast by two talkative companions. As the last fragments dropped from the girl's white fingers, she withdrew her hand, and slowly—very slowly—her head sank down, pillowed upon her arms.

For some five minutes she cried silently; the sparrows, unheeded, bade her good night, and flew to their nests in the trees of the Square. Then, very resolutely, as if inspired by a settled purpose, she stood up and recrossed the corridor to her bedroom.

She turned on the lamp above the dressing-table and rapidly removed the traces of her tears, contemplating in dismay a redness of her pretty nose which did not prove entirely amenable to treatment with the powder-puff. Finally, however, she switched off the light, and, going out on to the landing, descended to the door of Henry Leroux's flat.

In reply to her ring, the maid, Ferris, opened the door. She wore her hat and coat, and beside her on the floor stood a tin trunk.

"Why, Ferris!" cried Helen—"are you leaving?"

"I am indeed, miss!" said the girl, independently.

"But why? whatever will Mr. Leroux do?"

"He'll have to do the best he can. Cook's goin' too!"

"What! cook is going?"

"I am!" announced a deep, female voice.

And the cook appeared beside the maid.

"But whatever—" began Helen; then, realizing that she could achieve no good end by such an attitude: "Tell Mr. Leroux," she instructed the maid, quietly, "that I wish to see him."

Ferris glanced rapidly at her companion, as a man appeared on the landing, to inquire in an abysmal tone, if "them boxes was ready to be took?" Helen Cumberly forestalled an insolent refusal which the cook, by furtive wink, counseled to the housemaid.

"Don't trouble," she said, with an easy dignity reminiscent of her father. "I will announce myself."

She passed the servants, crossed the lobby, and rapped upon the study door.

"Come in," said the voice of Henry Leroux.

Helen opened the door. The place was in semidarkness, objects being but dimly discernible. Leroux sat in his usual seat at the writing-table. The room was in the utmost disorder, evidently having received no attention since its overhauling by the police. Helen pressed the switch, lighting the two lamps.

Leroux, at last, seemed in his proper element: he exhibited an unhealthy pallor, and it was obvious that no razor had touched his chin for at least three days. His dark blue eyes the eyes of a dreamer—were heavy and dull, with shadows pooled below them. A biscuit-jar, a decanter and a syphon stood half buried in papers on the table.

"Why, Mr. Leroux!" said Helen, with a deep note of sympathy in her voice—"you don't mean to say"…

Leroux rose, forcing a smile to his haggard face.

"You see—much too good," he said. "Altogether—too good."…

"I thought I should find you here," continued the girl, firmly; "but I did not anticipate"—she indicated the chaos about—"this! The insolence, the disgraceful, ungrateful insolence, of those women!"

"Dear, dear, dear!" murmured Leroux, waving his hand vaguely; "never mind—never mind! They—er—they… I don't want them to stop… and, believe me, I am—er—perfectly comfortable!"

"You should not be in—THIS room, at all. In fact, you should go right away."…

"I cannot… my wife may—return—at any moment." His voice shook. "I—am expecting her return—hourly."…

His gaze sought the table-clock; and he drew his lips very tightly together when the pitiless hands forced upon his mind the fact that the day was marching to its end.

Helen turned her head aside, inhaling deeply, and striving for composure.

"Garnham shall come down and tidy up for you," she said, quietly; "and you must dine with us."

The outer door was noisily closed by the departing servants.

"You are much too good," whispered Leroux, again; and the weary eyes glistened with a sudden moisture. "Thank you! Thank you! But—er—I could not dream of disturbing"…

"Mr. Leroux," said Helen, with all her old firmness—"Garnham is coming down IMMEDIATELY to put the place in order! And, whilst he is doing so, you are going to prepare yourself for a decent, Christian dinner!"

Henry Leroux rested one hand upon the table, looking down at the carpet. He had known for a long time, in a vague fashion, that he lacked something; that his success—a wholly inartistic one—had yielded him little gratification; that the comfort of his home was a purely monetary product and not in any sense atmospheric. He had schooled himself to believe that he liked loneliness—loneliness physical and mental, and that in marrying a pretty, but pleasure-loving girl, he had insured an ideal menage. Furthermore, he honestly believed that he worshiped his wife; and with his present grief at her unaccountable silence was mingled no atom of reproach.

But latterly he had begun to wonder—in his peculiarly indefinite way he had begun to doubt his own philosophy. Was the void in his soul a product of thwarted ambition?—for, whilst he slaved, scrupulously, upon "Martin Zeda," he loathed every deed and every word of that Old Man of the Sea. Or could it be that his own being—his nature of Adam—lacked something which wealth, social position, and Mira, his wife, could not yield to him?

Now, a new tone in the voice of Helen Cumberly—a tone different from that compound of good-fellowship and raillery, which he knew—a tone which had entered into it when she had exclaimed upon the state of the room—set his poor, anxious heart thrumming like a lute. He felt a hot flush creeping upon him; his forehead grew damp. He feared to raise his eyes.

"Is that a bargain?" asked Helen, sweetly.

Henry Leroux found a lump in his throat; but he lifted his untidy head and took the hand which the girl had extended to him. She smiled a bit unnaturally; then every tinge of color faded from her cheeks, and Henry Leroux, unconsciously holding the white hand in a vice-like grip, looked hungrily into the eyes grown suddenly tragic whilst into his own came the light of a great and sorrowful understanding.

"God bless you," he said. "I will do anything you wish."

Helen released her hand, turned, and ran from the study. Not until she was on the landing did she dare to speak. Then:—

"Garnham shall come down immediately. Don't be late for dinner!" she called—and there was a hint of laughter and of tears in her voice, of the restraint of culture struggling with rebellious womanhood.

XI. Presenting M. Gaston Max

Not venturing to turn on the light, not daring to look upon her own face in the mirror, Helen Cumberly sat before her dressing-table, trembling wildly. She wanted to laugh, and wanted to cry; but the daughter of Seton Cumberly knew what those symptoms meant and knew how to deal with them. At the end of an interval of some four or five minutes, she rang.

The maid opened the door.

"Don't light up, Merton," she said, composedly. "I want you to tell Garnham to go down to Mr. Leroux's and put the place in order. Mr. Leroux is dining with us."

The girl withdrew; and Helen, as the door closed, pressed the electric switch. She stared at her reflection in the mirror as if it were the face of an enemy, then, turning her head aside, sat deep in reflection, biting her lip and toying with the edge of the white doily.

"You little traitor!" she whispered, through clenched teeth. "You little traitor—and hypocrite"—sobs began to rise in her throat—"and fool!"

Five more minutes passed in a silent conflict. A knock announced the return of the maid; and the girl reentered, placing upon the table a visiting-card:—

DENISE RYLAND
ATELIER 4, RUE DU COQ D'OR,
MONTMARTRE,
PARIS.

Helen Cumberly started to her feet with a stifled exclamation and turned to the maid; her face, to which the color slowly had been returning, suddenly blanched anew.

"Denise Ryland!" she muttered, still holding the card in her hand, "why—that's Mrs. Leroux's friend, with whom she had been staying in Paris! Whatever can it mean?"

"Shall I show her in here, please?" asked the maid.

"Yes, in here," replied Helen, absently; and, scarcely aware that she had given instructions to that effect, she presently found herself confronted by the lady of the boat-train!

"Miss Cumberly?" said the new arrival in a pleasant American voice.

"Yes—I am Helen Cumberly. Oh! I am so glad to know you at last! I have often pictured you; for Mira—Mrs. Leroux—is always talking about you, and about the glorious times you have together! I have sometimes longed to join you in beautiful Paris. How good of you to come back with her!"

Miss Ryland unrolled the Scotch muffler from her throat, swinging her head from side to side in a sort of spuriously truculent manner, quite peculiarly her own. Her keen hazel eyes were fixed upon the face of the girl before her. Instinctively and immediately she liked Helen Cumberly; and Helen felt that this strong-looking, vaguely masculine woman, was an old, intimate friend, although she had never before set eyes upon her.

"H'm!" said Miss Ryland. "I have come from Paris"—she punctuated many of her sentences with wags of the head as if carefully weighing her words—"especially" (pause) "to see you" (pause and wag of head) "I am glad… to find that… you are the thoroughly sensible… kind of girl that I… had imagined, from the accounts which… I have had of you."…

She seated herself in an armchair.

"Had of me from Mira?" asked Helen.

"Yes… from Mrs. Leroux."

"How delightful it must be for you to have her with you so often! Marriage, as a rule, puts an end to that particular sort of good-time, doesn't it?"

"It does… very properly… too. No MAN… no MAN in his… right senses… would permit… his wife… to gad about in Paris with another… girl" (she presumably referred to herself) "whom HE had only met… casually… and did not like"…

"What! do you mean that Mr. Leroux doesn't like you? I can't believe that!"

"Then the sooner… you believe it… the better."

"It can only be that he does not know you, properly?"

"He has no wish… to know me… properly; and I have no desire… to cultivate… the… friendship of such… a silly being."

Helen Cumberly was conscious that a flush was rising from her face to her brow, and tingling in the very roots of her hair. She was indignant with herself and turned, aside, bending over her table in order to conceal this ill-timed embarrassment from her visitor.

"Poor Mr. Leroux!" she said, speaking very rapidly; "I think it awfully good of him, and sporty, to allow his wife so much liberty."

"Sporty!" said Miss Ryland, head wagging and nostrils distended in scorn. "Idi-otic… I should call it."

"Why?"

Helen Cumberly, perfectly composed again, raised her clear eyes to her visitor.

"You seem so… thoroughly sensible, except in regard to… Harry Leroux;—and ALL women, with a few… exceptions, are FOOLS where the true… character of a MAN is concerned—that I will take you right into my confidence."

Her speech lost its quality of syncopation; the whole expression of her face changed; and in the hazel eyes a deep concern might be read.

"My dear," she stood up, crossed to Helen's side, and rested her artistic looking hands upon the girl's shoulder. "Harry Leroux stands upon the brink of a great tragedy—a life's tragedy!"

Helen was trembling slightly again.

"Oh, I know!" she whispered—"I know—"

"You know?"

There was surprise in Miss Ryland's voice.

"Yes, I have seen them—watched them—and I know that the police think"…

"Police! What are you talking about—the police?"

Helen looked up with a troubled face.

"The murder!" she began…

Miss Ryland dropped into a chair which, fortunately, stood close behind her, with a face suddenly set in an expression of horror. She began to understand, now, a certain restraint, a certain ominous shadow, which she had perceived, or thought she had perceived, in the atmosphere of this home, and in the manner of its occupants.

"My dear girl," she began, and the old nervous, jerky manner showed itself again, momentarily,—"remember that… I left Paris by… the first

train, this morning, and have simply been… traveling right up to the present moment."…

"Then you have not heard? You don't know that a—murder—has been committed?"

"MURDER! Not—not"…

"Not any one connected with Mr. Leroux; no, thank God! but it was done in his flat."…

Miss Ryland brushed a whisk of straight hair back from her brow with a rough and ungraceful movement.

"My dear," she began, taking a French telegraphic form from her pocket, "you see this message? It's one which reached me at an unearthly hour this morning from Harry Leroux. It was addressed to his wife at my studio; therefore, as her friend, I opened it. Mira Leroux has actually visited me there twice since her marriage—"

"Twice!" Helen rose slowly to her feet, with horrified eyes fixed upon the speaker.

"Twice I said! I have not seen her, and have rarely heard from her, for nearly twelve months, now! Therefore I packed up post-haste and here I am! I came to you, because, from what little I have heard of you, and of your father, I judged you to be the right kind of friends to consult."…

"You have not seen her for twelve months?"

Helen's voice was almost inaudible, and she was trembling dreadfully.

"That's a fact, my dear. And now, what are we going to tell Harry Leroux?"

It was a question, the answer to which was by no means evident at a glance; and leaving Helen Cumberly face to face with this new and horrible truth which had brought Denise Ryland hotfoot from Paris to London, let us glance, for a moment, into the now familiar room of Detective-Inspector Dunbar at Scotland Yard.

He had returned from his interrogation of Brian; and he received the report of Sowerby, respecting the late Mrs. Vernon's maid. The girl, Sergeant Sowerby declared, was innocent of complicity, and could only depose to the fact that her late mistress took very little luggage with her on the occasions of her trips to Scotland. With his notebook open before him upon the table, Dunbar was adding this slight item to his notes upon the

case, when the door opened, and the uniformed constable entered, saluted, and placed an envelope in the Inspector's hand.

"From the commissioner!" said Sowerby, significantly.

With puzzled face, Dunbar opened the envelope and withdrew the commissioner's note. It was very brief:—

"M. Gaston Max, of the Paris Police, is joining you in the Palace Mansions murder case. You will cooperate with him from date above."

"MAX!" said Dunbar, gazing astoundedly at his subordinate.

Certainly it was a name which might well account for the amazement written upon the inspector's face; for it was the name of admittedly the greatest criminal investigator in Europe!

"What the devil has the case to do with the French police?" muttered Sowerby, his ruddy countenance exhibiting a whole history of wonderment.

The constable, who had withdrawn, now reappeared, knocking deferentially upon the door, throwing it open, and announcing:

"Mr. Gaston Max, to see Detective-Inspector Dunbar."

Bowing courteously upon the threshold, appeared a figure in a dazzling check traveling-coat—a figure very novel, and wholly unforgettable.

"I am honored to meet a distinguished London colleague," he said in perfect English, with a faint American accent.

Dunbar stepped across the room with outstretched hand, and cordially shook that of the famous Frenchman.

"I am the more honored," he declared, gallantly playing up to the other's courtesy. "This is Detective-Sergeant Sowerby, who is acting with me in the case."

M. Gaston Max bowed low in acknowledgment of the introduction.

"It is a pleasure to meet Detective-Sergeant Sowerby," he declared.

These polite overtures being concluded then, and the door being closed, the three detectives stood looking at one another in momentary silence. Then Dunbar spoke with blunt directness:

"I am very pleased to have you with us, Mr. Max," he said; "but might I ask what your presence in London means?"

M. Gaston Max shrugged in true Gallic fashion.

"It means, monsieur," he said, "—murder—and MR. KING!"

XII. Mr. Gianapolis

It will prove of interest at this place to avail ourselves of an opportunity denied to the police, and to inquire into the activities of Mr. Soames, whilom employee of Henry Leroux.

Luke Soames was a man of unpleasant character; a man ever seeking advancement—advancement to what he believed to be an ideal state, viz.: the possession of a competency; and to this ambition he subjugated all conflicting interests—especially the interests of others. From narrow but honest beginnings, he had developed along lines ever growing narrower until gradually honesty became squeezed out. He formed the opinion that wealth was unobtainable by dint of hard work; and indeed in a man of his limited intellectual attainments, this was no more than true.

At the period when he becomes of interest, he had just discovered himself a gentleman-at-large by reason of his dismissal from the services of a wealthy bachelor, to whose establishment in Piccadilly he had been attached in the capacity of valet. There was nothing definite against his character at this time, save that he had never remained for long in any one situation.

His experience was varied, if his references were limited; he had served not only as valet, but also as chauffeur, as steward on an ocean liner, and, for a limited period, as temporary butler in an American household at Nice.

Soames' banking account had increased steadily, but not at a rate commensurate with his ambitions; therefore, when entering his name and qualifications in the books of a certain exclusive employment agency in Mayfair he determined to avail himself, upon this occasion, of his comparative independence by waiting until kindly Fate should cast something really satisfactory in his path.

Such an opening occurred very shortly after his first visit to the agent. He received a card instructing him to call at the office in order to meet a certain Mr. Gianapolis. Quitting his rooms in Kennington, Mr. Soames, attired in discreet black, set out to make the acquaintance of his hypothetical employer.

He found Mr. Gianapolis to be a little and very swarthy man, who held his head so low as to convey the impression of having a pronounced stoop; a man whose well-cut clothes and immaculate linen could not redeem his

appearance from a constitutional dirtiness. A jet black mustache, small, aquiline features, an engaging smile, and very dark brown eyes, viciously crossed, made up a personality incongruous with his sheltering silk hat, and calling aloud for a tarboosh and a linen suit, a shop in a bazaar, or a part in the campaign of commercial brigandage which, based in the Levant, spreads its ramifications throughout the Orient, Near and Far.

Mr. Gianapolis had the suave speech and smiling manner. He greeted Soames not as one greets a prospective servant, but as one welcomes an esteemed acquaintance. Following a brief chat, he proposed an adjournment to a neighboring saloon bar; and there, over cocktails, he conversed with Mr. Soames as one crook with another.

Soames was charmed, fascinated, yet vaguely horrified; for this man smilingly threw off the cloak of hypocrisy from his companion's shoulders, and pretended, with the skill of his race, equally to nudify his own villainy.

"My dear Mr. Soames!" he said, speaking almost perfect English, but with the sing-song intonation of the Greek, and giving all his syllables an equal value—"you are the man I am looking for; and I can make your fortune."

This was entirely in accordance with Mr. Soames' own views, and he nodded, respectfully.

"I know," continued Gianapolis, proffering an excellent Egyptian cigarette, "that you were cramped in your last situation—that you were misunderstood"…

Soames, cigarette in hand, suppressed a start, and wondered if he were turning pale. He selected a match with nervous care.

"The little matter of the silver spoons," continued Gianapolis, smiling fraternally, "was perhaps an error of judgment. Although"—patting the startled Soames upon the shoulder—"they were a legitimate perquisite; I am not blaming you. But it takes so long to accumulate a really useful balance in that petty way. Now"—he glanced cautiously about him—"I can offer you a post under conditions which will place you above the consideration of silver spoons!"

Soames, hastily finishing his cocktail, sought for words; but Gianapolis, finishing his own, blandly ordered two more, and, tapping Soames upon the knee, continued:

"Then that matter of the petty cash, and those trifling irregularities in the wine-bill, you remember?—when you were with Colonel Hewett in Nice?"…

Soames gripped the counter hard, staring at the newly arrived cocktail as though it were hypnotizing him.

"These little matters," added Gianapolis, appreciatively sipping from his own glass, "which would weigh heavily against your other references, in the event of their being mentioned to any prospective employer"…

Soames knew beyond doubt that his face was very pale indeed.

"These little matters, then," pursued Gianapolis, "all go to prove to ME that you are a man of enterprise and spirit—that you are the very man I require. Now I can offer you a post in the establishment of Mr. Henry Leroux, the novelist. The service will be easy. You will be required to attend to callers and to wait at table upon special occasions. There will be no valeting, and you will have undisputed charge of the pantry and wine-cellar. In short, you will enjoy unusual liberty. The salary, you would say? It will be the same as that which you received from Mr. Mapleson"…

Soames raised his head drearily; he felt himself in the toils; he felt himself a mined man.

"It isn't a salary," he began, "which"…

"My dear Mr. Soames," said Gianapolis, tapping him confidentially upon the knee again—"my dear Soames, it isn't the salary, I admit, which you enjoyed whilst in the services of Colonel Hewett in a similar capacity. But this is not a large establishment, and the duties are light. Furthermore, there will be—extras."

"Extras?"

Mr. Soames' eye brightened, and under the benignant influence of the cocktails his courage began to return.

"I do not refer," smiled Mr. Gianapolis, "to perquisites! The extras will be monetary. Another two pounds per week"…

"Two pounds!"

"Bringing your salary up to a nice round figure; the additional amount will be paid to you from another source. You will receive the latter payment quarterly"…

"From—from"…

"From me!" said Mr. Gianapolis, smiling radiantly. "Now, I know you are going to accept; that is understood between us. I will give you the address —Palace Mansions, Westminster—at which you must apply; and I will tell you what little services will be required from you in return for this additional emolument."

Mr. Soames hurriedly finished his second cocktail. Mr. Gianapolis, in true sporting fashion, kept pace with him and repeated the order.

"You will take charge of the mail!" he whispered softly, one irregular eye following the movements of the barmaid, and the other fixed almost fiercely upon the face of Soames. "At certain times—of which you will be notified in advance—Mrs. Leroux will pay visits to Paris. At such times, all letters addressed to her, or re-addressed to her, will not be posted! You will ring me up when such letters come into your possession—they must ALL come into your possession!—and I will arrange to meet you, say at the corner of Victoria Street, to receive them. You understand?"

Mr. Soames understood, and thus far found his plastic conscience marching in step with his inclinations.

"Then," resumed Gianapolis, "prior to her departure on these occasions, Mrs. Leroux will hand you a parcel. This also you will bring to me at the place arranged. Do you find anything onerous in these conditions?"

"Not at all," muttered Soames, a trifle unsteadily; "it seems all right"—the cocktails were beginning to speak now, and his voice was a duet —"simply perfectly all right—all square."

"Good!" said Mr. Gianapolis with his radiant smile; and the gaze of his left eye, crossing that of its neighbor, observed the entrance of a stranger into the bar. He drew his stool closer and lowered his voice:

"Mrs. Leroux," he continued, "will be in your confidence. Mr. Leroux and every one else—EVERY ONE else—must not suspect the arrangement"…

"Certainly—I quite understand"…

"Mrs. Leroux will engage you this afternoon—her husband is a mere cipher in the household—and you will commence your duties on Monday. Later in the week, Wednesday or Thursday, we will meet by appointment, and discuss further details."

"Where can I see you?"

"Ring up this number: 18642 East, and ask for Mr. King. No! don't write it down; remember it! I will come to the telephone, and arrange a meeting."

Shortly after this, then, the interview concluded; and later in the afternoon of that day Mr. Soames presented himself at Palace Mansions.

He was received by Mrs. Leroux—a pretty woman with a pathetically weak mouth. She had fair hair, not very abundant, and large eyes; which, since they exhibited the unusual phenomenon, in a blonde, of long dark lashes (Mr. Soames judged their blackness to be natural), would have been beautiful had they not been of too light a color, too small in the pupils, and utterly expressionless. Indeed, her whole face lacked color, as did her personality, and the exquisite tea-gown which she wore conveyed that odd impression of slovenliness, which is often an indication of secret vice. She was quite young and indisputably pretty, but this malproprete, together with a certain aimlessness of manner, struck an incongruous note; for essentially she was of a type which for its complement needs vivacity.

Mr. Soames, a man of experience, scented an intrigue and a neglectful husband. Since he was engaged on the spot without reference to the invisible Leroux, he was immediately confirmed in the latter part of his surmise. He departed well satisfied with his affairs, and with the promise of the future, over which Mr. Gianapolis, the cherubic, radiantly presided.

XIII. The Draft On Paris

For close upon a month Soames performed the duties imposed upon him in the household of Henry Leroux. He was unable to discover, despite a careful course of inquiry from the cook and the housemaid, that Mrs. Leroux frequently absented herself. But the servants were newly engaged, for the flat in Palace Mansions had only recently been leased by the Leroux. He gathered that they had formerly lived much abroad, and that their marriage had taken place in Paris. Mrs. Leroux had been to visit a friend in the French capital once, he understood, since the housemaid had been in her employ.

The mistress (said the housemaid) did not care twopence-ha'penny for her husband; she had married him for his money, and for nothing else. She

had had an earlier love (declared the cook) and was pining away to a mere shadow because of her painful memories. During the last six months (the period of the cook's service) Mrs. Leroux had altered out of all recognition. The cook was of opinion that she drank secretly.

Of Mr. Leroux, Soames formed the poorest opinion. He counted him a spiritless being, whose world was bounded by his book-shelves, and whose wife would be a fool if she did not avail herself of the liberty which his neglect invited her to enjoy. Soames felt himself, not a snake in the grass, but a benefactor—a friend in need—a champion come to the defense of an unhappy and persecuted woman.

He wondered when an opportunity should arise which would enable him to commence his chivalrous operations; almost daily he anticipated instructions to the effect that Mrs. Leroux would be leaving for Paris immediately. But the days glided by and the weeks glided by, without anything occurring to break the monotony of the Leroux household.

Mr. Soames sought an opportunity to express his respectful readiness to Mrs. Leroux; but the lady was rarely visible outside her own apartments until late in the day, when she would be engaged in preparing for the serious business of the evening: one night a dance, another, a bridge-party; so it went. Mr. Leroux rarely joined her upon these festive expeditions, but clung to his study like Diogenes to his tub.

Great was Mr. Soames' contempt; bitter were the reproaches of the cook; dark were the predictions of the housemaid.

At last, however, Soames, feeling himself neglected, seized an opportunity which offered to cement the secret bond (the TOO secret bond) existing between himself and the mistress of the house.

Meeting her one afternoon in the lobby, which she was crossing on the way from her bedroom to the drawing-room, he stood aside to let her pass, whispering:

"At your service, whenever you are ready, madam!"

It was a non-committal remark, which, if she chose to keep up the comedy, he could explain away by claiming it to refer to the summoning of the car from the garage—for Mrs. Leroux was driving out that afternoon.

She did not endeavor to evade the occult meaning of the words, however. In the wearily dreamy manner which, when first he had seen her, had aroused Soames' respectful interest, she raised her thin hand to her hair,

slowly pressing it back from her brow, and directed her big eyes vacantly upon him.

"Yes, Soames," she said (her voice had a faraway quality in keeping with the rest of her personality), "Mr. King speaks well of you. But please do not refer again to"—she glanced in a manner at once furtive and sorrowful, in the direction of the study-door—"to the… little arrangement of"…

She passed on, with the slow, gliding gait, which, together with her fragility, sometimes lent her an almost phantomesque appearance.

This was comforting, in its degree; since it proved that the smiling Gianapolis had in no way misled him (Soames). But as a man of business, Mr. Soames was not fully satisfied. He selected an evening when Mrs. Leroux was absent—and indeed she was absent almost every evening, for Leroux entertained but little. The cook and the housemaid were absent, also; therefore, to all intents and purposes, Soames had the flat to himself; since Henry Leroux counted in that establishment, not as an entity, but rather as a necessary, if unornamental, portion of the fittings.

Standing in the lobby, Soames raised the telephone receiver, and having paused with closed eyes preparing the exact form of words in which he should address his invisible employer, he gave the number: East 18642.

Following a brief delay:—

"Yes," came a nasal voice, "who is it?"

"Soames! I want to speak to Mr. King!"

The words apparently surprised the man at the other end of the wire, for he hesitated ere inquiring:—

"What did you say your name was?"

"Soames—Luke Soames."

"Hold on!"

Soames, with closed eyes, and holding the receiver to his ear, silently rehearsed again the exact wording of his speech. Then:—

"Hullo!" came another voice—"is that Mr. Soames?"

"Yes! Is that Mr. Gianapolis speaking?"

"It is, my dear Soames!" replied the sing-song voice; and Soames, closing his eyes again, had before him a mental picture of the radiantly smiling Greek.

"Yes, my dear Soames," continued Gianapolis; "here I am. I hope you are quite well—perfectly well?"

"I am perfectly well, thank you; but as a man of business, it has occurred to me that failing a proper agreement—which in this case I know would be impossible—a trifling advance on the first quarter's"…

"On your salary, my dear Soames! On your salary? Payment for the first quarter shall be made to you to-morrow, my dear Soames! Why ever did you not express the wish before? Certainly, certainly!"…

"Will it be sent to me?"

"My dear fellow! How absurd you are! Can you get out to-morrow evening about nine o'clock?"

"Yes, easily."

"Then I will meet you at the corner of Victoria Street, by the hotel, and hand you your first quarter's salary. Will that be satisfactory?"

"Perfectly," said Soames, his small eyes sparkling with avarice. "Most decidedly, Mr. Gianapolis. Many thanks."…

"And by the way," continued the other, "it is rather fortunate that you rang me up this evening, because it has saved me the trouble of ringing you up."

"What?"—Soames' eyes half closed, from the bottom lids upwards: —"there is something"…

"There is a trifling service which I require of you—yes, my dear Soames."

"Is it?"…

"We will discuss the matter to-morrow evening. Oh! it is a mere trifle. So good-by for the present."

Soames, with the fingers of his two hands interlocked before him, and his thumbs twirling rapidly around one another, stood in the lobby, gazing reflectively at the rug-strewn floor. He was working out in his mind how handsomely this first payment would show up on the welcome side of his passbook. Truly, he was fortunate in having met the generous Gianapolis…

He thought of a trifling indiscretion committed at the expense of one Mr. Mapleson, and of the wine-bill of Colonel Hewett; and he thought of the apparently clairvoyant knowledge of the Greek. A cloud momentarily came between his perceptive and the rosy horizon.

But nearer to the foreground of the mental picture, uprose a left-hand page of his pass book; and its tidings of great joy, written in clerkly hand, served to dispel the cloud.

Soames sighed in gentle rapture, and, soft-footed, passed into his own room.

Certainly his duties were neither difficult nor unpleasant. The mistress of the house lived apparently in a hazy dream-world of her own, and Mr. Leroux was the ultimate expression of the non-commercial. Mr. Soames could have robbed him every day had he desired to do so; but he had refrained from availing himself even of those perquisites which he considered justly his; for it was evident, to his limited intelligence, that greater profit was to be gained by establishing himself in this household than by weeding-out five shillings here, and half-a-sovereign there, at the risk of untimely dismissal.

Yet—it was a struggle! All Mr. Soames' commercial instincts were up in arms against this voice of a greater avarice which counseled abstention. For instance: he could have added half-a-sovereign a week to his earnings by means of a simple arrangement with the local wine merchant. Leroux's cigars he could have sold by the hundreds; for Leroux, when a friend called, would absently open a new box, entirely forgetful of the fact that a box from which but two—or at most three—cigars had been taken, lay already on the bureau.

Mr. Soames, in order to put his theories to the test, had temporarily abstracted half-a-dozen such boxes from the study and the dining-room and had hidden them. Leroux, finding, as he supposed, that he was out of cigars, had simply ordered Soames to get him some more.

"Er—about a dozen boxes—er—Soames," he had said; "of the same sort!"

Was ever a man of business submitted to such an ordeal? After receiving those instructions, Soames had sat for close upon an hour in his own room, contemplating the six broken boxes, containing in all some five hundred and ninety cigars; but the voice within prevailed; he must court no chance of losing his situation; therefore, he "discovered" these six boxes in a cupboard—much to Henry Leroux's surprise!

Then, Leroux regularly sent him to the Charing Cross branch of the London County and Suburban Bank with open checks! Sometimes, he would be sent to pay in, at other times to withdraw; the amounts involved varying from one guinea to 150 pounds! But, as he told himself, on almost every occasion that he went to Leroux's bank, he was deliberately throwing

money away, deliberately closing his eyes to the good fortune which this careless and gullible man cast in his path. He observed a scrupulous honesty in all these dealings, with the result that the bank manager came to regard him as a valuable and trustworthy servant, and said as much to the assistant manager, expressing his wonder that Leroux—whose account occasioned the bank more anxiety, and gave it more work, than that of any other two depositors—had at last engaged a man who would keep his business affairs in order!

And these were but a few of the golden apples which Mr. Soames permitted to slip through his fingers, so steadfast was he in his belief that Gianapolis would be as good as his word, and make his fortune.

Leroux employed no secretary; and his MSS. were typed at his agent's office. A most slovenly man in all things, and in business matters especially, he was the despair, not only of his banker, but of his broker; he was a man who, in professional parlance, "deserved to be robbed." It is improbable that he had any but the haziest ideas, at any particular time, respecting the state of his bank balance and investments. He detested the writing of business letters, and was always at great pains to avoid anything in the nature of a commercial rendezvous. He would sign any document which his lawyer or his broker cared to send him, with simple, unquestioned faith.

His bank he never visited, and his appearance was entirely unfamiliar to the staff. True, the manager knew him slightly, having had two interviews with him: one when the account was opened, and the second when Leroux introduced his solicitor and broker—in order that in the future he might not be troubled in any way with business affairs.

Mr. Soames perceived more and more clearly that the mild deception projected was unlikely to be discovered by its victim; and, at the appointed time, he hastened to the corner of Victoria Street, to his appointment with Gianapolis. The latter was prompt, for Soames perceived his radiant smile afar off.

The saloon bar of the Red Lion was affably proposed by Mr. Gianapolis as a suitable spot to discuss the business. Soames agreed, not without certain inward qualms; for the proximity of the hostelry to New Scotland Yard was a disquieting circumstance.

However, since Gianapolis affected to treat their negotiations in the light of perfectly legitimate business, he put up no protest, and presently found

himself seated in a very cozy corner of the saloon bar, with a glass of whisky-and-soda on a little table before him, bubbling in a manner which rendered it an agreeable and refreshing sight in the eyes of Mr. Soames.

"You know," said Gianapolis, the gaze of his left eye bisecting that of his right in a most bewildering manner, "they call this 'the 'tec's tabernacle!'"

"Indeed," said Soames, without enthusiasm; "I suppose some of the Scotland Yard men do drop in now and then?"

"Beyond doubt, my dear Soames."

Soames responded to his companion's radiant smile with a smile of his own by no means so pleasant to look upon. Soames had the type of face which, in repose, might be the face of an honest man; but his smile would have led to his instant arrest on any racecourse in Europe: it was the smile of a pick-pocket.

"Now," continued Gianapolis, "here is a quarter's salary in advance."

From a pocket-book, he took a little brown paper envelope and from the brown paper envelope counted out four five-pound notes, five golden sovereigns, one half-sovereign, and ten shillings' worth of silver. Soames' eyes glittered, delightedly.

"A little informal receipt?" smiled Gianapolis, raising his eyebrows, satanically. "Here on this page of my notebook I have written: 'Received from Mr. King for service rendered, 26 pounds, being payment, in advance, of amount due on 31st October 19—' I have attached a stamp to the page, as you will see," continued Gianapolis, "and here is a fountain-pen. Just sign across the stamp, adding to-day's date."

Soames complied with willing alacrity; and Gianapolis having carefully blotted the signature, replaced the notebook in his pocket, and politely acknowledged the return of the fountain-pen. Soames, glancing furtively about him, replaced the money in the envelope, and thrust the latter carefully into a trouser pocket.

"Now," resumed Gianapolis, "we must not permit our affairs of business to interfere with our amusements."

He stepped up to the bar and ordered two more whiskies with soda. These being sampled, business was resumed.

"To-morrow," said Gianapolis, leaning forward across the table so that his face almost touched that of his companion, "you will be entrusted by Mr. Leroux with a commission."…

Soames nodded eagerly, his eyes upon the speaker's face.

"You will accompany Mrs. Leroux to the bank," continued Gianapolis, "in order that she may write a specimen signature, in the presence of the manager, for transmission to the Credit Lyonnais in Paris."…

Soames nearly closed his little eyes in his effort to comprehend.

"A draft in her favor," continued the Greek, "has been purchased by Mr. Leroux's bank from the Paris bank, and, on presentation of this, a checkbook will be issued to Mrs. Leroux by the Credit Lyonnais in Paris to enable her to draw at her convenience upon that establishment against the said order. Do you follow me?"

Soames nodded rapidly, eager to exhibit an intelligent grasp of the situation.

"Now"—Gianapolis lowered his voice impressively—"no one at the Charing Cross branch of the London County and Suburban Bank has ever seen Mrs. Leroux!—Oh! we have been careful of that, and we shall be careful in the future. You are known already as an accredited agent of Leroux; therefore"—he bent yet closer to Soames' ear—"you will direct the chauffeur to drop you, not at the Strand entrance, but at the side entrance. You follow?"

Soames, almost holding his breath, nodded again.

"At the end of the court, in which the latter entrance is situated, a lady dressed in the same manner as Mrs. Leroux (this is arranged) will be waiting. Mrs. Leroux will walk straight up the court, into the corridor of Bank Chambers by the back entrance, and from thence out into the Strand. YOU will escort the second lady into the manager's office, and she will sign 'Mira Leroux' instead of the real Mira Leroux."…

Soames became aware that he was changing color. This was a superior felony, and as such it awed his little mind. It was tantamount to burning his boats. Missing silver spoons and cooked petty cash were trivialities usually expiable at the price of a boot-assisted dismissal; but this—!

"You understand?" Gianapolis was not smiling, now. "There is not the slightest danger. The signature of the lady whom you will meet will be an exact duplicate of the real one; that is, exact enough to deceive a man who is not looking for a forgery. But it would not be exact enough to deceive the French banker—he WILL be looking for a forgery. You follow me? The signature on the checks drawn against the Credit Lyonnais will be the

SAME as the specimen forwarded by the London County and Suburban, since they will be written by the same lady—the duplicate Mrs. Leroux. Therefore, the French bank will have no means of detecting the harmless little deception practised upon them, and the English bank, if it should ever see those checks, will raise no question, since the checks will have been honored by the Credit Lyonnais."

Soames finished his whisky-and-soda at a gulp.

"Finally," concluded Gianapolis, "you will escort the lady out by the front entrance to the Strand. She will leave you and walk in an easterly direction —making some suitable excuse if the manager should insist upon seeing her to the door; and the real Mrs. Leroux will come out by the Strand end of Bank Chambers' corridor, and walk back with you around the corner to where the car will be waiting. Perfect?"

"Quite," said Soames, huskily…

But when, some twenty minutes later, he returned to Palace Mansions, he was a man lost in thought; and he did not entirely regain his wonted composure, and did not entirely shake off the incubus, Doubt, until in his own room he had re-counted the contents of the brown paper envelope. Then:—

"It's safe enough," he muttered; "and it's worth it!"

Thus it came about that, on the following morning, Leroux called him into the study and gave him just such instructions as Gianapolis had outlined the evening before.

"I am—er—too busy to go myself, Soames," said Leroux, "and—er—Mrs. Leroux will shortly be paying a visit to friends in—er—in Paris. So that I am opening a credit there for her. Save so much trouble—and—such a lot of—correspondence—international money orders—and such worrying things. Mr. Smith, the manager, knows you and you will take this letter of authority. The draft I understand has already been purchased."

Mr. Soames was bursting with anxiety to learn the amount of this draft, but could find no suitable opportunity to inquire. The astonishing deception, then, was carried out without anything resembling a hitch. Mrs. Leroux went through with her part in the comedy, in the dreamy manner of a somnambulist; and the duplicate Mrs. Leroux, who waited at the appointed spot, had achieved so startling a resemblance to her prototype, that Mr. Soames became conscious of a craving for a peg of brandy at the moment

of setting eyes upon her. However, he braced himself up and saw the business through.

As was to be expected, no questions were raised and no doubts entertained. The bank manager was very courteous and very reserved, and the fictitious Mrs. Leroux equally reserved, indeed, cold. She avoided raising her motor veil, and, immediately the business was concluded, took her departure, Mr. Smith escorting her as far as the door.

She walked away toward Fleet Street, and the respectful attendant, Soames, toward Charing Cross; he rejoined Mrs. Leroux at the door of Bank Chambers, and the two turned the corner and entered the waiting car. Soames was rather nervous; Mrs. Leroux quite apathetic.

Shortly after this event, Soames learnt that the date of Mrs. Leroux's departure to Paris was definitely fixed. He received from her hands a large envelope.

"For Mr. King," she said, in her dreamy fashion; and he noticed that she seemed to be in poorer health than usual. Her mouth twitched strangely; she was a nervous wreck.

Then came her departure, attended by a certain bustle, an appointment with Mr. Gianapolis; and the delivery of the parcel into that gentleman's keeping.

Mrs. Leroux was away for six days on this occasion. Leroux sent her three postcards during that time, and re-addressed some ten or twelve letters which arrived for her. The address in all cases was:

c/o Miss Denise Ryland,
Atelier 4, Rue du Coq d'Or,
Montmartre,
Paris.

East 18642 was much in demand that week; and there were numerous meetings between Soames and Gianapolis at the corner of Victoria Street, and numerous whiskies-and-sodas in the Red Lion; for Gianapolis persisted in his patronage of that establishment, apparently for no other reason than because it was dangerously near to Scotland Yard, and an occasional house of call for members of the Criminal Investigation Department.

Thus did Mr. Soames commence his career of duplicity at the flat of Henry Leroux; and for some twelve months before the events which so dramatically interfered with the delightful scheme, he drew his double salary and performed his perfidious work with great efficiency and contentment. Mrs. Leroux paid four other visits to Paris during that time, and always returned in much better spirits, although pale and somewhat haggard looking. It fell to the lot of Soames always to meet her at Charing Cross; but never once, by look or by word, did she proffer, or invite, the slightest exchange of confidence. She apathetically accepted his aid in conducting this intrigue as she would have accepted his aid in putting on her opera-cloak.

The curious Soames had read right through the telephone directory from A to Z in quest of East 18642—only to learn that no such number was published. His ingenuity not being great, he could think of no means to learn the address of the mysterious Mr. King. So keenly had he been impressed with the omniscience of that shadowy being who knew all his past, that he feared to inquire of the Eastern Exchange. His banking account was growing handsomely, and, above all things, he dreaded to kill the goose that laid the golden eggs.

Then came the night which shattered all. Having rung up East 18642 and made an appointment with Gianapolis in regard to some letters for Mrs. Leroux, he had been surprised, on reaching the corner of Victoria Street, to find that Gianapolis was not there! He glanced up at the face of Big Ben. Yes—for the first time during their business acquaintance, Mr. Gianapolis was late!

For close upon twenty minutes, Soames waited, walking slowly up and down. When, at last, coming from the direction of Westminster, he saw the familiar spruce figure.

Eagerly he hurried forward to meet the Greek; but Gianapolis—to the horror and amazement of Soames—affected not to know him! He stepped aside to avoid the stupefied butler, and passed. But, in passing, he hissed these words at Soames:—

"Follow to Victoria Street Post Office! Pretend to post letters at next box to me and put them in my hand!"

He was gone!

Soames, dazed at this new state of affairs, followed him at a discreet distance. Gianapolis ran up the Post Office steps briskly, and Soames, immediately afterwards, ascended also—furtively. Gianapolis was taking out a number of letters from his pocket.

Soames walked across to the "Country" box on his right, and affected to scrutinize the addresses on the envelopes of Mrs. Leroux's correspondence.

Gianapolis, on the pretense of posting a country letter, reached out and snatched the correspondence from Soames' hand. The gaze of his left eye crookedly sought the face of the butler.

"Go home!" whispered Gianapolis; "be cautious!"

XIV. East 18642

In a pitiable state of mind, Soames walked away from the Post Office. Gianapolis had hurried off in the direction of Victoria Station. Something was wrong! Some part of the machine, of the dimly divined machine whereof he formed a cog, was out of gear. Since the very nature of this machine—its construction and purpose, alike—was unknown to Soames, he had no basis upon which to erect surmises for good or ill.

His timid inquiries into the identity of East 18642 had begun and terminated with his labored perusal of the telephone book, a profitless task which had occupied him for the greater part of an evening.

The name, Gianapolis, did not appear at all; whereas there proved to be some two hundred and ninety Kings. But, oddly, only four of these were on the Eastern Exchange; one was a veterinary surgeon; one a boat-builder; and a third a teacher of dancing. The fourth, an engineer, seemed a "possible" to Soames, although his published number was not 18642; but a brief—a very brief—conversation, convinced the butler that this was not his man.

He had been away from the flat for over an hour, and he doubted if even the lax sense of discipline possessed by Mr. Leroux would enable that gentleman to overlook this irregularity. Soames had a key of the outer door, and he built his hopes upon the possibility that Leroux had not noticed his absence and would not hear his return.

He opened the door very quietly, but had scarcely set his foot in the lobby ere the dreadful, unforgettable scene met his gaze.

For more years than he could remember, he had lived in dread of the law; and, in Luke Soames' philosophy, the words Satan and Detective were interchangeable. Now, before his eyes, was a palpable, unmistakable police officer; and on the floor…

Just one glimpse he permitted himself—and, in a voice that seemed to reach him from a vast distance, the detective was addressing HIM!…

Slinking to his room, with his craven heart missing every fourth beat, and his mind in chaos, Soames sank down upon the bed, locked his hands together and hugged them, convulsively, between his knees.

It was come! He had overstepped that almost invisible boundary-line which divides indiscretion from crime. He knew now that the voice within him, the voice which had warned him against Gianapolis and against becoming involved in what dimly he had perceived to be an elaborate scheme, had been, not the voice of cowardice (as he had supposed) but that of prudence.

And it was too late. The dead woman, he told himself—he had been unable to see her very clearly—undoubtedly was Mrs. Leroux. What in God's name had happened! Probably her husband had killed her… which meant? It meant that proofs—PROOFS—were come into his possession; and who should be involved, entangled in the meshes of this fallen conspiracy, but himself, Luke Soames!

As must be abundantly evident, Soames was not a criminal of the daring type; he did not believe in reaching out for anything until he was well assured that he could, if necessary, draw back his hand. This last venture, this regrettable venture—this ruinous venture—had been a mistake. He had entered into it under the glamour of Gianapolis' personality. Of what use, now, to him was his swelling bank balance?

But in justice to the mental capacity of Soames, it must be admitted that he had not entirely overlooked such a possibility as this; he had simply refrained, for the good of his health, from contemplating it.

Long before, he had observed, with interest, that, should an emergency arise (such as a fire), a means of egress had been placed by the kindly architect adjacent to his bedroom window. Thus, his departure on the night

of the murder was not the fruit of a sudden scheme, but of one well matured.

Closing and locking his bedroom door, Soames threw out upon the bed the entire contents of his trunk; selected those things which he considered indispensable, and those which might constitute clues. He hastily packed his grip, and, with a last glance about the room and some seconds of breathless listening at the door, he attached to the handle a long piece of cord, which at some time had been tied about his trunk, and, gently opening the window, lowered the grip into the courtyard beneath. The light he had already extinguished, and with the conviction dwelling in his bosom that in some way he was become accessory to a murder—that he was a man shortly to be pursued by the police of the civilized world—he descended the skeleton lift-shaft, picked up his grip, and passed out under the archway into the lane at the back of Palace Mansions and St. Andrew's Mansions.

He did not proceed in the direction which would have brought him out into the Square, but elected to emerge through the other end. At exactly the moment that Inspector Dunbar rushed into his vacated room, Mr. Soames, grip in hand, was mounting to the top of a southward bound 'bus at the corner of Parliament Street!

He was conscious of a need for reflection. He longed to sit in some secluded spot in order to think. At present, his brain was a mere whirligig, and all things about him seemingly danced to the same tune. Stationary objects were become unstable in the eyes of Soames, and the solid earth, burst free of its moorings, no longer afforded him a safe foothold. There was a humming in his ears; and a mist floated before his eyes. By the time that the motor-'bus was come to the south side of the bridge, Soames had succeeded in slowing down his mental roundabout in some degree; and now he began grasping at the flying ideas which the diminishing violence of his brain storm enabled him, vaguely, to perceive.

The first fruits of his reflections were bitter. He viewed the events of the night in truer focus; he saw that by his flight he had sealed his fate—had voluntarily outlawed himself. It became frightfully evident to him that he dared not seek to draw from his bank, that he dared not touch even his modest Post Office account. With the exception of some twenty-five shillings in his pocket, he was penniless!

How could he hope to fly the country, or even to hide himself, without money?

He glanced suspiciously about the 'bus; for he perceived that an old instinct had prompted him to mount one which passed the Oval—a former point of debarkation when he lived in rooms near Kennington Park. Someone might recognize him!

Furtively, he scanned his fellow passengers, but perceived no acquaintance.

What should he do—where should he go? It was a desperate situation.

The inspector who had cared to study that furtive, isolated figure, could not have failed to mark it for that of a hunted man.

At Kennington Gate the 'bus made a halt. Soames glanced at the clock on the corner. It was close upon one A.M. Where in heaven's name should he go? What a fool he had been to come to this district where he was known!

Stay! There was one man in London, surely, who must be almost as keenly interested in the fate of Luke Soames as Luke Soames himself… Gianapolis!

Soames sprang up and hurried off the 'bus. No public telephone box would be available at that hour, but dire need spurred his slow mind and also lent him assurance. He entered the office of the taxicab depot on the next corner, and, from the man whom he found in charge, solicited and obtained the favor of using the telephone. Lifting the receiver, he asked for East 18642.

The seconds that elapsed, now, were as hours of deathly suspense to the man at the telephone. If the number should be engaged!… If the exchange could get no reply!…

"Hullo!" said a nasal voice—"who is it?"

"It is Soames—and I want to speak to Mr. King!"

He lowered his tone as much as possible, almost whispering his own name. He knew the voice which had answered him; it was the same that he always heard when ringing up East 18642. But would Gianapolis come to the telephone? Suddenly—

"Is that Soames?" spoke the sing-song voice of the Greek.

"Yes, yes!"

"Where are you?"

"At Kennington."

"Are they following you?"

"No—I don't think so, at least; what am I to do? Where am I to go?"

"Get to Globe Road—near Stratford Bridge, East, without delay. But whatever you do, see that you are not followed! Globe Road is the turning immediately beyond the Railway Station. It is not too late, perhaps, to get a 'bus or tram, for some part of the way, at any rate. But even if the last is gone, don't take a cab; walk. When you get to Globe Road, pass down on the left-hand side, and, if necessary, right to the end. Make sure you are not followed, then walk back again. You will receive a signal from an open door. Come right in. Good-by."

Soames replaced the receiver on the hook, uttering a long-drawn sigh of relief. The arbiter of his fortunes had not failed him!

"Thank you very much!" he said to the man in charge of the office, who had been bending over his books and apparently taking not the slightest interest in the telephone conversation. Soames placed twopence, the price of the call, on the desk. "Good night."

"Good night."

He hastened out of the gate and across the road. An electric tramcar which would bear him as far as the Elephant-and-Castle was on the point of starting from the corner. Grip in hand, Soames boarded the car and mounted to the top deck. He was in some doubt respecting his mode of travel from the next point onward, but the night was fine, even if he had to walk, and his reviving spirits would cheer him with visions of a golden future!

His money!—That indeed was a bitter draught: the loss of his hardly earned savings! But he was now established—linked by a common secret—in partnership with Gianapolis; he was one of that mysterious, obviously wealthy group which arranged drafts on Paris—which could afford to pay him some hundreds of pounds per annum for such a trifling service as juggling the mail!

Mr. King!—If Gianapolis were only the servant, what a magnificent man of business must be hidden beneath the cognomen, Mr. King! And he was about to meet that lord of mystery. Fear and curiosity were oddly blended in the anticipation.

By great good fortune, Soames arrived at the Elephant-and-Castle in time to catch an eastward bound motor-'bus, a 'bus which would actually carry him to the end of Globe Road. He took his seat on top, and with greater

composure than he had known since his dramatic meeting with Gianapolis in Victoria Street, lighted one of Mr. Leroux's cabanas (with which he invariably kept his case filled) and settled down to think about the future.

His reflections served apparently to shorten the journey; and Soames found himself proceeding along Globe Road—a dark and uninviting highway—almost before he realized that London Bridge had been traversed. It was now long past one o'clock; and that part of the east-end showed dreary and deserted. Public houses had long since ejected their late guests, and even those argumentative groups, which, after closing-time, linger on the pavements, within the odor Bacchanalian, were dispersed. The jauntiness was gone, now, from Soames' manner, and aware of a marked internal depression, he passed furtively along the pavement with its long shadowy reaches between the islands of light formed by the street lamps. From patch to patch he passed, and each successive lamp that looked down upon him found him more furtive, more bent in his carriage.

Not a shop nor a house exhibited any light. Sleeping Globe Road, East, served to extinguish the last poor spark of courage within Soames' bosom. He came to the extreme end of the road without having perceived a beckoning hand, without having detected a sound to reveal that his advent was observed. In the shadow of a wall he stopped, resting his grip upon the pavement and looking back upon his tracks.

No living thing moved from end to end of Globe Road.

Shivering slightly, Soames picked up the bag and began to walk back. Less than half-way along, an icy chill entered into his veins, and his nerves quivered like piano wires, for a soft crying of his name came, eerie, through the silence, and terrified the hearer.

"SOAMES!… SOAMES!"…

Soames stopped dead, breathing very rapidly, and looking about him right and left. He could hear the muted pulse of sleeping London. Then, in the dark doorway of the house before which he stood, he perceived, dimly, a motionless figure. His first sensation was not of relief, but of fear. The figure raised a beckoning hand. Soames, conscious that his course was set and that he must navigate it accordingly, opened the iron gate, passed up the path and entered the house to which he thus had been summoned…

He found himself surrounded by absolute darkness, and the door was closed behind him.

"Straight ahead, Soames!" said the familiar voice of Gianapolis out of the darkness.

Soames, with a gasp of relief, staggered on. A hand rested upon his shoulder, and he was guided into a room on the right of the passage. Then an electric lamp was lighted, and he found himself confronting the Greek.

But Gianapolis was no longer radiant; all the innate evil of the man shone out through the smirking mask.

"Sit down, Soames!" he directed.

Soames, placing his bag upon the floor, seated himself in a cane armchair. The room was cheaply furnished as an office, with a roll-top desk, a revolving chair, and a filing cabinet. On a side-table stood a typewriter, and about the room were several other chairs, whilst the floor was covered with cheap linoleum. Gianapolis sat in the revolving chair, staring at the lowered blinds of the window, and brushing up the points of his black mustache.

With a fine white silk handkerchief Soames gently wiped the perspiration from his forehead and from the lining of his hat-band. Gianapolis began abruptly:—

"There has been an—accident" (he continued to brush his mustache, with increasing rapidity). "Tell me all that took place after you left the Post Office."

Soames nervously related his painful experiences of the evening, whilst Gianapolis drilled his mustache to a satanic angle. The story being concluded:

"Whatever has happened?" groaned Soames; "and what am I to do?"

"What you are to do," replied Gianapolis, "will be arranged, my dear Soames, by—Mr. King. Where you are to go, is a problem shortly settled: you are to go nowhere; you are to stay here."…

"Here!"

Soames gazed drearily about the room.

"Not exactly here—this is merely the office; but at our establishment proper in Limehouse."…

"Limehouse!"

"Certainly. Although you seem to be unaware of the fact, Soames, there are some charming resorts in Limehouse; and your duties, for the present, will confine you to one of them."

"But—but," hesitated Soames, "the police"…

"Unless my information is at fault," said Gianapolis, "the police have no greater chance of paying us a visit, now, than they had formerly."…

"But Mrs. Leroux"…

"Mrs. Leroux!"

Gianapolis twirled around in the chair, his eyes squinting demoniacally: —"Mrs. Leroux!"

"She—she"…

"What about Mrs. Leroux?"

"Isn't she dead?"

"Dead! Mrs. Leroux! You are laboring under a strange delusion, Soames. The lady whom you saw was not Mrs. Leroux."

Soames' brain began to fail him again.

"Then who," he began…

"That doesn't concern you in the least, Soames. But what does concern you is this: your connection, and my connection, with the matter cannot possibly be established by the police. The incident is regrettable, but the emergency was dealt with—in time. It represents a serious deficit, unfortunately, and your own usefulness, for the moment, becomes nil; but we shall have to look after you, I suppose, and hope for better things in the future."

He took up the telephone.

"East 39951," he said, whilst Soames listened, attentively. Then:—

"Is that Kan-Suh Concessions?" he asked. "Yes—good! Tell Said to bring the car past the end of the road at a quarter-to-two. That's all."

He hung up the receiver.

"Now, my dear Soames," he said, with a faint return to his old manner, "you are about to enter upon new duties. I will make your position clear to you. Whilst you do your work, and keep yourself to yourself, you are in no danger; but one indiscretion—just one—apart from what it may mean for others, will mean, for YOU, immediate arrest as accessory to a murder!"

Soames shuddered, coldly.

"You can rely upon me, Mr. Gianapolis," he protested, "to do absolutely what you wish—absolutely. I am a ruined man, and I know it—I know it. My only hope is that you will give me a chance."…

"You shall have every chance, Soames," replied Gianapolis—"every chance."

XV. Cave of the Golden Dragon

When the car stopped at the end of a short drive, Soames had not the slightest idea of his whereabouts. The blinds at the window of the limousine had been lowered during the whole journey, and now he descended from the step of the car on to the step of a doorway. He was in some kind of roofed-in courtyard, only illuminated by the headlamps of the car. Mr. Gianapolis pushed him forward, and, as the door was closed, he heard the gear of the car reversed; then—silence fell.

"My grip!" he began, nervously.

"It will be placed in your room, Soames."

The voice of the Greek answered him from the darkness.

Guided by the hand of Gianapolis, he passed on and descended a flight of stone steps. Ahead of him a light shone out beneath a door, and, as he stumbled on the steps, the door was thrown suddenly open.

He found himself looking into a long, narrow apartment… He pulled up short with a smothered, gasping cry.

It was a cavern!—but a cavern the like of which he had never seen, never imagined. The walls had the appearance of being rough-hewn from virgin rock—from black rock—from rock black as the rocks of Shellal—black as the gates of Erebus.

Placed at regular intervals along the frowning walls, to right and left, were spiral, slender pillars, gilded and gleaming. They supported an archwork of fancifully carven wood, which curved gently outward to the center of the ceiling, forming, by conjunction with a similar, opposite curve, a pointed arch.

In niches of the wall were a number of grotesque Chinese idols. The floor was jet black and polished like ebony. Several tiger-skin rugs were strewn about it. But, dominating the strange place, in the center of the floor stood an ivory pedestal, supporting a golden dragon of exquisite workmanship; and before it, as before a shrine, an enormous Chinese vase was placed, of

the hue, at its base, of deepest violet, fading, upward, through all the shades of rose pink seen in an Egyptian sunset, to a tint more elusive than a maiden's blush. It contained a mass of exotic poppies of every shade conceivable, from purple so dark as to seem black, to poppies of the whiteness of snow.

Just within the door, and immediately in front of Soames, stood a slim man of about his own height, dressed with great nicety in a perfectly fitting morning-coat, his well-cut cashmere trousers falling accurately over glossy boots having gray suede uppers. His linen was immaculate, and he wore a fine pearl in his black poplin cravat. Between two yellow fingers smoldered a cigarette.

Soames, unconsciously, clenched his fists: this slim man embodied the very spirit of the outre. The fantastic surroundings melted from the ken of Soames, and he seemed to stand in a shadow-world, alone with an incarnate shadow.

For this was a Chinaman! His jet black lusterless hair was not shaven in the national manner, but worn long, and brushed back from his slanting brow with no parting, so that it fell about his white collar behind, lankly. He wore gold-rimmed spectacles, which magnified his oblique eyes and lent him a terrifying beetle-like appearance. His mephistophelean eyebrows were raised interrogatively, and he was smiling so as to exhibit a row of uneven yellow teeth.

Soames, his amazement giving place to reasonless terror, fell back a step —into the arms of Gianapolis.

"This is our friend from Palace Mansions," said the Greek. He squeezed Soames' arm, reassuringly. "Your new principal, Soames, Mr. Ho-Pin, from whom you will take your instructions."

"I have these instructions for Mr. Soames," said Ho-Pin, in a metallic, monotonous voice. (He gave to r half the value of w, with a hint of the presence of l.) "He will wremain here as valet until the search fowr him becomes less wrigowrous."

Soames, scarce believing that he was awake, made no reply. He found himself unable to meet the glittering eyes of the Chinaman; he glanced furtively about the room, prepared at any moment to wake up from what seemed to him an absurd, a ghostly dream.

"Said will change his appeawrance," continued Ho-Pin, smoothly, "so that he will not wreadily be wrecognized. Said will come now."

Ho-Pin clapped his hands three times.

The door at the end of the room immediately opened, and a thick-set man of a pronounced Arabian type, entered. He wore a chauffeur's livery of dark blue; and Soames recognized him for the man who had driven the car.

"Said," said Ho-Pin very deliberately, turning to face the new arrival, "ahu hina—Lucas Effendi—Mr. Lucas. Waddi el—shenta ila beta oda. Fehimt?"

Said bowed his head.

"Fahim, effendi," he muttered rapidly.

"Ma fihsh."…

Again Said bowed his head, then, glancing at Soames:—

"Ta'ala wayyaya!" he said.

Soames, looking helplessly at Gianapolis—who merely pointed to the door—followed Said from the room.

He was conducted along a wide passage, thickly carpeted and having its walls covered with a kind of matting kept in place by strips of bamboo. Its roof was similarly concealed. A door near to the end, and on the right, proved to open into a square room quite simply furnished in the manner of a bed-sitting room. A little bathroom opened out of it in one corner. The walls were distempered white, and there was no window. Light was furnished by an electric lamp, hanging from the center of the ceiling.

Soames, glancing at his bag, which Said had just placed beside the white-enameled bedstead, turned to his impassive guide.

"This is a funny go!" he began, with forced geniality. "Am I to live here?"

"Ma'lesh!" muttered Said—"ma'lesh!"

He indicated, by gestures, that Soames should remove his collar; he was markedly unemotional. He crossed to the bathroom, and could be heard filling the hand-basin with water.

"Kursi!" he called from within.

Soames, seriously doubting his own sanity, and so obsessed with a sense of the unreal that his senses were benumbed, began to take off his collar; he could not feel the contact of his fingers with his neck in the act. Collarless, he entered the little bathroom…

"Kursi!" repeated Said; then: "Ah! ana nesit! ma'lesh!"

Said—whilst Soames, docile in his stupor, watched him—went back, picked up the solitary cane chair which the apartment boasted, and brought it into the bathroom. Soames perceived that he was to be treated to something in the nature of a shampoo; for Said had ranged a number of bottles, a cake of soap, and several towels, along a shelf over the bath.

In a curious state of passivity, Soames submitted to the operation. His hair was vigorously toweled, then fanned in the most approved fashion; but this was no more than the beginning of the operation. As he leaned back in the chair:

"Am I dreaming?" he said aloud. "What's all this about?"

"Uskut!" muttered Said—"Uskut!"

Soames, at no time an aggressive character, resigned himself to the incredible.

Some lotion, which tingled slightly upon the scalp, was next applied by Said from a long-necked bottle. Then, fresh water having been poured into the basin, a dark purple liquid was added, and Soames' head dipped therein by the operating Eastern. This time no rubbing followed, but after some minutes of vigorous fanning, he was thrust back into the chair, and a dry towel tucked firmly into his collar-band. He anticipated that he was about to be shaved, and in this was not disappointed.

Said, filling a shaving-mug from the hot-water tap, lathered Soames' chin and the abbreviated whiskers upon which he had prided himself. Then the razor was skilfully handled, and Soames' face shaved until his chin was as smooth as satin.

Next, a dark brown solution was rubbed over the skin, and even upon his forehead and right into the roots of the hair; upon his throat, his ears, and the back of his neck. He was now past the putting of questions or the raising of protest; he was as clay in the hands of the silent Oriental. Having fanned his wet face again for some time, Said, breaking the long silence, muttered:

"Ikfil'iyyun!"

Soames stared. Said indicated, by pantomime, that he desired him to close his eyes, and Soames obeyed mechanically. Thereupon the Oriental busied himself with the ex-butler's not very abundant lashes for five minutes or more. Then the busy fingers were at work with his inadequate eyebrows: finally:—

"Khalas!" muttered Said, tapping him on the shoulder.

Soames wearily opened his eyes, wondering if his strange martyrdom were nearly at its end. He discovered his hair to be still rather damp, but, since it was sparse, it was rapidly drying. His eyes smarted painfully.

Removing all trace of his operations, Said, with no word of farewell, took up his towels, bottles and other paraphernalia and departed.

Soames watched the retreating figure crossing the outer room, but did not rise from the chair until the door had closed behind Said. Then, feeling strangely like a man who has drunk too heavily, he stood up and walked into the bedroom. There was a small shaving-glass upon the chest-of-drawers, and to this he advanced, filled with the wildest apprehensions.

One glance he ventured, and started back with a groan.

His apprehensions had fallen short of the reality. With one hand clutching the bedrail, he stood there swaying from side to side, and striving to screw up his courage to the point whereat he might venture upon a second glance in the mirror. At last he succeeded, looking long and pitifully.

"Oh, Lord!" he groaned, "what a guy!"

Beyond doubt he was strangely changed. By nature, Luke Soames had hair of a sandy color; now it was of so dark a brown as to seem black in the lamplight. His thin eyebrows and scanty lashes were naturally almost colorless; but they were become those of a pronounced brunette. He was of pale complexion, but to-night had the face of a mulatto, or of one long in tropical regions. In short, he was another man—a man whom he detested at first sight!

This was the price, or perhaps only part of the price, of his indiscretion. Mr. Soames was become Mr. Lucas. Clutching the top of the chest-of-drawers with both hands, he glared at his own reflection, dazedly.

In that pose, he was interrupted. Said, silently opening the door behind him, muttered:

"Ta'ala wayyaya!"

Soames whirled around in a sudden panic, his heart leaping madly. The immobile brown face peered in at the door.

"Ta'ala wayyaya!" repeated Said, his face expressionless as a mask. He pointed along the corridor. "Ho-Pin Effendi!" he explained.

Soames, raising his hands to his collarless neck, made a swallowing noise, and would have spoken; but:

"Ta'ala wayyaya!" reiterated the Oriental.

Soames hesitated no more. Reentering the corridor, with its straw-matting walls, he made a curious discovery. Away to the left it terminated in a blank, matting-covered wall. There was no indication of the door by which he had entered it. Glancing hurriedly to the right, he failed also to perceive any door there. The bespectacled Ho-Pin stood halfway along the passage, awaiting him. Following Said in that direction, Soames was greeted with the announcement:

"Mr. King will see you."

The words taught Soames that his capacity for emotion was by no means exhausted. His endless conjectures respecting the mysterious Mr. King were at last to be replaced by facts; he was to see him, to speak with him. He knew now that it was a fearful privilege which gladly he would have denied himself.

Ho-Pin opened a door almost immediately behind him, a door the existence of which had not hitherto been evident to Soames. Beyond, was a dark passage.

"You will follow me, closely," said Ho-Pin with one of his piercing glances.

Soames, finding his legs none too steady, entered the passage behind Ho-Pin. As he did so, the door was closed by Said, and he found himself in absolute darkness.

"Keep close behind me," directed the metallic voice.

Soames could not see the speaker, since no ray of light penetrated into the passage. He stretched out a groping hand, and, although he was conscious of an odd revulsion, touched the shoulder of the man in front of him and maintained that unpleasant contact whilst they walked on and on through apparently endless passages, extensive as a catacomb. Many corners they turned; they turned to the right, they turned to the left. Soames was hopelessly bewildered. Then, suddenly, Ho-Pin stopped.

"Stand still," he said.

Soames became vaguely aware that a door was being closed somewhere near to him. A lamp lighted up directly over his head… he found himself in a small library!

Its four walls were covered with book-shelves from floor to ceiling, and the shelves were packed to overflowing with books in most unusual and

bizarre bindings. A red carpet was on the floor and a red-shaded lamp hung from the ceiling, which was conventionally white-washed. Although there was no fireplace, the room was immoderately hot, and heavy with the perfume of roses. On three little tables were great bowls filled with roses, and there were other bowls containing roses in gaps between the books on the open shelves.

A tall screen of beautifully carved sandalwood masked one corner of the room, but beyond it protruded the end of a heavy writing-table upon which lay some loose papers, and, standing amid them, an enormous silver rose-bowl, brimming with sulphur-colored blooms.

Soames, obeying a primary instinct, turned, as the light leaped into being, to seek the door by which he had entered. As he did so, the former doubts of his own sanity returned with renewed vigor.

The book-lined wall behind him was unbroken by any opening.

Slowly, as a man awaking from a stupor, Soames gazed around the library.

It contained no door.

He rested his hand upon one of the shelves and closed his eyes. Beyond doubt he was going mad! The tragic events of that night had proved too much for him; he had never disguised from himself the fact that his mental capacity was not of the greatest. He was assured, now, that his brain had lost its balance shortly after his flight from Palace Mansions, and that the events of the past two hours had been phantasmal. He would presently return to sanity (or, blasphemously, he dared to petition heaven that he would) and find himself…? Perhaps in the hands of the police!

"Oh, God!" he groaned—"Oh, God!"

He opened his eyes…

A woman stood before the sandalwood screen! She had the pallidly dusky skin of a Eurasian, but, by virtue of nature or artifice, her cheeks wore a peachlike bloom. Her features were flawless in their chiseling, save for the slightly distended nostrils, and her black eyes were magnificent.

She was divinely petite, slender and girlish; but there was that in the lines of her figure, so seductively defined by her clinging Chinese dress, in the poise of her small head, with the blush rose nestling amid the black hair—above all in the smile of her full red lips—which discounted the youth of her body; which whispered "Mine is a soul old in strange sins—a soul for

whom dead Alexandria had no secrets, that learnt nothing of Athenean Thais and might have tutored Messalina"…

In her fanciful robe of old gold, with her tiny feet shod in ridiculously small, gilt slippers, she stood by the screen watching the stupefied man—an exquisite, fragrantly youthful casket of ancient, unnameable evils.

"Good evening, Soames!" she said, stumbling quaintly with her English, but speaking in a voice musical as a silver bell. "You will here be known as Lucas. Mr. King he wishing me to say that you to receive two pounds, at each week."…

Soames, glassy-eyed, stood watching her. A horror, the horror of insanity, had descended upon him—a clammy, rose-scented mantle. The room, the incredible, book-lined room, was a red blur, surrounding the black, taunting eyes of the Eurasian. Everything was out of focus; past, present, and future were merged into a red, rose-haunted nothingness…

"You will attend to Block A," resumed the girl, pointing at him with a little fan. "You will also attend to the gentlemen."…

She laughed softly, revealing tiny white teeth; then paused, head tilted coquettishly, and appeared to be listening to someone's conversation—to the words of some person seated behind the screen. This fact broke in upon Soames' disordered mind and confirmed him in his opinion that he was a man demented. For only one slight sound broke the silence of the room. The red carpet below the little tables was littered with rose petals, and, in the super-heated atmosphere, other petals kept falling—softly, with a gentle rustling. Just that sound there was… and no other. Then:

"Mr. King he wishing to point out to you," said the girl, "that he hold receipts of you, which bind you to him. So you will be free man, and have liberty to go out sometimes for your own business. Mr. King he wishing to hear you say you thinking to agree with the conditions and be satisfied."

She ceased speaking, but continued to smile; and so complete was the stillness, that Soames, whose sense of hearing had become nervously stimulated, heard a solitary rose petal fall upon the corner of the writing-table.

"I… agree," he whispered huskily; "and… I am… satisfied."

He looked at the carven screen as a lost soul might look at the gate of Hades; he felt now that if a sound should come from beyond it he would

shriek out, he would stop up his ears; that if the figure of the Unseen should become visible, he must die at the first glimpse of it.

The little brown girl was repeating the uncanny business of listening to that voice of silence; and Soames knew that he could not sustain his part in this eerie comedy for another half-minute without breaking out into hysterical laughter. Then:

"Mr. King he releasing you for to-night," announced the silver bell voice.

The light went out.

Soames uttered a groan of terror, followed by a short, bubbling laugh, but was seized firmly by the arm and led on into the blackness—on through the solid, book-laden walls, presumably; and on—on—on, along those interminable passages by which he had come. Here the air was cooler, and the odor of roses no longer perceptible, no longer stifling him, no longer assailing his nostrils, not as an odor of sweetness, but as a perfume utterly damnable and unholy.

With his knees trembling at every step, he marched on, firmly supported by his unseen companion.

"Stop!" directed a metallic, guttural voice.

Soames pulled up, and leaned weakly against the wall. He heard the clap of hands close behind him; and a door opened within twelve inches of the spot whereat he stood.

He tottered out into the matting-lined corridor from which he had started upon that nightmare journey; Ho-Pin appeared at his elbow, but no door appeared behind Ho-Pin!

"This is your wroom," said the Chinaman, revealing his yellow teeth in a mirthless smile.

He walked across the corridor, threw open a door—a real, palpable door… and there was Soames' little white room!

Soames staggered across, for it seemed a veritable haven of refuge—entered, and dropped upon the bed. He seemed to see the rose-petals fall—fall—falling in that red room in the labyrinth—the room that had no door; he seemed to see the laughing eyes of the beautiful Eurasian.

"Good night!" came the metallic voice of Ho-Pin.

The light in the corridor went out.

XVI. Ho-Pin's Catacombs

The newly-created Mr. Lucas entered upon a sort of cave-man existence in this fantastic abode where night was day and day was night; where the sun never shone.

He was awakened on the first morning of his sojourn in the establishment of Ho-Pin by the loud ringing of an electric bell immediately beside his bed. He sprang upright with a catching of the breath, peering about him at the unfamiliar surroundings and wondering, in the hazy manner of a sleeper newly awakened, where he was, and how come there. He was fully dressed, and his strapped-up grip lay beside him on the floor; for he had not dared to remove his clothes, had not dared to seek slumber after that terrifying interview with Mr. King. But outraged nature had prevailed, and sleep had come unbeckoned, unbidden.

The electric light was still burning in the room, as he had left it, and as he sat up, looking about him, a purring whistle drew his attention to a speaking-tube which protruded below the bell.

Soames rolled from the bed, head throbbing, and an acrid taste in his mouth, and spoke into the tube:

"Hullo!"

"You will pwrepare for youwr duties," came the metallic gutturals of Ho-Pin. "Bwreakfast will be bwrought to you in a quawrter-of-an-hour."

He made no reply, but stood looking about him dully. It had not been a dream, then, nor was he mad. It was a horrible reality; here, in London, in modern, civilized London, he was actually buried in some incredible catacomb; somewhere near to him, very near to him, was the cave of the golden dragon, and, also adjacent—terrifying thought—was the doorless library, the rose-scented haunt where the beautiful Eurasian spoke, oracularly, the responses of Mr. King!

Soames could not understand it all; he felt that such things could not be; that there must exist an explanation of those seeming impossibilities other than that they actually existed. But the instructions were veritable enough, and would not be denied.

Rapidly he began to unpack his grip. His watch had stopped, since he had neglected to wind it, and he hurried with his toilet, fearful of incurring the

anger of Ho-Pin—of Ho-Pin, the beetlesque.

He observed, with passive interest, that the operation of shaving did not appreciably lighten the stain upon his skin, and, by the time that he was shaved, he had begun to know the dark-haired, yellow-faced man grimacing in the mirror for himself; but he was far from being reconciled to his new appearance.

Said peeped in at the door. He no longer wore his chauffeur's livery, but was arrayed in a white linen robe, red-sashed, and wore loose, red slippers; a tarboosh perched upon his shaven skull.

Pushing the door widely open, he entered with a tray upon which was spread a substantial breakfast.

"Hurryup!" he muttered, as one word; wherewith he departed again.

Soames seated himself at the little table upon which the tray rested, and endeavored to eat. His usual appetite had departed with his identity; Mr. Lucas was a poor, twitching being of raw nerves and internal qualms. He emptied the coffee-pot, however, and smoked a cigarette which he found in his case.

Said reappeared.

"Ta'ala!" he directed.

Soames having learnt that that term was evidently intended as an invitation to follow Said, rose and followed, dumbly.

He was conducted along the matting-lined corridor to the left; and now, where formerly he had seen a blank wall, he saw an open door! Passing this, he discovered himself in the cave of the golden dragon. Ho-Pin, dressed in a perfectly fitting morning coat and its usual accompaniments, received him with a mirthless smile.

"Good mowrning!" he said; "I twrust your bwreakfast was satisfactowry?"

"Quite, sir," replied Soames, mechanically, and as he might have replied to Mr. Leroux.

"Said will show you to a wroom," continued Ho-Pin, "where you will find a gentleman awaiting you. You will valet him and perfowrm any other services which he may wrequire of you. When he departs, you will clean the wroom and adjoining bath-wroom, and put it into thowrough order for an incoming tenant. In short, your duties in this wrespect will be identical to

those which formerly you perfowrmed at sea. There is one important diffewrence: your name is Lucas, and you will answer no questions."

The metallic voice seemed to reach Soames' comprehension from some place other than the room of the golden dragon—from a great distance, or as though he were fastened up in a box and were being addressed by someone outside it.

"Yes, sir," he replied.

Said opened the yellow door upon the right of the room, and Soames followed him into another of the matting-lined corridors, this one running right and left and parallel with the wall of the apartment which he had just quitted. Six doors opened out of this corridor; four of them upon the side opposite to that by which he had entered, and one at either end.

These doors were not readily to be detected; and the wall, at first glance, presented an unbroken appearance. But from experience, he had learned that where the strips of bamboo which overlay the straw matting formed a rectangular panel, there was a door, and by the light of the electric lamp hung in the center of the corridor, he counted six of these.

Said, selecting a key from a bunch which he carried, opened one of the doors, held it ajar for Soames to enter, and permitted it to reclose behind him.

Soames entered nervously. He found himself in a room identical in size with his own private apartment; a bathroom, etc., opened out of it in one corner after the same fashion. But there similarity ended.

The bed in this apartment was constructed more on the lines of a modern steamer bunk; that is, it was surrounded by a rail, and was raised no more than a foot from the floor. The latter was covered with a rich carpet, worked in many colors, and the wall was hung with such paper as Soames had never seen hitherto in his life. The scheme of this mural decoration was distinctly Chinese, and consisted in an intricate design of human and animal figures, bewilderingly mingled; its coloring was brilliant, and the scheme extended, unbroken, over the entire ceiling. Cushions, most fancifully embroidered, were strewn about the floor, and the bed coverlet was a piece of heavy Chinese tapestry. A lamp, shaded with silk of a dull purple, swung in the center of the apartment, and an ebony table, inlaid with ivory, stood on one side of the bed; on the other was a cushioned armchair figured with the eternal, chaotic Chinese design, and being littered, at the moment, with

the garments of the man in the bed. The air of the room was disgusting, unbreathable; it caught Soames by the throat and sickened him. It was laden with some kind of fumes, entirely unfamiliar to his nostrils. A dainty Chinese tea-service stood upon the ebony table.

For fully thirty seconds Soames, with his back to the door, gazed at the man in the bed, and fought down the nausea which the air of the place had induced in him.

This sleeper was a man of middle age, thin to emaciation and having lank, dark hair. His face was ghastly white, and he lay with his head thrown back and with his arms hanging out upon either side of the bunk, so that his listless hands rested upon the carpet. It was a tragic face; a high, intellectual brow and finely chiseled features; but it presented an indescribable aspect of decay; it was as the face of some classic statue which has long lain buried in humid ruins.

Soames shook himself into activity, and ventured to approach the bed. He moistened his dry lips and spoke:

"Good morning, sir"—the words sounded wildly, fantastically out of place. "Shall I prepare your bath?"

The sleeper showed no signs of awakening.

Soames forced himself to touch one of the thrown-back shoulders. He shook it gently.

The man on the bed raised his arms and dropped them back again into their original position, without opening his eyes.

"They… are hiding," he murmured thickly… "in the… orange grove… If the felucca sails… closer… they will"…

Soames, finding something very horrifying in the broken words, shook the sleeper more urgently.

"Wake up, sir!" he cried; "I am going to prepare your bath."

"Don't let them… escape," murmured the man, slowly opening his eyes —"I have not"…

He struggled upright, glaring madly at the intruder. His light gray eyes had a glassiness as of long sickness, and his pupils, which were unnaturally dilated, began rapidly to contract; became almost invisible. Then they expanded again—and again contracted.

"Who—the deuce are you?" he murmured, passing his hand across his unshaven face.

"My name is—Lucas, sir," said Soames, conscious that if he remained much longer in the place he should be physically sick. "At your service—shall I prepare the bath?"

"The bath?" said the man, sitting up more straightly—"certainly, yes—of course"…

He looked at Soames, with a light of growing sanity creeping into his eyes; a faint flush tinged the pallid face, and his loose mouth twitched sensitively.

"Then, Said," he began, looking Soames up and down… "let me see, whom did you say you were?"

"Lucas, sir—at your service."

"Ah," muttered the man, lowering his eyes in unmistakable shame—"yes, yes, of course. You are new here?"

"Yes, sir. Shall I prepare your bath?"

"Yes, please. This is Wednesday morning?"

"Wednesday morning, sir; yes."

"Of course—it is Wednesday. You said your name was?"

"Lucas, sir," reiterated Soames, and, crossing the fantastic apartment, he entered the bathroom beyond.

This contained the most modern appointments and was on an altogether more luxurious scale than that attached to his own quarters. He noted, without drawing any deduction from the circumstance, that the fittings were of American manufacture. Here, as in the outer room, there was no window; an electric light hung from the center of the ceiling. Soames busied himself in filling the bath, and laying out the towels upon the rack.

"Fairly warm, sir?" he asked.

"Not too warm, thank you," replied the other, now stumbling out of bed and falling into the armchair—"not too warm."

"If you will take your bath, sir," said Soames, returning to the outer room, "I will brush your clothes and be ready to shave you."

"Yes, yes," said the man, rubbing his hands over his face wearily. "You are new here?"

Soames, who was becoming used to answering this question, answered it once more without irritation.

"Yes, sir, will you take your bath now? It is nearly full, I think."

The man stood up unsteadily and passed into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. Soames, seeking to forget his surroundings, took out from a small hand-bag which he found beneath the bed, a razor-case and a shaving stick. The clothes-brush he had discovered in the bathroom; and now he set to work to brush the creased garments stacked in the armchair. He noted that they were of excellent make, and that the linen was of the highest quality. He was thus employed when the outer door silently opened and the face of Said looked in.

"Gazm," said the Oriental; and he placed inside, upon the carpet, a pair of highly polished boots.

The door was reclosed.

Soames had all the garments in readiness by the time that the man emerged from the bathroom, looking slightly less ill, and not quite so pallid. He wore a yellow silk kimono; and, with greater composure than he had yet revealed, he seated himself in the armchair that Soames might shave him.

This operation Soames accomplished, and the subject, having partially dressed, returned to the bathroom to brush his hair. When his toilet was practically completed:

"Shall I pack the rest of the things in the bag, sir?" asked Soames.

The man nodded affirmatively.

Five minutes later he was ready to depart, and stood before the ex-butler a well-dressed, intellectual, but very debauched-looking gentleman. Being evidently well acquainted with the regime of the establishment, he pressed an electric bell beside the door, presented Soames with half-a-sovereign, and, as Said reappeared, took his departure, leaving Soames more reconciled to his lot than he could ever have supposed possible.

The task of cleaning the room was now commenced by Soames. Said returned, bringing him the necessary utensils; and for fifteen minutes or so he busied himself between the outer apartment and the bathroom. During this time he found leisure to study the extraordinary mural decorations; and, as he looked at them, he learned that they possessed a singular property.

If one gazed continuously at any portion of the wall, the intertwined figures thereon took shape—nay, took life; the intricate, elaborate design ceased to be a design, and became a procession, a saturnalia; became a sinister comedy, which, when first visualized, shocked Soames immoderately. The horrors presented by these devices of evil cunning,

crowding the walls, appalled the narrow mind of the beholder, revolted him in an even greater degree than they must have revolted a man of broader and cleaner mind. He became conscious of a quality of evil which pervaded the room; the entire place seemed to lie beneath a spell, beneath the spell of an invisible, immeasurably wicked intelligence.

His reflections began to terrify him, and he hastened to complete his duties. The stench of the place was sickening him anew, and when at last Said opened the door, Soames came out as a man escaping from some imminent harm.

"Di," muttered Said.

He pointed to the opened door of a second room, identical in every respect with the first; and Soames started back with a smothered groan. Had his education been classical he might have likened himself to Hercules laboring for Augeus; but his mind tending scripturally, he wondered if he had sold his soul to Satan in the person of the invisible Mr. King!

XVII. Kan-Suh Concessions

Soames' character was of a pliable sort, and ere many days had passed he had grown accustomed to this unnatural existence among the living corpses in the catacombs of Ho-Pin.

He rarely saw Ho-Pin, and desired not to see him at all; as for Mr. King, he even endeavored to banish from his memory the name of that shadowy being. The memory of the Eurasian he could not banish, and was ever listening for the silvery voice, but in vain. He had no particular duties, apart from the care of the six rooms known as Block A, and situated in the corridor to the left of the cave of the golden dragon; this, and the valeting of departing occupants. But the hours at which he was called upon to perform these duties varied very greatly. Sometimes he would attend to four human wrecks in the same morning; whilst, perhaps on the following day, he would not be called upon to officiate until late in the evening. One fact early became evident to him. There was a ceaseless stream of these living dead men pouring into the catacombs of Ho-Pin, coming he knew not whence, and issuing forth again, he knew not whither.

Twice in the first week of his new and strange service he recognized the occupants of the rooms as men whom he had seen in the upper world. On entering the room of one of these (at ten o'clock at night) he almost cried out in his surprise; for the limp, sallow-faced creature extended upon the bed before him was none other than Sir Brian Malpas—the brilliant politician whom his leaders had earmarked for office in the next Cabinet!

As Soames stood contemplating him stretched there in his stupor, he found it hard to credit the fact that this was the same man whom political rivals feared for his hard brilliance, whom society courted, and whose engagement to the daughter of a peer had been announced only a few months before.

Throughout this time, Soames had made no attempt to seek the light of day: he had not seen a newspaper; he knew nothing of the hue and cry raised throughout England, of the hunt for the murderer of Mrs. Vernon. He suffered principally from lack of companionship. The only human being with whom he ever came in contact was Said, the Egyptian; and Said, at best, was uncommunicative. A man of very limited intellect, Luke Soames had been at a loss for many days to reconcile Block A and its temporary occupants with any comprehensible scheme of things. Whereas some of the rooms would be laden with nauseating fumes, others would be free of these; the occupants, again, exhibited various symptoms.

That he was a servant of an opium-den de luxe did not for some time become apparent to him; then, when first the theory presented itself, he was staggered by a discovery so momentous.

But it satisfied his mind only partially. Some men whom he valeted might have been doped with opium, certainly, but all did not exhibit those indications which, from hearsay, he associated with the resin of the white poppy.

Knowing nothing of the numerous and exotic vices which have sprung from the soil of the Orient, he was at a loss for a full explanation of the facts as he saw them.

Finding himself unmolested, and noting, in the privacy of his own apartment, how handsomely his tips were accumulating, Soames was rapidly becoming reconciled to his underground existence, more especially as it spelt safety to a man wanted by the police. His duties thus far had never taken him beyond the corridor known as Block A; what might lie on

the other side of the cave of the golden dragon he knew not. He never saw any of the habitues arrive, or actually leave; he did not know whether the staff of the place consisted of himself, Said, Ho-Pin, the Eurasian girl—and… the other, or if there were more servants of this unseen master. But never a day passed by that the clearance of at least one apartment did not fall to his lot, and never an occupant quitted those cells without placing a golden gratuity in the valet's palm.

His appetite returned, and he slept soundly enough in his clean white bedroom, content to lose the upper world, temporarily, and to become a dweller in the catacombs—where tips were large and plentiful. His was the mind of a domestic animal, neither learning from the past nor questioning the future; but dwelling only in the well-fed present.

No other type of European, however lowly, could have supported existence in such a place.

Thus the days passed, and the nights passed, the one merged imperceptibly in the other. At the end of the first week, two sovereigns appeared upon the breakfast tray which Said brought to Soames' room; and, some little time later, Said reappeared with his bottles and paraphernalia to renew the ex-butler's make-up. As he was leaving the room:

"Ahu hina—G'nap'lis effendi!" he muttered, and went out as Mr. Gianapolis entered.

At sight of the Greek, Soames realized, in one emotional moment, how really lonely he had been and how in his inmost heart he longed for a sight of the sun, for a breath of unpolluted air, for a glimpse of gray, homely London.

All the old radiance had returned to Gianapolis; his eyes were crossed in an amiable smile.

"My dear Soames!" he cried, greeting the really delighted man. "How well your new complexion suits you! Sit down, Soames, sit down, and let us talk."

Soames placed a chair for Gianapolis, and seated himself upon the bed, twirling his thumbs in the manner which was his when under the influence of excitement.

"Now, Soames," continued Gianapolis—"I mean Lucas!—my anticipations, which I mentioned to you on the night of—the accident… you remember?"

"Yes," said Soames rapidly, "yes."

"Well, they have been realized. Our establishment, here, continues to flourish as of yore. Nothing has come to light in the press calculated to prejudice us in the eyes of our patrons, and although your own name, Soames"…

Soames started and clutched at the bedcover.

"Although your own name has been freely mentioned on all sides, it is not generally accepted that you perpetrated the deed."

Soames discovered his hair to be bristling; his skin tingled with a nervous apprehension.

"That I," he began dryly, paused and swallowed—"that I perpetrated… Has it been"…

"It has been hinted at by one or two Fleet Street theorists—yes, Soames! But the post-mortem examination of—the victim, revealed the fact that she was addicted to drugs"…

"Opium?" asked Soames, eagerly.

Gianapolis smiled.

"What an observant mind you have, Soames!" he said. "So you have perceived that these groves are sacred to our Lady of the Poppies? Well, in part that is true. Here, under the auspices of Mr. Ho-Pin, fretful society seeks the solace of the brass pipe; yes, Soames, that is true. Have you ever tried opium?"

"Never!" declared Soames, with emphasis, "never!"

"Well, it is a delight in store for you! But the reason of our existence as an institution, Soames, is not far to seek. Once the joys of Chandu become perceptible to the neophyte, a great need is felt—a crying need. One may drink opium or inject morphine; these, and other crude measures, may satisfy temporarily, but if one would enjoy the delights of that fairyland, of that enchanted realm which bountiful nature has concealed in the heart of the poppy, one must retire from the ken of goths and vandals who do not appreciate such exquisite delights; one must dedicate, not an hour snatched from grasping society, but successive days and nights to the goddess"…

Soames, barely understanding this discourse, listened eagerly to every word of it, whilst Gianapolis, waxing eloquent upon his strange thesis, seemed to be addressing, not his solitary auditor, but an invisible concourse.

"In common with the lesser deities," he continued, "our Lady of the Poppies is exacting. After a protracted sojourn at her shrine, so keen are the delights which she opens up to her worshipers, that a period of lassitude, of exhaustion, inevitably ensues. This precludes the proper worship of the goddess in the home, and necessitates—I say NECESSITATES the presence, in such a capital as London, of a suitable Temple. You have the honor, Soames, to be a minor priest of that Temple!"

Soames brushed his dyed hair with his fingers and endeavored to look intelligent.

"A branch establishment—merely a sacred caravanserai where votaries might repose ere reentering the ruder world," continued Gianapolis—"has unfortunately been raided by the police!"

With that word, POLICE, he seemed to come to earth again.

"Our arrangements, I am happy to say, were such that not one of the staff was found on the premises and no visible link existed between that establishment and this. But now let us talk about yourself. You may safely take an evening off, I think"…

He scrutinized Soames attentively.

"You will be discreet as a matter of course, and I should not recommend your visiting any of your former haunts. I make this proposal, of course, with the full sanction of Mr. King."

The muscles of Soames' jaw tightened at sound of the name, and he avoided the gaze of the crossed eyes.

"And the real purpose of my visit here this morning is to acquaint you with the little contrivance by which we ensure our privacy here. Once you are acquainted with it, you can take the air every evening at suitable hours, on application to Mr. Ho-Pin."

Soames coughed dryly.

"Very good," he said in a strained voice; "I am glad of that."

"I knew you would be glad, Soames," declared the smiling Gianapolis; "and now, if you will step this way, I will show you the door by which you must come and go." He stood up, then bent confidentially to Soames' ear. "Mr. King, very wisely," he whispered, "has retained you on the premises hitherto, because some doubt, some little doubt, remained respecting the information which had come into the possession of the police."

Again that ominous word! But ere Soames had time to reflect, Gianapolis led the way out of the room and along the matting-lined corridor into the apartment of the golden dragon. Soames observed, with a nervous tremor, that Mr. Ho-Pin sat upon one of the lounges, smoking a cigarette, and arrayed in his usual faultless manner. He did not attempt to rise, however, as the pair entered, but merely nodded to Gianapolis and smiled mirthlessly at Soames.

They quitted the room by the door opening on the stone steps—the door by which Soames had first entered into that evil Aladdin's cave. Gianapolis went ahead, and Soames, following him, presently emerged through a low doorway into a concrete-paved apartment, having walls of Portland stone and a white-washed ceiling. One end consisted solely of a folding gate, evidently designed to admit the limousine.

Gianapolis turned, as Soames stepped up beside him.

"If you will glance back," he said, "you will see exactly where the door is situated."

Soames did as directed, and suppressed a cry of surprise. Four of the stone blocks were fictitious—were, in verity, a heavy wooden door, faced in some way with real, or imitation granite—a door communicating with the steps of the catacombs.

"Observe!" said Gianapolis.

He closed the door, which opened outward, and there remained nothing to show the keenest observer—unless he had resorted to sounding—that these four blocks differed in any way from their fellows.

"Ingenious, is it not?" said Gianapolis, genially. "And now, my dear Soames, observe again!"

He rolled back the folding gates; and beyond was a garage, wherein stood the big limousine.

"I keep my car here, Soames, for the sake of—convenience! And now, my dear Soames, when you go out this evening, Said will close this entrance after you. When you return, which, I understand, you must do at ten o'clock, you will enter the garage by the side door yonder, which will not be locked, and you will press the electric button at the back of the petrol cans here—look! you can see it!—the inner door will then be opened for you. Step this way."

He passed between the car and the wall of the garage, opened the door at the left of the entrance gates, and, Soames following, came out into a narrow lane. For the first time in many days Soames scented the cleaner air of the upper world, and with it he filled his lungs gratefully.

Behind him was the garage, before him the high wall of a yard, and, on his right, for a considerable distance, extended a similar wall; in the latter case evidently that of a wharf—for beyond it flowed the Thames.

Proceeding along beside this wall, the two came to the gates of a warehouse. They passed these, however, and entered a small office. Crossing the office, they gained the interior of the warehouse, where chests bearing Chinese labels were stacked in great profusion.

"Then this place," began Soames…

"Is a ginger warehouse, Soames! There is a very small office staff, but sufficiently large to cope with the limited business done—in the import and export of ginger! The firm is known as Kan-Suh Concessions and imports preserved Chinese ginger from its own plantations in that province of the Celestial Empire. There is a small wharf attached, as you may have noted. Oh! it is a going concern and perfectly respectable!"

Soames looked about him with wide-opened eyes.

"The ginger staff," said Gianapolis, "is not yet arrived. Mr. Ho-Pin is the manager. The lane, in which the establishment is situated, communicates with Limehouse Causeway, and, being a cul-de-sac, is little frequented. Only this one firm has premises actually opening into it and I have converted the small corner building at the extremity of the wharf into a garage for my car. There are no means of communication between the premises of Kan-Suh Concessions and those of the more important enterprise below—and I, myself, am not officially associated with the ginger trade. It is a precaution which we all adopt, however, never to enter or leave the garage if anyone is in sight."…

Soames became conscious of a new security. He set about his duties that morning with a greater alacrity than usual, valeting one of the living dead men—a promising young painter whom he chanced to know by sight—with a return to the old affable manner which had rendered him so popular during his career as cabin steward.

He felt that he was now part and parcel of Kan-Suh Concessions; that Kan-Suh Concessions and he were at one. He had yet to learn that his sense

of security was premature, and that his added knowledge might be an added danger.

When Said brought his lunch into his room, he delivered also a slip of paper bearing the brief message:

"Go out 6.30—return 10."

Mr. Soames uncorked his daily bottle of Bass almost gaily, and attacked his lunch with avidity.

XVIII. The World Above

The night had set in grayly, and a drizzle of fine rain was falling. West India Dock Road presented a prospect so uninviting that it must have damped the spirits of anyone but a cave-dweller.

Soames, buttoned up in a raincoat kindly lent by Mr. Gianapolis, and of a somewhat refined fit, with a little lagoon of rainwater forming within the reef of his hat-brim, trudged briskly along. The necessary ingredients for the manufacture of mud are always present (if invisible during dry weather) in the streets of East-end London, and already Soames' neat black boots were liberally bedaubed with it. But what cared Soames? He inhaled the soot-laden air rapturously; he was glad to feel the rain beating upon his face, and took a childish pleasure in ducking his head suddenly and seeing the little stream of water spouting from his hat-brim. How healthy they looked, these East-end workers, these Italian dock-hands, these Jewish tailors, these nondescript, greasy beings who sometimes saw the sun. Many of them, he knew well, labored in cellars; but he had learnt that there are cellars and cellars. Ah! it was glorious, this gray, murky London!

Yet, now that temporarily he was free of it, he realized that there was that within him which responded to the call of the catacombs; there was a fascination in the fume-laden air of those underground passages; there was a charm, a mysterious charm, in the cave of the golden dragon, in that unforgettable place which he assumed to mark the center of the labyrinth; in the wicked, black eyes of the Eurasian. He realized that between the abstraction of silver spoons and deliberate, organized money-making at the

expense of society, a great chasm yawned; that there may be romance even in felony.

Soames at last felt himself to be a traveler on the highroad to fortune; he had become almost reconciled to the loss of his bank balance, to the loss of his place in the upper world. His was the constitution of a born criminal, and, had he been capable of subtle self-analysis, he must have known now that fear, and fear only, hitherto had held him back, had confined him to the ranks of the amateurs. Well, the plunge was taken.

Deep in such reflections, he trudged along through the rain, scarce noting where his steps were leading him, for all roads were alike to-night. His natural inclinations presently dictated a halt at a brilliantly lighted public house; and, taking off his hat to shake some of the moisture from it, he replaced it on his head and entered the saloon lounge.

The place proved to be fairly crowded, principally with local tradesmen whose forefathers had toiled for Pharaoh; and conveying his glass of whisky to a marble-topped table in a corner comparatively secluded, Soames sat down for a consideration of past, present, and future; an unusual mental exercise. Curiously enough, he had lost something of his old furtiveness; he no longer examined, suspiciously, every stranger who approached his neighborhood; for as the worshipers of old came by the gate of Fear into the invisible presence of Moloch, so he—of equally untutored mind—had entered the presence of Mr. King! And no devotee of the Ammonite god had had greater faith in his potent protection than Soames had in that of his unseen master. What should a servant of Mr. King fear from the officers of the law? How puny a thing was the law in comparison with the director of that secret, powerful, invulnerable organization whereof to-day he (Soames) formed an unit!

Then, oddly, the old dormant cowardice of the man received a sudden spurring, and leaped into quickness. An evening paper lay upon the marble top of the table, and carelessly taking it up, Soames, hitherto lost in imaginings, was now reminded that for more than a week he had lain in ignorance of the world's doings. Good Heavens! how forgetful he had been! It was the nepenthe of the catacombs. He must make up for lost time and get in touch again with passing events: especially he must post himself up on the subject of… the murder…

The paper dropped from his hands, and, feeling himself blanch beneath his artificial tan, Soames, in his old furtive manner, glanced around the saloon to learn if he were watched. Apparently no one was taking the slightest notice of him, and, with an unsteady hand, he raised his glass and drained its contents. There, at the bottom of the page before him, was the cause of this sudden panic; a short paragraph conceived as follows:—

REPORTED ARREST OF SOAMES

It is reported that a man answering to the description of Soames, the butler wanted in connection with the Palace Mansions outrage, has been arrested in Birmingham. He was found sleeping in an outhouse belonging to Major Jennings, of Olton, and as he refused to give any account of himself, was handed over, by the gentleman's gardener, to the local police. His resemblance to the published photograph being observed, he was closely questioned, and although he denies being Luke Soames, he is being held for further inquiry.

Soames laid down the paper, and, walking across to the bar, ordered a second glass of whisky. With this he returned to the table and began more calmly to re-read the paragraph. From it he passed to the other news. He noted that little publicity was given to the Palace Mansions affair, from which he judged that public interest in the matter was already growing cold. A short summary appeared on the front page, and this he eagerly devoured. It read as follows:—

PALACE MANSIONS MYSTERY

The police are following up an important clue to the murderer of Mrs. Vernon, and it is significant in this connection that a man answering to the description of Soames was apprehended at Olton (Birmingham) late last night. (See Page 6). The police are very reticent in regard to the new information which they hold, but it is evident that at last they are confident of establishing a case. Mr. Henry Leroux, the famous novelist, in whose flat the mysterious outrage took place, is suffering from a nervous breakdown, but is reported to be progressing favorably by Dr. Cumberly, who is

attending him. Dr. Cumberly, it will be remembered, was with Mr. Leroux, and Mr. John Exel, M.P., at the time that the murder was discovered. The executors of the late Mr. Horace Vernon are faced with extraordinary difficulties in administering the will of the deceased, owing to the tragic coincidence of his wife's murder within twenty-four hours of his own demise.

Public curiosity respecting the nursing home in Gillingham Street, with its electric baths and other modern appliances, has by no means diminished, and groups of curious spectators regularly gather outside the former establishment of Nurse Proctor, and apparently derive some form of entertainment from staring at the windows and questioning the constable on duty. The fact that Mrs. Vernon undoubtedly came from this establishment on the night of the crime, and that the proprietors of the nursing home fled immediately, leaving absolutely no clue behind them, complicates the mystery which Scotland Yard is engaged in unraveling.

It is generally believed that the woman, Proctor, and her associates had actually no connection with the crime, and that realizing that the inquiry might turn in their direction, they decamped. The obvious inference, of course, is that the nursing home was conducted on lines which would not bear official scrutiny.

The flight of the butler, Soames, presents a totally different aspect, and in this direction the police are very active.

Soames searched the remainder of the paper scrupulously, but failed to find any further reference to the case. The second Scottish stimulant had served somewhat to restore his failing courage; he congratulated himself upon taking the only move which could have saved him from arrest; he perceived that he owed his immunity entirely to the protective wings of Mr. King. He trembled to think that his fate might indeed have been that of the man arrested at Olton; for, without money and without friends, he would have become, ere this, just such an outcast and natural object of suspicion.

He noted, as a curious circumstance, that throughout the report there was no reference to the absence of Mrs. Leroux; therefore—a primitive reasoner—he assumed that she was back again at Palace Mansions. He was mentally incapable of fitting Mrs. Leroux into the secret machine engineered by Mr. King through the visible agency of Ho-Pin. On the whole, he was disposed

to believe that her several absences—ostensibly on visits to Paris—had nothing to do with the catacombs of Ho-Pin, but were to be traced to the amours of the radiant Gianapolis. Taking into consideration his reception by the Chinaman in the cave of the golden dragon, he determined, to his own satisfaction, that this had been dictated by prudence, and by Mr. Gianapolis. In short he believed that the untimely murder of Mrs. Vernon had threatened to direct attention to the commercial enterprise of the Greek, and that he, Soames, had become incorporated in the latter in this accidental fashion. He believed himself to have been employed in a private intrigue during the time that he was at Palace Mansions, and counted it a freak of fate that Mr. Gianapolis' affairs of the pocket had intruded upon his affairs of the heart.

It was all very confusing, and entirely beyond Soames' mental capacity to unravel.

He treated himself to a third scotch whisky, and sallied out into the rain. A brilliantly lighted music hall upon the opposite side of the road attracted his attention. The novelty of freedom having worn off, he felt no disposition to spend the remainder of the evening in the street, for the rain was now falling heavily, but determined to sample the remainder of the program offered by the "first house," and presently was reclining in a plush-covered, tip-up seat in the back row of the stalls.

The program was not of sufficient interest wholly to distract his mind, and during the performance of a very tragic comedian, Soames found his thoughts wandering far from the stage. His seat was at the extreme end of the back row, and, quite unintentionally, he began to listen to the conversation of two men, who, standing just inside the entrance door and immediately behind him to the right, were talking in subdued voices.

"There are thousands of Kings in London," said one…

Soames slowly lowered his hands to the chair-arms on either side of him and clutched them tightly. Every nerve in his body seemed to be strung up to the ultimate pitch of tensity. He was listening, now, as a man arraigned might listen for the pronouncement of a judgment.

"That's the trouble," replied a second voice; "but you know Max's ideas on the subject? He has his own way of going to work; but my idea, Sowerby, is that if we can find the one Mr. Soames—and I am open to bet he hasn't left London—we shall find the right Mr. King."

The comedian finished, and the orchestra noisily chorded him off. Soames, his forehead wet with perspiration, began to turn his head, inch by inch. The lights in the auditorium were partially lowered, and he prayed, devoutly, that they would remain so; for now, glancing out of the corner of his right eye, he saw the speakers.

The taller of the two, a man wearing a glistening brown overall and rain-drenched tweed cap, was the detective who had been in Leroux's study and who had ordered him to his room on the night of the murder!

Then commenced for Soames such an ordeal as all his previous life had not offered him; an ordeal beside which even the interview with Mr. King sank into insignificance. His one hope was in the cunning of Said's disguise; but he knew that Scotland Yard men judged likenesses, not by complexions, which are alterable, not by the color of the hair, which can be dyed, but by certain features which are measurable, and which may be memorized because nature has fashioned them immutable.

What should he do?—What should he do? In the silence:

"No good stopping any longer," came the whispered voice of the shorter detective; "I have had a good look around the house, and there is nobody here."…

Soames literally held his breath.

"We'll get along down to the Dock Gate," was the almost inaudible reply; "I am meeting Stringer there at nine o'clock."

Walking softly, the Scotland Yard men passed out of the theater.

XIX. The Living Dead

The night held yet another adventure in store for Soames. His encounter with the two Scotland Yard men had finally expelled all thoughts of pleasure from his mind. The upper world, the free world, was beset with pitfalls; he realized that for the present, at any rate, there could be no security for him, save in the catacombs of Ho-Pin. He came out of the music-hall and stood for a moment just outside the foyer, glancing fearfully up and down the rain-swept street. Then, resuming the drenched raincoat which he had taken off in the theater, and turning up its collar about his

ears, he set out to return to the garage adjoining the warehouse of Kan-Suh Concessions.

He had fully another hour of leave if he cared to avail himself of it, but, whilst every pedestrian assumed, in his eyes, the form of a detective, whilst every dark corner seemed to conceal an ambush, whilst every passing instant he anticipated feeling a heavy hand upon his shoulder, and almost heard the words:—"Luke Soames, I arrest you"… Whilst this was his case, freedom had no joys for him.

No light guided him to the garage door, and he was forced to seek for the handle by groping along the wall. Presently, his hand came in contact with it, he turned it—and the way was open before him.

Being far from familiar with the geography of the place, he took out a box of matches, and struck one to light him to the shelf above which the bell-push was concealed.

Its feeble light revealed, not only the big limousine near which he was standing and the usual fixtures of a garage, but, dimly penetrating beyond into the black places, it also revealed something else…

The door in the false granite blocks was open!

Soames, who had advanced to seek the bell-push, stopped short. The match burnt down almost to his fingers, whereupon he blew it out and carefully crushed it under his foot. A faint reflected light rendered perceptible the stone steps below. At the top, Soames stood looking down. Nothing stirred above, below, or around him. What did it mean? Dimly to his ears came the hooting of some siren from the river—evidently that of a large vessel. Still he hesitated; why he did so, he scarce knew, save that he was afraid—vaguely afraid.

Then, he asked himself what he had to fear, and conjuring up a mental picture of his white bedroom below, he planted his foot firmly upon the first step, and from thence, descended to the bottom, guided by the faint light which shone out from the doorway beneath.

But the door proved to be only partly opened, and Soames knocked deferentially. No response came to his knocking, and he so greatly ventured as to push the door fully open.

The cave of the golden dragon was empty. Half frightfully, Soames glanced about the singular apartment, in amid the mountainous cushions of

the leewans, behind the pedestal of the dragon; to the right and to the left of the doorway wherein he stood.

There was no one there; but the door on the right—the door inlaid with ebony and green stone, which he had never yet seen open was open now, widely opened. He glided across the floor, his wet boots creaking unmusically, and peeped through. He saw a matting-lined corridor identical with that known as Block A. The door of one apartment, that on the extreme left, was opened. Sickly fumes were wafted out to him, and these mingled with the incense-like odor which characterized the temple of the dragon.

A moment he stood so, then started back, appalled.

An outcry—the outcry of a woman, of a woman whose very soul is assailed—split the stillness. Not from the passageway before him, but from somewhere behind him—from the direction of Block A—it came.

"For God's sake—oh! for God's sake, have mercy! Let me go!… let me go!" Higher, shriller, more fearful and urgent, grew the voice—"LET ME GO!"…

Soames' knees began to tremble beneath him; he clutched at the black wall for support; then turned, and with unsteady footsteps crossed to the door communicating with the corridor which contained his room. It had a lever handle of the Continental pattern, and, trembling with apprehension that it might prove to be locked, Soames pressed down this handle.

The door opened…

"Hina, effendi!—hina!"

The voice sounded like that of Said…

"Oh! God in Heaven help me!… Help!—help!"…

"Imsik!"…

Footsteps were pattering upon the stone stairs; someone was descending from the warehouse! The frenzied shrieks of the woman continued. Soames broke into a cold perspiration; his heart, which had leaped wildly, seemed now to have changed to a cold stone in his breast. Just at the entrance to the corridor he stood, frozen with horror at those cries.

"Ikfil el-bab!" came now, in the voice of Ho-Pin,—and nearer.

"Let me go!… only let me go, and I will never breathe a word… Ah! Ah! Oh! God of mercy! not the needle again! You are killing me!… not the needle!"…

Soames staggered on to his own room and literally fell within—as across the cave of the golden dragon, behind him, SOMEONE—one whom he did not see but only heard, one whom with all his soul he hoped had not seen HIM—passed rapidly.

Another shriek, more frightful than any which had preceded it, struck the trembling man as an arrow might have struck him. He dropped upon his knees at the side of the bed and thrust his fingers firmly into his ears. He had never swooned in his life, and was unfamiliar with the symptoms, but now he experienced a sensation of overpowering nausea; a blood-red mist floated before his eyes, and the floor seemed to rock beneath him like the deck of a ship…

That soul-appalling outcry died away, merged into a sobbing, moaning sound which defied Soames' efforts to exclude it… He rose to his feet, feeling physically ill, and turned to close his door…

They were dragging someone—someone who sighed, shudderingly, and whose sighs sank to moans, and sometimes rose to sobs,—across the apartment of the dragon. In a faint, dying voice, the woman spoke again:—

"Not Mr. King!… NOT MR. KING!… Is there no God in Heaven!… AH! spare me… spare"…

Soames closed the door and stood propped up against it, striving to fight down the deathly sickness which assailed him. His clothes were sticking to his clammy body, and a cold perspiration was trickling down his forehead and into his eyes. The sensation at his heart was unlike anything that he had ever known; he thought that he must be dying.

The awful sounds died away… then a muffled disturbance drew his attention to a sort of square trap which existed high up on one wall of the room, but which admitted no light, and which hitherto had never admitted any sound. Now, in the utter darkness, he found himself listening—listening…

He had learnt, during his duties in Block A, that each of the minute suites was rendered sound-proof in some way, so that what took place in one would be inaudible to the occupant of the next, provided that both doors were closed. He perceived, now, that some precaution hitherto exercised continuously had been omitted to-night, and that the sounds which he could hear came from the room next to his own—the room which opened upon

the corridor that he had never entered, and which now he classified, mentally, as Block B.

What did it mean?

Obviously there had been some mishap in the usually smooth conduct of Ho-Pin's catacombs. There had been a hurried outgoing in several directions… a search?

And by the accident of his returning an hour earlier than he was expected, he was become a witness of this incident, or of its dreadful, concluding phases. He had begun to move away from the door, but now he returned, and stood leaning against it.

That stifling room where roses shed their petals, had been opened to-night; a chill touched the very center of his being and told him so. The occupant of that room—the Minotaur of this hideous labyrinth—was at large to-night, was roaming the passages about him, was perhaps outside his very door…

Dull moaning sounds reached him through the trap. He realized that if he had the courage to cross the room, stand upon a chair and place his ear to the wall, he might be able to detect more of what was passing in the next apartment. But craven fear held him in its grip, and in vain he strove to shake it off. Trembling wildly, he stood with his back to the door, whilst muttered words, and moans, ever growing fainter, reached him from beyond. A voice, a harsh, guttural voice—surely not that of Ho-Pin—was audible, above the moaning.

For two minutes—three minutes—four minutes—he stood there, tottering on the brink of insensibility, then… a faint sound—a new sound,—drew his gaze across the room, and up to the corner where the trap was situated.

A very dim light was dawning there; he could just detect the outline of an opening—a half-light breaking the otherwise impenetrable darkness.

He felt that his capacity for fear was strained to its utmost; that he could support nothing more, yet a new horror was in store for him; for, as he watched that gray patch, in it, as in a frame, a black silhouette appeared—the silhouette of a human head… a woman's head!

Soames convulsively clenched his jaws, for his teeth were beginning to chatter.

A whistle, an eerie, minor whistle, subscribed the ultimate touch of terror to the night. The silhouette disappeared, and, shortly afterwards, the gray luminance. A faint click told of some shutter being fastened; complete silence reigned.

Soames groped his way to the bed and fell weakly upon it, half lying down and burying his face in the pillow. For how long, he had no idea, but for some considerable time, he remained so, fighting to regain sufficient self-possession to lie to Ho-Pin, who sooner or later must learn of his return.

At last he managed to sit up. He was not trembling quite so wildly, but he still suffered from a deathly sickness. A faint streak of light from the corridor outside shone under his door. As he noted it, it was joined by a second streak, forming a triangle.

There was a very soft rasping of metal. Someone was opening the door!

Soames lay back upon the bed. This time he was past further panic and come to a stage of sickly apathy. He lay, now, because he could not sit upright, because stark horror had robbed him of physical strength, and had drained the well of his emotions dry.

Gradually—so that the operation seemed to occupy an interminable time, the door opened, and in the opening a figure appeared.

The switch clicked, and the room was flooded with electric light.

Ho-Pin stood watching him.

Soames—in his eyes that indescribable expression seen in the eyes of a bird placed in a cobra's den—met the Chinaman's gaze. This gaze was no different from that which habitually he directed upon the people of the catacombs. His yellow face was set in the same mirthless smile, and his eyebrows were raised interrogatively. For the space of ten seconds, he stood watching the man on the bed. Then:—

"You wreturn vewry soon, Mr. Soames?" he said, softly.

Soames groaned like a dying man, whispering:

"I was… taken ill—very ill."…

"So you wreturn befowre the time awranged for you?"

His metallic voice was sunk in a soothing hiss. He smiled steadily: he betrayed no emotion.

"Yes… sir," whispered Soames, his hair clammily adhering to his brow and beads of perspiration trickling slowly down his nose.

"And when you wreturn, you see and you hear—stwrange things, Mr. Soames?"

Soames, who was in imminent danger of becoming physically ill, gulped noisily.

"No, sir," he whispered,—tremulously, "I've been—in here all the time."

Ho-Pin nodded, slowly and sympathetically, but never removed the glittering eyes from the face of the man on the bed.

"So you hear nothing, and see nothing?"

The words were spoken even more softly than he had spoken hitherto.

"Nothing," protested Soames. He suddenly began to tremble anew, and his trembling rattled the bed. "I have been—very ill indeed, sir."

Ho-Pin nodded again slowly, and with deep sympathy.

"Some medicine shall be sent to you, Mr. Soames," he said.

He turned and went out slowly, closing the door behind him.

XX. Abraham Levinsky Butts In

At about the time that this conversation was taking place in Ho-Pin's catacombs, Detective-Inspector Dunbar and Detective-Sergeant Sowerby were joined by a third representative of New Scotland Yard at the appointed spot by the dock gates. This was Stringer, the detective to whom was assigned the tracing of the missing Soames; and he loomed up through the rain-mist, a glistening but dejected figure.

"Any luck?" inquired Sowerby, sepulchrally.

Stringer, a dark and morose looking man, shook his head.

"I've beaten up every 'Chink' in Wapping and Limehouse, I should reckon," he said, plaintively. "They're all as innocent as babes unborn. You can take it from me: Chinatown hasn't got a murder on its conscience at present. BRR! it's a beastly night. Suppose we have one?"

Dunbar nodded, and the three wet investigators walked back for some little distance in silence, presently emerging via a narrow, dark, uninviting alleyway into West India Dock Road. A brilliantly lighted hostelry proved to be their objective, and there, in a quiet corner of the deserted billiard room, over their glasses, they discussed this mysterious case, which at first

had looked so simple of solution if only because it offered so many unusual features, but which, the deeper they probed, merely revealed fresh complications.

"The business of those Fry people, in Scotland, was a rotten disappointment," said Dunbar, suddenly. "They were merely paid by the late Mrs. Vernon to re-address letters to a little newspaper shop in Knightsbridge, where an untraceable boy used to call for them! Martin has just reported this evening. Perth wires for instructions, but it's a dead-end, I'm afraid."

"You know," said Sowerby, fishing a piece of cork from the brown froth of a fine example by Guinness, "to my mind our hope's in Soames; and if we want to find Soames, to my mind we want to look, not east, but west."

"Hear, hear!" concorded Stringer, gloomily sipping hot rum.

"It seems to me," continued Sowerby, "that Limehouse is about the last place in the world a man like Soames would think of hiding in."

"It isn't where he'll be THINKING of hiding," snapped Dunbar, turning his fierce eyes upon the last speaker. "You can't seem to get the idea out of your head, Sowerby, that Soames is an independent agent. He ISN'T an independent agent. He's only the servant; and through the servant we hope to find the master."

"But why in the east-end?" came the plaintive voice of Stringer; "for only one reason, that I can see—because Max says that there's a Chinaman in the case."

"There's opium in the case, isn't there?" said Dunbar, adding more water to his whisky, "and where there's opium there is pretty frequently a Chinaman."

"But to my mind," persisted Sowerby, his eyebrows drawn together in a frown of concentration, "the place where Mrs. Vernon used to get the opium was the place we raided in Gillingham Street."

"Nurse Proctor's!" cried Stringer, banging his fist on the table. "Exactly my idea! There may have been a Chinaman concerned in the management of the Gillingham Street stunt, or there may not, but I'll swear that was where the opium was supplied. In fact I don't think that there's any doubt about it. Medical evidence (opinions differed a bit, certainly) went to show that she had been addicted to opium for some years. Other evidence—you got it yourself, Inspector—went to show that she came from Gillingham

Street on the night of the murder. Gillingham Street crowd vanished like a beautiful dream before we had time to nab them! What more do you want? What are we up to, messing about in Limehouse and Wapping?"

Sowerby partook of a long drink and turned his eyes upon Dunbar, awaiting the inspector's reply.

"You both have the wrong idea!" said Dunbar, deliberately; "you are all wrong! You seem to be under the impression that if we could lay our hands upon the missing staff of the so-called Nursing Home, we should find the assassin to be one of the crowd. It doesn't follow at all. For a long time, you, Sowerby,"—he turned his tawny eyes upon the sergeant—"had the idea that Soames was the murderer, and I'm not sure that you have got rid of it yet! You, Stringer, appear to think that Nurse Proctor is responsible. Upon my word, you are a hopeless pair! Suppose Soames had nothing whatever to do with the matter, but merely realized that he could not prove an alibi? Wouldn't YOU bolt? I put it to you."

Sowerby stared hard, and Stringer scratched his chin, reflectively.

"The same reasoning applies to the Gillingham Street people," continued Dunbar. "We haven't the slightest idea of THEIR whereabouts because we don't even know who they were; but we do know something about Soames, and we're looking for him, not because we think he did the murder, but because we think he can tell us who did."

"Which brings us back to the old point," interrupted Stringer, softly beating his fist upon the table at every word; "why are we looking for Soames in the east-end?"

"Because," replied Dunbar, "we're working on the theory that Soames, though actually not accessory to the crime, was in the pay of those who were"…

"Well?"—Stringer spoke the word eagerly, his eyes upon the inspector's face.

"And those who WERE accessory,"—continued Dunbar, "were servants of Mr. King."

"Ah!" Stringer brought his fist down with a bang—"Mr. King! That's where I am in the dark, and where Sowerby, here, is in the dark." He bent forward over the table. "Who the devil is Mr. King?"

Dunbar twirled his whisky glass between his fingers.

"We don't know," he replied quietly, "but Soames does, in all probability; and that's why we're looking for Soames."

"Is it why we're looking in Limehouse?" persisted Stringer, the argumentative.

"It is," snapped Dunbar. "We have only got one Chinatown worthy of the name, in London, and that's not ten minutes' walk from here."

"Chinatown—yes," said Sowerby, his red face glistening with excitement; "but why look for Mr. King in Chinatown?"

"Because," replied Dunbar, lowering his voice, "Mr. King in all probability is a Chinaman."

"Who says so?" demanded Stringer.

"Max says so…"

"MAX!"—again Stringer beat his fist upon the table. "Now we have got to it! We're working, then, not on our own theories, but on those of Max?"

Dunbar's sallow face flushed slightly, and his eyes seemed to grow brighter.

"Mr. Gaston Max obtained information in Paris," he said, "which he placed, unreservedly, at my disposal. We went into the matter thoroughly, with the result that our conclusions were identical. A certain Mr. King is at the bottom of this mystery, and, in all probability, Mr. King is a Chinaman. Do I make myself clear?"

Sowerby and Stringer looked at one another, perplexedly. Each man finished his drink in silence. Then:

"What took place in Paris?" began Sowerby.

There was an interruption. A stooping figure in a shabby, black frock-coat, the figure of a man who wore a dilapidated bowler pressed down upon his ears, who had a greasy, Semitic countenance, with a scrubby, curling, sandy colored beard, sparse as the vegetation of a desert, appeared at Sowerby's elbow.

He carried a brimming pewter pot. This he set down upon a corner of the table, depositing himself in a convenient chair and pulling out a very dirty looking letter from an inside pocket. He smoothed it carefully. He peered, little-eyed, from the frowning face of Dunbar to the surprised countenance of Sowerby, and smiled with native amiability at the dangerous-looking Stringer.

"Excuthe me," he said, and his propitiatory smile was expansive and dazzling, "excuthe me buttin' in like thith. It theemth rude, I know—it doth theem rude; but the fact of the matter ith I'm a tailor—thath's my pithneth, a tailor. When I thay a tailor, I really mean a breecheth-maker—tha'th what I mean, a breecheth-maker. Now thethe timeth ith very hard timeth for breecheth-makerth."…

Dunbar finished his whisky, and quietly replaced the glass upon the table, looking from Sowerby to Stringer with unmistakable significance. Stringer emptied his glass of rum, and Sowerby disposed of his stout.

"I got thith letter lath night," continued the breeches-maker, bending forward confidentially over the table. (The document looked at least twelve months old.) "I got thith letter latht night with thethe three fiverth in it; and not havin' no friendth in London—I'm an American thitithen, by birth,—Levinthky, my name ith—Abraham Levinthky—I'm a Noo Englander. Well, not havin' no friendth in London, and theein' you three gentlemen thittin' here, I took the liberty"…

Dunbar stood up, glared at Levinsky, and stalked out of the billiard-room, followed by his equally indignant satellites. Having gained the outer door:

"Of all the blasted impudence!" he said, turning to Sowerby and Stringer; but there was a glint of merriment in the fierce eyes. "Can you beat that? Did you tumble to his game?"

Sowerby stared at Stringer, and Stringer stared at Sowerby.

"Except," began the latter in a voice hushed with amazement, "that he's got the coolest cheek of any mortal being I ever met."…

Dunbar's grim face relaxed, and he laughed boyishly, his square shoulders shaking.

"He was leading up to the confidence trick!" he said, between laughs. "Damn it all, man, it was the old confidence trick! The idea of a confidence-merchant spreading out his wares before three C.I.D. men!"

He was choking with laughter again; and now, Sowerby and Stringer having looked at one another for a moment, the surprised pair joined him in his merriment. They turned up their collars and went out into the rain, still laughing.

"That man," said Sowerby, as they walked across to the stopping place of the electric trains, "is capable of calling on the Commissioner and asking him to 'find the lady'!"

XXI. The Studio In Soho

Certainly, such impudence as that of Mr. Levinsky is rare even in east-end London, and it may be worth while to return to the corner of the billiard-room and to study more closely this remarkable man.

He was sitting where the detectives had left him, and although their departure might have been supposed to have depressed him, actually it had had a contrary effect; he was chuckling with amusement, and, between his chuckles, addressing himself to the contents of the pewter with every mark of appreciation. Three gleaming golden teeth on the lower row, and one glittering canine, made a dazzling show every time that he smiled; he was a very greasy and a very mirthful Hebrew.

Finishing his tankard of ale, he shuffled out into the street, the line of his bent shoulders running parallel with that of his hat-brim. His hat appeared to be several sizes too large for his head, and his skull was only prevented from disappearing into the capacious crown by the intervention of his ears, which, acting as brackets, supported the whole weight of the rain-sodden structure. He mounted a tram proceeding in the same direction as that which had borne off the Scotland Yard men. Quitting this at Bow Road, he shuffled into the railway station, and from Bow Road proceeded to Liverpool Street. Emerging from the station at Liverpool Street, he entered a motor-'bus bound westward.

His neighbors, inside, readily afforded him ample elbow room; and, smiling agreeably at every one, including the conductor (who resented his good-humor) and a pretty girl in the corner seat (who found it embarrassing) he proceeded to Charing Cross. Descending from the 'bus, he passed out into Leicester Square and plunged into the network of streets which complicates the map of Soho. It will be of interest to follow him.

In a narrow turning off Greek Street, and within hail of the popular Bohemian restaurants, he paused before a doorway sandwiched between a Continental newsagent's and a tiny French cafe; and, having fumbled in his greasy raiment he presently produced a key, opened the door, carefully closed it behind him, and mounted the dark stair.

On the top floor he entered a studio, boasting a skylight upon which the rain was drumming steadily and drearily. Lighting a gas burner in one corner of the place which bore no evidence of being used for its legitimate purpose—he entered a little adjoining dressing-room. Hot and cold water were laid on there, and a large zinc bath stood upon the floor. With the aid of an enamel bucket, Mr. Abraham Levinsky filled the bath.

Leaving him to his ablutions, let us glance around the dressing-room. Although there was no easel in the studio, and no indication of artistic activity, the dressing-room was well stocked with costumes. Two huge dress-baskets were piled in one corner, and their contents hung upon hooks around the three available walls. A dressing table, with a triplicate mirror and a suitably shaded light, presented a spectacle reminiscent less of a model's dressing-room than of an actor's.

At the expiration of some twenty-five minutes, the door of this dressing-room opened; and although Abraham Levinsky had gone in, Abraham Levinsky did not come out!

Carefully flicking a particle of ash from a fold of his elegant, silk-lined cloak, a most distinguished looking gentleman stepped out onto the bleak and dirty studio. He wore, in addition to a graceful cloak, which was lined with silk of cardinal red, a soft black hat, rather wide brimmed and dented in a highly artistic manner, and irreproachable evening clothes; his linen was immaculate; and no valet in London could have surpassed the perfect knotting of his tie. His pearl studs were elegant and valuable; and a single eyeglass was swung about his neck by a thin, gold chain. The white gloves, which fitted perfectly, were new; and if the glossy boots were rather long in the toe-cap from an English point of view, the gold-headed malacca cane which the newcomer carried was quite de rigeur.

The strong clean-shaven face calls for no description here; it was the face of M. Gaston Max.

M. Max, having locked the study door, and carefully tried it to make certain of its security, descended the stairs. He peeped out cautiously into the street ere setting foot upon the pavement; but no one was in sight at the moment, and he emerged quickly, closing the door behind him, and taking shelter under the newsagent's awning. The rain continued its steady downpour, but M. Max stood there softly humming a little French melody until a taxi-cab crawled into view around the Greek Street corner.

He whistled shrilly through his teeth—the whistle of a gamin; and the cabman, glancing up and perceiving him, pulled around into the turning, and drew up by the awning.

M. Max entered the cab.

"To Frascati's," he directed.

The cabman backed out into Greek Street and drove off. This was the hour when the theaters were beginning to eject their throngs, and outside one of them, where a popular comedy had celebrated its three-hundred-and-fiftieth performance, the press of cabs and private cars was so great that M. Max found himself delayed within sight of the theater foyer.

Those patrons of the comedy who had omitted to order vehicles or who did not possess private conveyances, found themselves in a quandary tonight, and amongst those thus unfortunately situated, M. Max, watching the scene with interest, detected a lady whom he knew—none other than the delightful American whose conversation had enlivened his recent journey from Paris—Miss Denise Ryland. She was accompanied by a charming companion, who, although she was wrapped up in a warm theater cloak, seemed to be shivering disconsolately as she and her friend watched the interminable stream of vehicles filing up before the theater, and cutting them off from any chance of obtaining a cab for themselves.

M. Max acted promptly.

"Drive into that side turning!" he directed the cabman, leaning out of the window. The cabman followed his directions, and M. Max, heedless of the inclement weather, descended from the cab, dodged actively between the head lamps of a big Mercedes and the tail-light of a taxi, and stood bowing before the two ladies, his hat pressed to his bosom with one gloved hand, the other, ungloved, resting upon the gold knob of the malacca.

"Why!" cried Miss Ryland, "if it isn't… M. Gaston! My dear… M. Gaston! Come under the awning, or"—her head was wagging furiously —"you will be… simply drowned."

M. Max smilingly complied.

"This is M. Gaston," said Denise Ryland, turning to her companion, "the French gentleman… whom I met… in the train from… Paris. This is Miss Helen Cumberly, and I know you two will get on… famously."

M. Max acknowledged the presentation with a few simple words which served to place the oddly met trio upon a mutually easy footing. He was,

par excellence, the polished cosmopolitan man of the world.

"Fortunately I saw your dilemma," he explained. "I have a cab on the corner yonder, and it is entirely at your service."

"Now that… is real good of you," declared Denise Ryland. "I think you're… a brick."…

"But, my dear Miss Ryland!" cried Helen, "we cannot possibly deprive M. Gaston of his cab on a night like this!"

"I had hoped," said the Frenchman, bowing gallantly, "that this most happy reunion might not be allowed to pass uncelebrated. Tell me if I intrude upon other plans, because I am speaking selfishly; but I was on my way to a lonely supper, and apart from the great pleasure which your company would afford me, you would be such very good Samaritans if you would join me."

Helen Cumberly, although she was succumbing rapidly to the singular fascination of M. Max, exhibited a certain hesitancy. She was no stranger to Bohemian customs, and if the distinguished Frenchman had been an old friend of her companion's, she should have accepted without demur; but she knew that the acquaintance had commenced in a Continental railway train, and her natural prudence instinctively took up a brief for the prosecution. But Denise Ryland had other views.

"My dear girl," she said, "you are not going to be so… crack-brained… as to stand here… arguing and contracting… rheumatism, lumbago… and other absurd complaints… when you know PERFECTLY well that we had already arranged to go… to supper!" She turned to the smiling Max. "This girl needs… DRAGGING out of… her morbid self… M. Gaston! We'll accept… your cab, on the distinct… understanding that YOU are to accept OUR invitation… to supper."

M. Max bowed agreeably.

"By all means let MY cab take us to YOUR supper," he said, laughing.

XXII. M. Max Mounts Cagliostro's Staircase

At a few minutes before midnight, Helen Cumberly and Denise Ryland, escorted by the attentive Frenchman, arrived at Palace Mansions. Any

distrust which Helen had experienced at first was replaced now by the esteem which every one of discrimination (criminals excluded) formed of M. Max. She perceived in him a very exquisite gentleman, and although the acquaintance was but one hour old, counted him a friend. Denise Ryland was already quite at home in the Cumberly household, and she insisted that Dr. Cumberly would be deeply mortified should M. Gaston take his departure without making his acquaintance. Thus it came about that M. Gaston Max was presented (as "M. Gaston") to Dr. Cumberly.

Cumberly, who had learned to accept men and women upon his daughter's estimate, welcomed the resplendent Parisian hospitably; the warm, shaded lights made convivial play in the amber deeps of the decanters, and the cigars had a fire-side fragrance which M. Max found wholly irresistible.

The ladies being momentarily out of ear-shot, M. Gaston glancing rapidly about him, said: "May I beg a favor, Dr. Cumberly?"

"Certainly, M. Gaston," replied the physician—he was officiating at the syphon. "Say when."

"When!" said Max. "I should like to see you in Harley Street to-morrow morning."

Cumberly glanced up oddly. "Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Oh, not professionally," smiled Max; "or perhaps I should say only semi-professionally. Can you spare me ten minutes?"

"My book is rather full in the morning, I believe," said Cumberly, frowning thoughtfully, "and without consulting it—which, since it is in Harley Street, is impossible—I scarcely know when I shall be at liberty. Could we not lunch together?"

Max blew a ring of smoke from his lips and watched it slowly dispersing.

"For certain reasons," he replied, and his odd American accent became momentarily more perceptible, "I should prefer that my visit had the appearance of being a professional one."

Cumberly was unable to conceal his surprise, but assuming that his visitor had good reason for the request, he replied after a moment's reflection:

"I should propose, then, that you come to Harley Street at, shall we say, 9.30? My earliest professional appointment is at 10. Will that inconvenience you?"

"Not at all," Max assured him; "it will suit me admirably."

With that the matter dropped for the time, since Helen and her new friend now reentered; and although Helen's manner was markedly depressed, Miss Ryland energetically turned the conversation upon the subject of the play which they had witnessed that evening.

M. Max, when he took his departure, found that the rain had ceased, and accordingly he walked up Whitehall, interesting himself in those details of midnight London life so absorbing to the visitor, though usually overlooked by the resident.

Punctually at half-past nine, a claret-colored figure appeared in sedate Harley Street. M. Gaston Max pressed the bell above which appeared: DR. BRUCE CUMBERLY.

He was admitted by Garnham, who attended there daily during the hours when Dr. Cumberly was visible to patients, and presently found himself in the consulting room of the physician.

"Good morning, M. Gaston!" said Cumberly, rising and shaking his visitor by the hand. "Pray sit down, and let us get to business. I can give you a clear half-hour."

Max, by way of reply, selected a card from one of the several divisions of his card-case, and placed it on the table. Cumberly glanced at it and started slightly, turning and surveying his visitor with a new interest.

"You are M. Gaston Max!" he said, fixing his gray eyes upon the face of the man before him. "I understood my daughter to say"…

Max waved his hands, deprecatingly.

"It is in the first place to apologize," he explained, "that I am here. I was presented to your daughter in the name of Gaston—which is at least part of my own name—and because other interests were involved I found myself in the painful position of being presented to you under the same false colors"…

"Oh, dear, dear!" began Cumberly. "But—"

"Ah! I protest, it is true," continued Max with an inimitable movement of the shoulder; "and I regret it; but in my profession"…

"Which you adorn, monsieur," injected Cumberly.

"Many thanks—but in my profession these little annoyances sometimes occur. At the earliest suitable occasion, I shall reveal myself to Miss

Cumberly and Miss Ryland, but at present,"—he spread his palms eloquently, and raised his eyebrows—"morbleu! it is impossible."

"Certainly; I quite understand that. Your visit to London is a professional one? I am more than delighted to have met you, M. Max; your work on criminal anthroposcopy has an honored place on my shelves."

Again M. Max delivered himself of the deprecatory wave.

"You cover me with confusion," he protested; "for I fear in that book I have intruded upon sciences of which I know nothing, and of which you know much."

"On the contrary, you have contributed to those sciences, M. Max," declared the physician; "and now, do I understand that the object of your call this morning?"…

"In the first place it was to excuse myself—but in the second place, I come to ask your help."

He seated himself in a deep armchair—bending forward, and fixing his dark, penetrating eyes upon the physician. Cumberly, turning his own chair slightly, evinced the greatest interest in M. Max's disclosures.

"If you have been in Paris lately," continued the detective, "you will possibly have availed yourself of the opportunity—since another may not occur—of visiting the house of the famous magician, Cagliostro, on the corner of Rue St. Claude, and Boulevard Beaumarchais"…

"I have not been in Paris for over two years," said Cumberly, "nor was I aware that a house of that celebrated charlatan remained extant."

"Ah! Dr. Cumberly, your judgment of Cagliostro is a harsh one. We have no time for such discussion now, but I should like to debate with you this question: was Cagliostro a charlatan? However, the point is this: Owing to alterations taking place in the Boulevard Beaumarchais, some of the end houses in Rue St. Claude are being pulled down, among them Number 1, formerly occupied by the Comte de Cagliostro. At the time that the work commenced, I availed myself of a little leisure to visit that house, once so famous. I was very much interested, and found it fascinating to walk up the Grande Staircase where so many historical personages once walked to consult the seer. But great as was my interest in the apartments of Cagliostro, I was even more interested in one of the apartments in a neighboring house, into which—quite accidentally, you understand—I found myself looking."

XXIII. Raid In the Rue St. Claude

"I perceived," said M. Gaston Max, "that owing to the progress of the work of demolition, and owing to the carelessness of the people in charge—nom d'un nom! they were careless, those!—I was able, from a certain point, to look into a small room fitted up in a way very curious. There was a sort of bunk somewhat similar to that in a steamer berth, and the walls were covered with paper of a Chinese pattern most bizarre. No one was in the room when I first perceived it, but I had not been looking in for many moments before a Chinaman entered and closed the shutters. He was hasty, this one.

"Eh bien! I had seen enough. I perceived that my visit to the house of Cagliostro had been dictated by a good little angel. It happened that for many months I had been in quest of the headquarters of a certain group which I knew, beyond any tiny doubt, to have its claws deep in Parisian society. I refer to an opium syndicate"…

Dr. Cumberly started and seemed about to speak; but he restrained himself, bending forward and awaiting the detective's next words with even keener interest than hitherto.

"I had been trying—all vainly—to trace the source from which the opium was obtained, and the place where it was used. I have devoted much attention to the subject, and have spent some twelve months in the opium provinces of China, you understand. I know how insidious a thing it is, this opium, and how dreadful a curse it may become when it gets a hold upon a community. I was formerly engaged upon a most sensational case in San Francisco; and the horrors of the discoveries which we made there—the American police and myself—have remained with me ever since. Pardieu! I cannot forget them! Therefore when I learnt that an organized attempt was being made to establish elaborate opium dens upon a most up-to-date plan, in Paris, I exerted myself to the utmost to break up this scheme in its infancy"…

Dr. Cumberly was hanging upon every word.

"Apart from the physical and moral ruin attendant upon the vice," continued Max, "the methods of this particular organization have brought financial ruin to many." He shook his finger at Dr. Cumberly as if to emphasize his certainty upon this point. "I will not go into particulars now, but there is a system of wholesale robbery—sapristi! of most ingenious brigandage—being practised by this group. Therefore I congratulated myself upon the inspiration which had led me to mount Cagliostro's staircase. The way in which these people had conducted their sinister trade from so public a spot as this was really wonderful, but I had already learned to respect the ingenuity of the group, or of the man at the head of it. I wasted no time; not I! We raided the house that evening"…

"And what did you find?" asked Dr. Cumberly, eagerly.

"We found this establishment elaborately fitted, and the whole of the fittings were American. Eh bien! This confirmed me in my belief that the establishment was a branch of the wealthy concern I have mentioned in San Francisco. There was also a branch in New York, apparently. We found six or eight people in the place in various stages of coma; and I cannot tell you their names because—among them, were some well-known in the best society"…

"Good Heavens, M. Max, you surprise and shock me!"

"What I tell you is but the truth. We apprehended two low fellows who acted as servants sometimes in the place. We had records of both of them at the Bureau. And there was also a woman belonging to the same class. None of these seemed to me very important, but we were fortunate enough to capture, in addition, a Chinaman—Sen—and a certain Madame Jean—the latter the principal of the establishment!"

"What! a woman?"

"Morbleu! a woman—exactly! You are surprised? Yes; and I was surprised, but full inquiry convinced me that Madame Jean was the chief of staff. We had conducted the raid at night, of course, and because of the big names, we hushed it up. We can do these things in Paris so much more easily than is possible here in London." He illustrated, delivering a kick upon the person of an imaginary malefactor. "Cochon! Va!" he shrugged. "It is finished!

"The place was arranged with Oriental magnificence. The reception-room —if I can so term that apartment—was like the scene of Rimsky Korsakov's

Sheherezade; I could see that very heavy charges were made at this establishment. I will not bore you with further particulars, but I will tell you of my disappointment."

"Your disappointment?"

"Yes, I was disappointed. True, I had brought about the closing of that house, but of the huge sums of money fraudulently obtained from victims, I could find no trace in the accounts of Madame Jean. She defied me with silence, simply declining to give any account of herself beyond admitting that she conducted an hotel at which opium might be smoked if desired. Blagueur! Sen, the Chinaman, who professed to speak nothing but Chinese —ah! cochon!—was equally a difficult case, Nom d'un nom! I was in despair, for apart from frauds connected with the concern, I had more than small suspicions that at least one death—that of a wealthy banker—could be laid at the doors of the establishment in Rue St. Claude."…

Dr. Cumberly bent yet lower, watching the speaker's face.

"A murder!" he whispered.

"I do not say so," replied Max, "but it certainly might have been. The case then must, indeed, have ended miserably, as far as I was concerned, if I had not chanced upon a letter which the otherwise prudent Madame Jean had forgotten to destroy. Triomphe! It was a letter of instruction, and definitely it proved that she was no more than a kind of glorified concierge, and that the chief of the opium group was in London."

"Undoubtedly in London. There was no address on the letter, and no date, and it was curiously signed: Mr. King."

"Mr. King!"

Dr. Cumberly rose slowly from his chair, and took a step toward M. Max.

"You are interested?" said the detective, and shrugged his shoulders, whilst his mobile mouth shaped itself in a grim smile. "Pardieu! I knew you would be! Acting upon another clue which the letter—priceless letter—contained, I visited the Credit Lyonnais. I discovered that an account had been opened there by Mr. Henry Leroux of London on behalf of his wife, Mira Leroux, to the amount of a thousand pounds."

"A thousand pounds—really!" cried Dr. Cumberly, drawing his heavy brows together—"as much as that?"

"Certainly. It was for a thousand pounds," repeated Max, "and the whole of that amount had been drawn out."

"The whole thousand?"

"The whole thousand; nom d'un p'tit bonhomme! The whole thousand! Acting, as I have said, upon the information in this always priceless letter, I confronted Madame Jean and the manager of the bank with each other. Morbleu! 'This,' he said, 'is Mira Leroux of London!'"…

"What!" cried Cumberly, seemingly quite stupefied by this last revelation.

Max spread wide his palms, and the flexible lips expressed sympathy with the doctor's stupefaction.

"It is as I tell you," he continued. "This Madame Jean had been posing as Mrs. Leroux, and in some way, which I was unable to understand, her signature had been accepted by the Credit Lyonnais. I examined the specimen signature which had been forwarded to them by the London County and Suburban Bank, and I perceived, at once, that it was not a case of common forgery. The signatures were identical"…

"Therefore," said Cumberly, and he was thinking of Henry Leroux, whom Fate delighted in buffeting—"therefore, the Credit Lyonnais is not responsible?"

"Most decidedly not responsible," agreed Max. "So you see I now have two reasons for coming to London: one, to visit the London County and Suburban Bank, and the other to find… Mr. King. The first part of my mission I have performed successfully; but the second"… again he shrugged, and the lines of his mouth were humorous.

Dr. Cumberly began to walk up and down the carpet.

"Poor Leroux!" he muttered—"poor Leroux."

"Ah! poor Leroux, indeed," said Max. "He is so typical a victim of this most infernal group!"

"What!" Dr. Cumberly turned in his promenade and stared at the detective—"he's not the only one?"

"My dear sir," said Max, gently, "the victims of Mr. King are truly as the sands of Arabia."

"Good heavens!" muttered Dr. Cumberly; "good heavens!"

"I came immediately to London," continued Max, "and presented myself at New Scotland Yard. There I discovered that my inquiry was complicated by a ghastly crime which had been committed in the flat of Mr. Leroux; but

I learned, also, that Mr. King was concerned in this crime—his name had been found upon a scrap of paper clenched in the murdered woman's hand!"

"I was present when it was found," said Dr. Cumberly.

"I know you were," replied Max. "In short, I discovered that the Palace Mansions murder case was my case, and that my case was the Palace Mansions case. Eh bien! the mystery of the Paris draft did not detain me long. A call upon the manager of the London County and Suburban Bank at Charing Cross revealed to me the whole plot. The real Mrs. Leroux had never visited that bank; it was Madame Jean, posing as Mrs. Leroux, who went there and wrote the specimen signature, accompanied by a certain Soames, a butler"…

"I know him!" said Dr. Cumberly, grimly, "the blackguard!"

"Truly a blackguard, truly a big, dirty blackguard! But it is such canaille as this that Mr. King discovers and uses for his own ends. Paris society, I know for a fact; has many such a cankerworm in its heart. Oh! it is a big case, a very big case. Poor Mr. Leroux being confined to his bed—ah! I pity him—I took the opportunity to visit his flat in Palace Mansions with Inspector Dunbar, and I obtained further evidence showing how the conspiracy had been conducted; yes. For instance, Dunbar's notebook showed me that Mr. Leroux was accustomed to receive letters from Mrs. Leroux whilst she was supposed to be in Paris. I actually discovered some of those letters, and they bore no dates. This, if they came from a woman, was not remarkable, but, upon one of them I found something that WAS remarkable. It was still in its envelope, you must understand, this letter, its envelope bearing the Paris post-mark. But impressed upon the paper I discovered a second post-mark, which, by means of a simple process, and the use of a magnifying glass, I made out to be Bow, East!"

"What!"

"Do you understand? This letter, and others doubtless, had been enclosed in an envelope and despatched to Paris from Bow, East? In short, Mrs. Leroux wrote those letters before she left London; Soames never posted them, but handed them over to some representative of Mr. King; this other, in turn, posted them to Madame Jean in Paris! Morbleu! these are clever rogues! This which I was fortunate enough to discover had been on top, you understand, this billet, and the outer envelope being very heavily stamped, that below retained the impress of the post-mark."

"Poor Leroux!" said Cumberly again, with suppressed emotion. "That unsuspecting, kindly soul has been drawn into the meshes of this conspiracy. How they have been wound around him, until…"

"He knows the truth about his wife?" asked Max, suddenly glancing up at the physician, "that she is not in Paris?"

"I, myself, broke the painful news to him," replied Cumberly—"after a consultation with Miss Ryland and my daughter. I considered it my duty to tell him, but I cannot disguise from myself that it hastened, if it did not directly occasion, his breakdown."

"Yes, yes," said Max; "we have been very fortunate however in diverting the attention of the press from the absence of Mrs. Leroux throughout this time. Nom d'un nom! Had they got to know about the scrap of paper found in the dead woman's hand, I fear that this would have been impossible."

"I do not doubt that it would have been impossible, knowing the London press," replied Dr. Cumberly, "but I, too, am glad that it has been achieved; for in the light of your Paris discoveries, I begin at last to understand."

"You were not Mrs. Leroux's medical adviser?"

"I was not," replied Cumberly, glancing sharply at Max. "Good heavens, to think that I had never realized the truth!"

"It is not so wonderful at all. Of course, as I have seen from the evidence which you gave to the police, you knew that Mrs. Vernon was addicted to the use of opium?"

"It was perfectly evident," replied Cumberly; "painfully evident. I will not go into particulars, but her entire constitution was undermined by the habit. I may add, however, that I did not associate the vice with her violent end, except"…

"Ah!" interrupted Max, shaking his finger at the physician, "you are coming to the point upon which you disagreed with the divisional surgeon! Now, it is an important point. You are of opinion that the injection in Mrs. Vernon's shoulder—which could not have been self-administered"…

"She was not addicted to the use of the needle," interrupted Cumberly; "she was an opium SMOKER."

"Quite so, quite so," said Max: "it makes the point all the more clear. You are of opinion that this injection was made at least eight hours before the woman's death?"

"At least eight hours—yes."

"Eh bien!" said Max; "and have you had extensive experience of such injections?"

Dr. Cumberly stared at him in some surprise.

"In a general way," he said, "a fair number of such cases have come under my notice; but it chances that one of my patients, a regular patient—is addicted to the vice."

"Injections?"

"Only as a makeshift. He has periodical bouts of opium smoking—what I may term deliberate debauches."

"Ah!" Max was keenly interested. "This patient is a member of good society?"

"He's a member of Parliament," replied Cumberly, a faint, humorous glint creeping into his gray eyes; "but, of course, that is not an answer to your question! Yes, he is of an old family, and is engaged to the daughter of a peer."

"Dr. Cumberly," said Max, "in a case like the present—apart from the fact that the happiness—pardieu! the life—of one of your own friends is involved… should you count it a breach of professional etiquette to divulge the name of that patient?"

It was a disturbing question; a momentous question for a fashionable physician to be called upon to answer thus suddenly. Dr. Cumberly, who had resumed his promenade of the carpet, stopped with his back to M. Max, and stared out of the window into Harley Street.

M. Max, a man of refined susceptibilities, came to his aid, diplomatically.

"It is perhaps overmuch to ask you," he said. "I can settle the problem in a more simple manner. Inspector Dunbar will ask you for this gentleman's name, and you, as witness in the case, cannot refuse to give it."

"I can refuse until I stand in the witness-box!" replied Cumberly, turning, a wry smile upon his face.

"With the result," interposed Max, "that the ends of justice might be defeated, and the wrong man hanged!"

"True," said Cumberly; "I am splitting hairs. It is distinctly a breach of professional etiquette, nevertheless, and I cannot disguise the fact from myself. However, since the knowledge will never go any further, and since tremendous issues are at stake, I will give you the name of my opium patient. It is Sir Brian Malpas!"

"I am much indebted to you, Dr. Cumberly," said Max; "a thousand thanks;" but in his eyes there was a far-away look. "Malpas—Malpas! Where in this case have I met with the name of Malpas?"

"Inspector Dunbar may possibly have mentioned it to you in reference to the evidence of Mr. John Exel, M.P. Mr. Exel, you may remember"…

"I have it!" cried Max; "Nom d'un nom! I have it! It was from Sir Brian Malpas that he had parted at the corner of Victoria Street on the night of the murder, is it not so?"

"Your memory is very good, M. Max!"

"Then Mr. Exel is a personal friend of Sir Brian Malpas?

"Excellent! Kismet aids me still! I come to you hoping that you may be acquainted with the constitution of Mrs. Leroux, but no! behold me disappointed in this. Then—morbleu! among your patients I find a possible client of the opium syndicate!"

"What! Malpas? Good God! I had not thought of that! Of course, he must retire somewhere from the ken of society to indulge in these opium orgies"…

"Quite so. I have hopes. Since it would never do for Sir Brian Malpas to know who I am and what I seek, a roundabout introduction is provided by kindly Providence—Ah! that good little angel of mine!—in the person of Mr. John Exel, M.P."

"I will introduce you to Mr. Exel with pleasure."

"Eh bien! Let it be arranged as soon as possible," said M. Max. "To Mr. John Exel I will be, as to Miss Ryland (morbleu! I hate me!) and Miss Cumberly (pardieu! I loathe myself!), M. Gaston! It is ten o'clock, and already I hear your first patient ringing at the front-door bell. Good morning, Dr. Cumberly."

Dr. Cumberly grasped his hand cordially.

"Good morning, M. Max!"

The famous detective was indeed retiring, when:

"M. Max!"

He turned—and looked into the troubled gray eyes of Dr. Cumberly.

"You would ask me where is she—Mrs. Leroux?" he said. "My friend—I may call you my friend, may I not?—I cannot say if she is living or is dead. Some little I know of the Chinese, quite a little; nom de dieu!… I hope she is dead!"…

XXIV. Opium

Denise Ryland was lunching that day with Dr. Cumberly and his daughter at Palace Mansions; and as was usually the case when this trio met, the conversation turned upon the mystery.

"I have just seen Leroux," said the physician, as he took his seat, "and I have told him that he must go for a drive to-morrow. I have released him from his room, and given him the run of the place again, but until he can get right away, complete recovery is impossible. A little cheerful company might be useful, though. You might look in and see him for a while, Helen?"

Helen met her father's eyes, gravely, and replied, with perfect composure, "I will do so with pleasure. Miss Ryland will come with me."

"Suppose," said Denise Ryland, assuming her most truculent air, "you leave off… talking in that… frigid manner… my dear. Considering that Mira… Leroux and I were… old friends, and that you… are old friends of hers, too, and considering that I spend… my life amongst… people who very sensibly call… one another… by their Christian names, forget that my name is Ryland, and call me… Denise!"

"I should love to!" cried Helen Cumberly; "in fact, I wanted to do so the very first time I saw you; perhaps because Mira Leroux always referred to you as Denise"…

"May I also avail myself of the privilege?" inquired Dr. Cumberly with gravity, "and may I hope that you will return the compliment?"

"I cannot… do it!" declared Denise Ryland, firmly. "A doctor… should never be known by any other name than… Doctor. If I heard any one refer to my own… physician as Jack or… Bill, or Dick… I should lose ALL faith in him at once!"

As the lunch proceeded, Dr. Cumberly gradually grew more silent, seeming to be employed with his own thoughts; and although his daughter and Denise Ryland were discussing the very matter that engaged his own attention, he took no part in the conversation for some time. Then:

"I agree with you!" he said, suddenly, interrupting Helen; "the greatest blow of all to Leroux was the knowledge that his wife had been deceiving him."

"He invited… deceit!" proclaimed Denise Ryland, "by his… criminal neglect."

"Oh! how can you say so!" cried Helen, turning her gray eyes upon the speaker reproachfully; "he deserves—"

"He certainly deserves to know the real truth," concluded Dr. Cumberly; "but would it relieve his mind or otherwise?"

Denise Ryland and Helen looked at him in silent surprise.

"The truth?" began the latter—"Do you mean that you know—where she is"…

"If I knew that," replied Dr. Cumberly, "I should know everything; the mystery of the Palace Mansions murder would be a mystery no longer. But I know one thing: Mrs. Leroux's absence has nothing to do with any love affair."

"What!" exclaimed Denise Ryland. "There isn't another man… in the case? You can't tell me"…

"But I DO tell you!" said Dr. Cumberly; "I ASSURE you."

"And you have not told—Mr. Leroux?" said Helen incredulously. "You have NOT told him—although you know that the thought—of THAT is?"…

"Is practically killing him? No, I have not told him yet. For—would my news act as a palliative or as an irritant?"

"That depends," pronounced Denise Ryland, "on the nature of… your news."

"I suppose I have no right to conceal it from him. Therefore, we will tell him to-day. But although, beyond doubt, his mind will be relieved upon one point, the real facts are almost, if not quite, as bad."

"I learnt, this morning," he continued, lighting a cigarette, "certain facts which, had I been half as clever as I supposed myself, I should have deduced from the data already in my possession. I was aware, of course, that the unhappy victim—Mrs. Vernon—was addicted to the use of opium, and if a tangible link were necessary, it existed in the form of the written fragment which I myself took from the dead woman's hand."…

"A link!" said Denise Ryland.

"A link between Mrs. Vernon and Mrs. Leroux," explained the physician. "You see, it had never occurred to me that they knew one another."…

"And did they?" questioned his daughter, eagerly.

"It is almost certain that they were acquainted, at any rate; and in view of certain symptoms, which, without giving them much consideration, I nevertheless had detected in Mrs. Leroux, I am disposed to think that the bond of sympathy which existed between them was"…

He seemed to hesitate, looking at his daughter, whose gray eyes were fixed upon him intently, and then at Denise Ryland, who, with her chin resting upon her hands, and her elbows propped upon the table, was literally glaring at him.

"Opium!" he said.

A look of horror began slowly to steal over Helen Cumberly's face; Denise Ryland's head commenced to sway from side to side. But neither woman spoke.

"By the courtesy of Inspector Dunbar," continued Dr. Cumberly, "I have been enabled to keep in touch with the developments of the case, as you know; and he had noted as a significant fact that the late Mrs. Vernon's periodical visits to Scotland corresponded, curiously, with those of Mrs. Leroux to Paris. I don't mean in regard to date; although in one or two instances (notably Mrs. Vernon's last journey to Scotland, and that of Mrs. Leroux to Paris), there was similarity even in this particular. A certain Mr. Debnam—the late Horace Vernon's solicitor—placed an absurd construction upon this"…

"Do you mean," interrupted Helen in a strained voice, "that he insinuated that Mrs. Vernon"…

"He had an idea that she visited Leroux—yes," replied her father hastily. "It was one of those absurd and irritating theories, which, instinctively, we know to be wrong, but which, if asked for evidence, we cannot hope to PROVE to be wrong."

"It is outrageous!" cried Helen, her eyes flashing indignantly; "Mr. Debnam should be ashamed of himself!"

Dr. Cumberly smiled rather sadly.

"In this world," he said, "we have to count with the Debnams. One's own private knowledge of a man's character is not worth a brass farthing as legal

evidence. But I am happy to say that Dunbar completely pooh-poohed the idea."

"I like Inspector Dunbar!" declared Helen; "he is so strong—a splendid man!"

Denise Ryland stared at her cynically, but made no remark.

"The inspector and myself," continued Dr. Cumberly, "attached altogether a different significance to the circumstances. I am pleased to tell you that Debnam's unpleasant theories are already proved fallacious; the case goes deeper, far deeper, than a mere intrigue of that kind. In short, I am now assured—I cannot, unfortunately, name the source of my new information—but I am assured, that Mrs. Leroux, as well as Mrs. Vernon, was addicted to the opium vice."…

"Oh, my God! how horrible!" whispered Helen.

"A certain notorious character," resumed Dr. Cumberly…

"Soames!" snapped Denise Ryland. "Since I heard… that man's name I knew him for… a villain… of the worst possible… description… imaginable."

"Soames," replied Dr. Cumberly, smiling slightly, "was one of the group, beyond doubt—for I may as well explain that we are dealing with an elaborate organization; but the chief member, to whom I have referred, is a greater one than Soames. He is a certain shadowy being, known as Mr. King."

"The name on the paper!" said Helen, quickly. "But of course the police have been looking for Mr. King all along?"

"In a general way—yes; but as we have thousands of Kings in London alone, the task is a stupendous one. The information which I received this morning narrows down the search immensely; for it points to Mr. King being the chief, or president, of a sort of opium syndicate, and, furthermore, it points to his being a Chinaman."

"A Chinaman!" cried Denise and Helen together.

"It is not absolutely certain, but it is more than probable. The point is that Mrs. Leroux has not eloped with some unknown lover; she is in one of the opium establishments of Mr. King."

"Do you mean that she is detained there?" asked Helen.

"It appears to me, now, to be certain that she is. My hypothesis is that she was an habitue of this place, as also was Mrs. Vernon. These unhappy

women, by means of elaborate plans, made on their behalf by the syndicate, indulged in periodical opium orgies. It was a game well worth the candle, as the saying goes, from the syndicate's standpoint; for Mrs. Leroux, alone, has paid no less than a thousand pounds to the opium group!"

"A thousand pounds!" cried Denise Ryland. "You don't mean to tell me that that… silly fool… of a man, Harry Leroux… has allowed himself to be swindled of… all that money?"

"There is not the slightest doubt about it," Dr. Cumberly assured her; "he opened a credit to that amount in Paris, and the entire sum has been absorbed by Mr. King!"

"It's almost incredible!" said Helen.

"I quite agree with you," replied her father. "Of course, most people know that there are opium dens in London, as in almost every other big city, but the existence of these palatial establishments, conducted by Mr. King, although undoubtedly a fact, is a fact difficult to accept. It doesn't seem possible that such a place can be conducted secretly; whereas I am assured that all the efforts of Scotland Yard thus far have failed to locate the site of the London branch."

"But surely," cried Denise Ryland, nostrils dilated indignantly, "some of the… customers of this… disgusting place… can be followed?"…

"The difficulty is to identify them," explained Cumberly. "Opium smoking is essentially a secret vice; a man does not visit an opium den openly as he would visit his club; and the elaborate precautions adopted by the women are illustrated in the case of Mrs. Vernon, and in the case of Mrs. Leroux. It is a pathetic fact almost daily brought home to me, that women who acquire a drug habit become more rapidly and more entirely enslaved by it than does a man. It becomes the center of the woman's existence; it becomes her god: all other claims, social and domestic, are disregarded. Upon this knowledge, Mr. King has established his undoubtedly extensive enterprise."…

Dr. Cumberly stood up.

"I will go down and see Leroux," he announced quietly. "His sorrow hitherto has been secondary to his indignation. Possibly ignorance in this case is preferable to the truth, but nevertheless I am determined to tell him what I know. Give me ten minutes or so, and then join me. Are you agreeable?"

"Quite," said Helen.

Dr. Cumberly departed upon his self-imposed mission.

XXV. Fate's Shuttlecock

Some ten minutes later, Helen Cumberly and Denise Ryland were in turn admitted to Henry Leroux's flat. They found him seated on a couch in his dining-room, wearing the inevitable dressing-gown. Dr. Cumberly, his hands clasped behind him, stood looking out of the window.

Leroux's pallor now was most remarkable; his complexion had assumed an ivory whiteness which lent his face a sort of statuesque beauty. He was cleanly shaven (somewhat of a novelty), and his hair was brushed back from his brow. But the dark blue eyes were very tragic.

He rose at sight of his new visitors, and a faint color momentarily tinged his cheeks. Helen Cumberly grasped his outstretched hand, then looked away quickly to where her father was standing.

"I almost thought," said Leroux, "that you had deserted me."

"No," said Helen, seeming to speak with an effort—"we—my father, thought—that you needed quiet."

Denise Ryland nodded grimly.

"But now," she said, in her most truculent manner, "we are going to… drag you out of… your morbid… self… for a change… which you need… if ever a man… needed it."

"I have just prescribed a drive," said Dr. Cumberly, turning to them, "for to-morrow morning; with lunch at Richmond and a walk across the park, rejoining the car at the Bushey Gate, and so home to tea."

Henry Leroux looked eagerly at Helen in silent appeal. He seemed to fear that she would refuse.

"Do you mean that you have included us in the prescription, father?" she asked.

"Certainly; you are an essential part of it."

"It will be fine," said the girl quietly; "I shall enjoy it."

"Ah!" said Leroux, with a faint note of contentment in his voice; and he reseated himself.

There was an interval of somewhat awkward silence, to be broken by Denise Ryland.

"Dr. Cumberly has told you the news?" she asked, dropping for the moment her syncopated and pugnacious manner.

Leroux closed his eyes and leant back upon the couch.

"Yes," he replied. "And to think that I am a useless wreck—a poor parody of a man—whilst—Mira is… Oh, God! help me!—God help HER!"

He was visibly contending with his emotions; and Helen Cumberly found herself forced to turn her head aside.

"I have been blind," continued Leroux, in a forced, monotonous voice. "That Mira has not—deceived me, in the worst sense of the word, is in no way due to my care of her. I recognize that, and I accept my punishment; for I deserved it. But what now overwhelms me is the knowledge, the frightful knowledge, that in a sense I have misjudged her, that I have remained here inert, making no effort, thinking her absence voluntary, whilst—God help her!—she has been"…

"Once again, Leroux," interrupted Dr. Cumberly, "I must ask you not to take too black a view. I blame myself more than I blame you, for having failed to perceive what as an intimate friend I had every opportunity to perceive; that your wife was acquiring the opium habit. You have told me that you count her as dead"—he stood beside Leroux, resting both hands upon the bowed shoulders—"I have not encouraged you to change that view. One who has cultivated—the—vice, to a point where protracted absences become necessary—you understand me?—is, so far as my experience goes"…

"Incurable! I quite understand," jerked Leroux. "A thousand times better dead, indeed."

"The facts as I see them," resumed the physician, "as I see them, are these: by some fatality, at present inexplicable, a victim of the opium syndicate met her death in this flat. Realizing that the inquiries brought to bear would inevitably lead to the cross-examination of Mrs. Leroux, the opium syndicate has detained her; was forced to detain her."

"Where is the place," began Leroux, in a voice rising higher with every syllable—"where is the infamous den to which—to which"…

Dr. Cumberly pressed his hands firmly upon the speaker's shoulders.

"It is only a question of time, Leroux," he said, "and you will have the satisfaction of knowing that—though at a great cost to yourself—this dreadful evil has been stamped out, that this yellow peril has been torn from the heart of society. Now, I must leave you for the present; but rest assured that everything possible is being done to close the nets about Mr. King."

"Ah!" whispered Leroux, "MR. KING!"

"The circle is narrowing," continued the physician. "I may not divulge confidences; but a very clever man—the greatest practical criminologist in Europe—is devoting the whole of his time, night and day, to this object."

Helen Cumberly and Denise Ryland exhibited a keen interest in the words, but Leroux, with closed eyes, merely nodded in a dull way. Shortly, Dr. Cumberly took his departure, and, Helen looking at her companion interrogatively:—

"I think," said Denise Ryland, addressing Leroux, "that you should not over-tax your strength at present." She walked across to where he sat, and examined some proofslips lying upon the little table beside the couch. "'Martin Zeda,'" she said, with a certain high disdain. "Leave 'Martin Zeda' alone for once, and read a really cheerful book!"

Leroux forced a smile to his lips.

"The correction of these proofs," he said diffidently, "exacts no great mental strain, but is sufficient to—distract my mind. Work, after all, is nature's own sedative."

"I rather agree with Mr. Leroux, Denise," said Helen;—"and really you must allow him to know best."

"Thank you," said Leroux, meeting her eyes momentarily. "I feared that I was about to be sent to bed like a naughty boy!"

"I hope it's fine to-morrow," said Helen rapidly. "A drive to Richmond will be quite delightful."

"I think, myself," agreed Leroux, "that it will hasten my recovery to breathe the fresh air once again."

Knowing how eagerly he longed for health and strength, and to what purpose, the girl found something very pathetic in the words.

"I wish you were well enough to come out this afternoon," she said; "I am going to a private view at Olaf van Noord's studio. It is sure to be an extraordinary afternoon. He is the god of the Soho futurists, you know. And his pictures are the weirdest nightmares imaginable. One always meets such

singular people there, too, and I am honored in receiving an invitation to represent the Planet!"

"I consider," said Denise Ryland, head wagging furiously again, "that the man is… mad. He had an exhibition… in Paris… and everybody… laughed at him… simply LAUGHED at him."

"But financially, he is very successful," added Helen.

"Financially!" exclaimed Denise Ryland, "FINANCIALLY! To criticize a man's work… financially, is about as… sensible as… to judge the Venus… de Milo… by weight!—or to sell the works… of Leonardo… da Vinci by the… yard! Olaf van Noord is nothing but… a fool… of the worst possible… description… imaginable."

"He is at least an entertaining fool!" protested Helen, laughingly.

"A mountebank!" cried Denise Ryland; "a clown… a pantaloon… a whole family of… idiots… rolled into one!"

"It seems unkind to run away and leave you here—in your loneliness," said Helen to Leroux; "but really I must be off to the wilds of Soho."…

"To-morrow," said Leroux, standing up and fixing his eyes upon her lingeringly, "will be a red-letter day. I have no right to complain, whilst such good friends remain to me—such true friends."…

XXVI. "Our Lady of the Poppies"

A number of visitors were sprinkled about Olaf van Noord's large and dirty studio, these being made up for the most part of those weird and nondescript enthusiasts who seek to erect an apocryphal Montmartre in the plains of Soho. One or two ordinary mortals, representing the Press, leavened the throng, but the entire gathering—"advanced" and unenlightened alike—seemed to be drawn to a common focus: a large canvas placed advantageously in the southeast corner of the studio, where it enjoyed all the benefit of a pure and equably suffused light.

Seated apart from his worshipers upon a little sketching stool, and handling a remarkably long, amber cigarette-holder with much grace, was Olaf van Noord. He had hair of so light a yellow as sometimes to appear white, worn very long, brushed back from his brow and cut squarely all

around behind, lending him a medieval appearance. He wore a slight mustache carefully pointed; and his scanty vandyke beard could not entirely conceal the weakness of his chin. His complexion had the color and general appearance of drawing-paper, and in his large blue eyes was an eerie hint of sightlessness. He was attired in a light tweed suit cut in an American pattern, and out from his low collar flowed a black French knot.

Olaf van Noord rose to meet Helen Cumberly and Denise Ryland, advancing across the floor with the measured gait of a tragic actor. He greeted them aloofly, and a little negro boy proffered tiny cups of China tea. Denise Ryland distended her nostrils as her gaze swept the picture-covered walls; but she seemed to approve of the tea.

The artist next extended to them an ivory box containing little yellow-wrapped cigarettes. Helen Cumberly smilingly refused, but Denise Ryland took one of the cigarettes, sniffed at it superciliously—and then replaced it in the box.

"It has a most… egregiously horrible… odor," she commented.

"They are a special brand," explained Olaf van Noord, distractedly, "which I have imported for me from Smyrna. They contain a small percentage of opium."

"Opium!" exclaimed Denise Ryland, glaring at the speaker and then at Helen Cumberly, as though the latter were responsible in some way for the vices of the painter.

"Yes," he said, reclosing the box, and pacing somberly to the door to greet a new arrival.

"Did you ever in all your life," said Denise Ryland, glancing about her, "see such an exhibition… of nightmares?"

Certainly, the criticism was not without justification; the dauby-looking oil-paintings, incomprehensible water-colors, and riotous charcoal sketches which formed the mural decoration of the studio were distinctly "advanced." But, since the center of interest seemed to be the large canvas on the easel, the two moved to the edges of the group of spectators and began to examine this masterpiece. A very puzzled newspaperman joined them, bending and whispering to Helen Cumberly:

"Are you going to notice the thing seriously? Personally, I am writing it up as a practical joke! We are giving him half a column—Lord knows what for!—but I can't see how to handle it except as funny stuff."

"But, for heaven's sake… what does he… CALL it?" muttered Denise Ryland, holding a pair of gold rimmed pince-nez before her eyes, and shifting them to and fro in an endeavor to focus the canvas.

"'Our Lady of the Poppies,'" replied the journalist. "Do you think it's intended to mean anything in particular?"

The question was no light one; it embodied a problem not readily solved. The scene depicted, and depicted with a skill, with a technical mastery of the bizarre that had in it something horrible—was a long narrow room—or, properly, cavern. The walls apparently were hewn from black rock, and at regular intervals, placed some three feet from these gleaming walls, uprose slender golden pillars supporting a kind of fretwork arch which entirely masked the ceiling. The point of sight adopted by the painter was peculiar. One apparently looked down into this apartment from some spot elevated fourteen feet or more above the floor level. The floor, which was black and polished, was strewn with tiger skins; and little, inlaid tables and garishly colored cushions were spread about in confusion, whilst cushioned divans occupied the visible corners of the place. The lighting was very "advanced": a lamp, having a kaleidoscopic shade, swung from the center of the roof low into the room and furnished all the illumination.

Three doors were visible; one, directly in line at the further end of the place, apparently of carved ebony inlaid with ivory; another, on the right, of lemon wood or something allied to it, and inlaid with a design in some emerald hued material; with a third, corresponding door, on the left, just barely visible to the spectator.

Two figures appeared. One was that of a Chinaman in a green robe scarcely distinguishable from the cushions surrounding him, who crouched upon the divan to the left of the central door, smoking a long bamboo pipe. His face was the leering face of a yellow satyr. But, dominating the composition, and so conceived in form, in color, and in lighting, as to claim the attention centrally, so that the other extravagant details became but a setting for it, was another figure.

Upon a slender ivory pedestal crouched a golden dragon, and before the pedestal was placed a huge Chinese vase of the indeterminate pink seen in the heart of a rose, and so skilfully colored as to suggest an internal luminousness. The vase was loaded with a mass of exotic poppies, a riotous splash of color; whilst beside this vase, and slightly in front of the pedestal,

stood the figure presumably intended to represent the Lady of the Poppies who gave title to the picture.

The figure was that of an Eastern girl, slight and supple, and possessing a devilish and forbidding grace. Her short hair formed a black smudge upon the canvas, and cast a dense shadow upon her face. The composition was infinitely daring; for out of this shadow shone the great black eyes, their diablerie most cunningly insinuated; whilst with a brilliant exclusion of detail—by means of two strokes of the brush steeped in brightest vermilion, and one seemingly haphazard splash of dead white—an evil and abandoned smile was made to greet the spectator.

To the waist, the figure was a study in satin nudity, whence, from a jeweled girdle, light draperies swept downward, covering the feet and swinging, a shimmering curve out into the foreground of the canvas, the curve being cut off in its apogee by the gold frame.

Above her head, this girl of demoniacal beauty held a bunch of poppies seemingly torn from the vase: this, with her left hand; with her right she pointed, tauntingly, at her beholder.

In comparison with the effected futurism of the other pictures in the studio, "Our Lady of the Poppies," beyond question was a great painting. From a point where the entire composition might be taken in by the eye, the uncanny scene glowed with highly colored detail; but, exclude the scheme of the composition, and focus the eye upon any one item—the golden dragon—the seated Chinaman—the ebony door—the silk-shaded lamp; it had no detail whatever: one beheld a meaningless mass of colors. Individually, no one section of the canvas had life, had meaning; but, as a whole, it glowed, it lived—it was genius. Above all, it was uncanny.

This, Denise Ryland fully realized, but critics had grown so used to treating the work of Olaf van Noord as a joke, that "Our Lady of the Poppies" in all probability would never be judged seriously.

"What does it mean, Mr. van Noord?" asked Helen Cumberly, leaving the group of worshipers standing hushed in rapture before the canvas and approaching the painter. "Is there some occult significance in the title?"

"It is a priestess," replied the artist, in his dreamy fashion…

"A priestess?"

"A priestess of the temple."…

Helen Cumberly glanced again at the astonishing picture.

"Do you mean," she began, "that there is a living original?"

Olaf van Noord bowed absently, and left her side to greet one who at that moment entered the studio. Something magnetic in the personality of the newcomer drew all eyes from the canvas to the figure on the threshold. The artist was removing garish tiger skin furs from the shoulders of the girl—for the new arrival was a girl, a Eurasian girl.

She wore a tiger skin motor-coat, and a little, close-fitting, turban-like cap of the same. The coat removed, she stood revealed in a clinging gown of silk; and her feet were shod in little amber colored slippers with green buckles. The bodice of her dress opened in a surprising V, displaying the satin texture of her neck and shoulders, and enhancing the barbaric character of her appearance. Her jet black hair was confined by no band or comb, but protruded Bishareen-like around the shapely head. Without doubt, this was the Lady of the Poppies—the original of the picture.

"Dear friends," said Olaf van Noord, taking the girl's hand, and walking into the studio, "permit me to present my model!"

Following, came a slightly built man who carried himself with a stoop; an olive faced man, who squinted frightfully, and who dressed immaculately.

"What a most… EXTRAORDINARY-looking creature!" whispered Denise Ryland to Helen. "She has undoubted attractions of… a hellish sort… if I may use… the term."

"She is the strangest looking girl I have ever seen in my life," replied Helen, who found herself unable to turn her eyes away from Olaf van Noord's model. "Surely she is not a professional model!"

The chatty reporter (his name was Crockett) confided to Helen Cumberly:

"She is not exactly a professional model, I think, Miss Cumberly, but she is one of the van Noord set, and is often to be seen in the more exclusive restaurants, and sometimes in the Cafe Royal."

"She is possibly a member of the theatrical profession?"

"I think not. She is the only really strange figure (if we exclude Olaf) in this group of poseurs. She is half Burmese, I believe, and a native of Moulmein."

"Most EXTRAORDINARY creature!" muttered Denise Ryland, focussing upon the Eurasian her gold rimmed glasses—"MOST

extraordinary." She glanced around at the company in general. "I really begin to feel… more and more as though I were… in a private lunatic… asylum. That picture… beyond doubt is the work… of a madman… a perfect… madman!"

"I, also, begin to be conscious of an uncomfortable sensation," said Helen, glancing about her almost apprehensively. "Am I dreaming, or did SOME ONE ELSE enter the studio, immediately behind that girl?"

"A squinting man… yes!"

"But a THIRD person?"

"No, my dear… look for yourself. As you say… you are… dreaming. It's not to be wondered… at!"

Helen laughed, but very uneasily. Evidently it had been an illusion, but an unpleasant illusion; for she should have been prepared to swear that not two, but THREE people had entered! Moreover, although she was unable to detect the presence of any third stranger in the studio, the persuasion that this third person actually was present remained with her, unaccountably, and uncannily.

The lady of the tiger skins was surrounded by an admiring group of unusuals, and Helen, who had turned again to the big canvas, suddenly became aware that the little cross-eyed man was bowing and beaming radiantly before her.

"May I be allowed," said Olaf van Noord who stood beside him, "to present my friend Mr. Gianapolis, my dear Miss Cumberly?"…

Helen Cumberly found herself compelled to acknowledge the introduction, although she formed an immediate, instinctive distaste for Mr. Gianapolis. But he made such obvious attempts to please, and was so really entertaining a talker, that she unbent towards him a little. His admiration, too, was unconcealed; and no pretty woman, however great her common sense, is entirely admiration-proof.

"Do you not think 'Our Lady of the Poppies' remarkable?" said Gianapolis, pleasantly.

"I think," replied Denise Ryland,—to whom, also, the Greek had been presented by Olaf van Noord, "that it indicates… a disordered… imagination on the part of… its creator."

"It is a technical masterpiece," replied the Greek, smiling, "but hardly a work of imagination; for you have seen the original of the principal figure,

and"—he turned to Helen Cumberly—"one need not go very far East for such an interior as that depicted."

"What!" Helen knitted her brows, prettily—"you do not suggest that such an apartment actually exists either East or West?"

Gianapolis beamed radiantly.

"You would, perhaps, like to see such an apartment?" he suggested.

"I should, certainly," replied Helen Cumberly. "Not even in a stage setting have I seen anything like it."

"You have never been to the East?"

"Never, unfortunately. I have desired to go for years, and hope to go some day."

"In Smyrna you may see such rooms; possibly in Port Said—certainly in Cairo. In Constantinople—yes! But perhaps in Paris; and—who knows?—Sir Richard Burton explored Mecca, but who has explored London?"

Helen Cumberly watched him curiously.

"You excite my curiosity," she said. "Don't you think"—turning to Denise Ryland—"he is most tantalizing?"

Denise Ryland distended her nostrils scornfully.

"He is telling… fairy tales," she declared. "He thinks… we are… silly!"

"On the contrary," declared Gianapolis; "I flatter myself that I am too good a judge of character to make that mistake."

Helen Cumberly absorbed his entire attention; in everything he sought to claim her interest; and when, ere taking their departure, the girl and her friend walked around the studio to view the other pictures, Gianapolis was the attendant cavalier, and so well as one might judge, in his case, his glance rarely strayed from the piquant beauty of Helen.

When they departed, it was Gianapolis, and not Olaf van Noord, who escorted them to the door and downstairs to the street. The red lips of the Eurasian smiled upon her circle of adulators, but her eyes—her unfathomable eyes—followed every movement of the Greek.

XXVII. Grove Of A Million Apes

Four men sauntered up the grand staircase and entered the huge smoking-room of the Radical Club as Big Ben was chiming the hour of eleven o'clock. Any curious observer who had cared to consult the visitor's book in the hall, wherein the two lines last written were not yet dry, would have found the following entries:

VISITOR RESIDENCE INTROD'ING MEMBER
Dr. Bruce Cumberly London John Exel
M. Gaston Paris Brian Malpas

The smoking-room was fairly full, but a corner near the big open grate had just been vacated, and here, about a round table, the four disposed themselves. Our French acquaintance being in evening dress had perforce confined himself in his sartorial eccentricities to a flowing silk knot in place of the more conventional, neat bow. He was already upon delightfully friendly terms with the frigid Exel and the aristocratic Sir Brian Malpas. Few natures were proof against the geniality of the brilliant Frenchman.

Conversation drifted, derelict, from one topic to another, now seized by this current of thought, now by that; and M. Gaston Max made no perceptible attempt to steer it in any given direction. But presently:

"I was reading a very entertaining article," said Exel, turning his monocle upon the physician, "in the Planet to-day, from the pen of Miss Cumberly; Ah! dealing with Olaf van Noord."

Sir Brian Malpas suddenly became keenly interested.

"You mean in reference to his new picture, 'Our Lady of the Poppies'?" he said.

"Yes," replied Exel, "but I was unaware that you knew van Noord?"

"I do not know him," said Sir Brian, "I should very much like to meet him. But directly the picture is on view to the public I shall certainly subscribe my half-crown."

"My own idea," drawled Exel, "was that Miss Cumberly's article probably was more interesting than the picture or the painter. Her description of the canvas was certainly most vivid; and I, myself, for a moment, experienced an inclination to see the thing. I feel sure, however, that I should be disappointed."

"I think you are wrong," interposed Cumberly. "Helen is enthusiastic about the picture, and even Miss Ryland, whom you have met and who is a somewhat severe critic, admits that it is out of the ordinary."

Max, who covertly had been watching the face of Sir Brian Malpas, said at this point:

"I would not miss it for anything, after reading Miss Cumberly's account of it. When are you thinking of going to see it, Sir Brian? I might arrange to join you."

"Directly the exhibition is opened," replied the baronet, lapsing again into his dreamy manner. "Ring me up when you are going, and I will join you."

"But you might be otherwise engaged?"

"I never permit business," said Sir Brian, "to interfere with pleasure."

The words sounded absurd, but, singularly, the statement was true. Sir Brian had won his political position by sheer brilliancy. He was utterly unreliable and totally indifferent to that code of social obligations which ordinarily binds his class. He held his place by force of intellect, and it was said of him that had he possessed the faintest conception of his duties toward his fellow men, nothing could have prevented him from becoming Prime Minister. He was a puzzle to all who knew him. Following a most brilliant speech in the House, which would win admiration and applause from end to end of the Empire, he would, perhaps on the following day, exhibit something very like stupidity in debate. He would rise to address the House and take his seat again without having uttered a word. He was eccentric, said his admirers, but there were others who looked deeper for an explanation, yet failed to find one, and were thrown back upon theories.

M. Max, by strategy, masterful because it was simple, so arranged matters that at about twelve o'clock he found himself strolling with Sir Brian Malpas toward the latter's chambers in Piccadilly.

A man who wore a raincoat with the collar turned up and buttoned tightly about his throat, and whose peculiar bowler hat seemed to be so tightly pressed upon his head that it might have been glued there, detached himself from the shadows of the neighboring cab rank as M. Gaston Max and Sir Brian Malpas quitted the Club, and followed them at a discreet distance.

It was a clear, fine night, and both gentlemen formed conspicuous figures, Sir Brian because of his unusual height and upright military bearing, and the Frenchman by reason of his picturesque cloak and hat. Up

Northumberland Avenue, across Trafalgar Square and so on up to Piccadilly Circus went the two, deep in conversation; with the tireless man in the raincoat always dogging their footsteps. So the procession proceeded on, along Piccadilly. Then Sir Brian and M. Max turned into the door of a block of chambers, and a constable, who chanced to be passing at the moment, touched his helmet to the baronet.

As the two were entering the lift, the follower came up level with the doorway and abreast of the constable; the top portion of a very red face showed between the collar of the raincoat and the brim of the hat, together with a pair of inquiring blue eyes.

"Reeves!" said the follower, addressing the constable.

The latter turned and stared for a moment at the speaker; then saluted hurriedly.

"Don't do that!" snapped the proprietor of the bowler; "you should know better! Who was that gentleman?"

"Sir Brian Malpas, sir."

"Sir Brian Malpas?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the other?"

"I don't know, sir. I have never seen him before."

"H'm!" grunted Detective-Sergeant Sowerby, walking across the road toward the Park with his hands thrust deep in his pockets; "I have! What the deuce is Max up to? I wonder if Dunbar knows about this move?"

He propped himself up against the railings, scarcely knowing what he expected to gain by remaining there, but finding the place as well suited to reflection as any other. He shared with Dunbar a dread that the famous Frenchman would bring the case to a successful conclusion unaided by Scotland Yard, thus casting professional discredit upon Dunbar and himself.

His presence at that spot was largely due to accident. He had chanced to be passing the Club when Sir Brian and M. Max had come out, and, fearful that the presence of the tall stranger portended some new move on the Frenchman's part, Sowerby had followed, hoping to glean something by persistency when clues were unobtainable by other means. He had had no time to make inquiries of the porter of the Club respecting the identity of M. Max's companion, and thus, as has appeared, he did not obtain the desired information until his arrival in Piccadilly.

Turning over these matters in his mind, Sowerby stood watching the block of buildings across the road. He saw a light spring into being in a room overlooking Piccadilly, a room boasting a handsome balcony. This took place some two minutes after the departure of the lift bearing Sir Brian and his guest upward; so that Sowerby permitted himself to conclude that the room with the balcony belonged to Sir Brian Malpas.

He watched the lighted window aimlessly and speculated upon the nature of the conversation then taking place up there above him. Had he possessed the attributes of a sparrow, he thought, he might have flown up to that balcony and have "got level" with this infernally clever Frenchman who was almost certainly going to pull off the case under the very nose of Scotland Yard.

In short, his reflections were becoming somewhat bitter; and persuaded that he had nothing to gain by remaining there any longer he was about to walk off, when his really remarkable persistency received a trivial reward.

One of the windows communicating with the balcony was suddenly thrown open, so that Sowerby had a distant view of the corner of a picture, of the extreme top of a book-case, and of a patch of white ceiling in the room above; furthermore he had a clear sight of the man who had opened the window, and who now turned and reentered the room. The man was Sir Brian Malpas.

Heedless of the roaring traffic stream, upon the brink of which he stood, heedless of all who passed him by, Sowerby gazed aloft, seeking to project himself, as it were, into that lighted room. Not being an accomplished clairvoyant, he remained in all his component parts upon the pavement of Piccadilly; but ours is the privilege to succeed where Sowerby failed, and the comedy being enacted in the room above should prove well deserving of study.

To the tactful diplomacy of M. Gaston Max, the task of securing from Sir Brian an invitation to step up into his chambers in order to smoke a final cigar was no heavy one. He seated himself in a deep armchair, at the baronet's invitation, and accepted a very fine cigar, contentedly, sniffing at the old cognac with the appreciation of a connoisseur, ere holding it under the syphon.

He glanced around the room, noting the character of the ornaments, and looked up at the big bookshelf which was near to him; these rapid inquiries

dictated the following remark: "You have lived in China, Sir Brian?"

Sir Brian surveyed him with mild surprise.

"Yes," he replied; "I was for some time at the Embassy in Pekin."

His guest nodded, blowing a ring of smoke from his lips and tracing its hazy outline with the lighted end of his cigar.

"I, too, have been in China," he said slowly.

"What, really! I had no idea."

"Yes—I have been in China… I"…

M. Gaston grew suddenly deathly pale and his fingers began to twitch alarmingly. He stared before him with wide-opened eyes and began to cough and to choke as if suffocating—dying.

Sir Brian Malpas leapt to his feet with an exclamation of concern. His visitor weakly waved him away, gasping: "It is nothing… it will… pass off. Oh! mon dieu!"…

Sir Brian ran and opened one of the windows to admit more air to the apartment. He turned and looked back anxiously at the man in the armchair.

M. Gaston, twitching in a pitiful manner and still frightfully pale, was clutching the chair-arms and glaring straight in front of him. Sir Brian started slightly and advanced again to his visitor's side.

The burning cigar lay upon the carpet beside the chair, and Sir Brian took it up and tossed it into the grate. As he did so he looked searchingly into the eyes of M. Gaston. The pupils were extraordinary dilated…

"Do you feel better?" asked Sir Brian.

"Much better," muttered M. Gaston, his face twitching nervously —"much better."

"Are you subject to these attacks?"

"Since—I was in China—yes, unfortunately."

Sir Brian tugged at his fair mustache and seemed about to speak, then turned aside, and, walking to the table, poured out a peg of brandy and offered it to his guest.

"Thanks," said M. Gaston; "many thanks indeed, but already I recover. There is only one thing that would hasten my recovery, and that, I fear, is not available."

"What is that?"

He looked again at M. Gaston's eyes with their very dilated pupils.

"Opium!" whispered M. Gaston.

"What! you… you"…

"I acquired the custom in China," replied the Frenchman, his voice gradually growing stronger; "and for many years, now, I have regarded opium, as essential to my well-being. Unfortunately business has detained me in London, and I have been forced to fast for an unusually long time. My outraged constitution is protesting—that is all."

He shrugged his shoulders and glanced up at his host with an odd smile.

"You have my sympathy," said Sir Brian…

"In Paris," continued the visitor, "I am a member of a select and cozy little club; near the Boulevard Beaumarchais…"

"I have heard of it," interjected Malpas—"on the Rue St. Claude?"

"That indeed is its situation," replied the other with surprise. "You know someone who is a member?"

Sir Brian Malpas hesitated for ten seconds or more; then, crossing the room and reclosing the window, he turned, facing his visitor across the large room.

"I was a member, myself, during the time that I lived in Paris," he said, in a hurried manner which did not entirely serve to cover his confusion.

"My dear Sir Brian! We have at least one taste in common!"

Sir Brian Malpas passed his hand across his brow with a weary gesture well-known to fellow Members of Parliament, for it often presaged the abrupt termination of a promising speech.

"I curse the day that I was appointed to Pekin," he said; "for it was in Pekin that I acquired the opium habit. I thought to make it my servant; it has made me"…

"What! you would give it up?"

Sir Brian surveyed the speaker with surprise again.

"Do you doubt it?"

"My dear Sir Brian!" cried the Frenchman, now completely restored, "my real life is lived in the land of the poppies; my other life is but a shadow! Morbleu! to be an outcast from that garden of bliss is to me torture excruciating. For the past three months I have regularly met in my trances."…

Sir Brian shuddered coldly.

"In my explorations of that wonderland," continued the Frenchman, "a most fascinating Eastern girl. Ah! I cannot describe her; for when, at a time

like this, I seek to conjure up her image,—nom d'un nom! do you know, I can think of nothing but a serpent!"

"A serpent!"

"A serpent, exactly. Yet, when I actually meet her in the land of the poppies, she is a dusky Cleopatra in whose arms I forget the world—even the world of the poppy. We float down the stream together, always in an Indian bark canoe, and this stream runs through orange groves. Numberless apes—millions of apes, inhabit these groves, and as we two float along, they hurl orange blossoms—orange blossoms, you understand—until the canoe is filled with them. I assure you, monsieur, that I perform these delightful journeys regularly, and to be deprived of the key which opens the gate of this wonderland, is to me like being exiled from a loved one. Pardieu! that grove of the apes! Morbleu! my witch of the dusky eyes! Yet, as I have told you, owing to some trick of my brain, whilst I can experience an intense longing for that companion of my dreams, my waking attempts to visualize her provide nothing but the image"…

"Of a serpent," concluded Sir Brian, smiling pathetically. "You are indeed an enthusiast, M. Gaston, and to me a new type. I had supposed that every slave of the drug cursed his servitude and loathed and despised himself."…

"Ah, monsieur! to ME those words sound almost like a sacrilege!"

"But," continued Sir Brian, "your remarks interest me strangely; for two reasons. First, they confirm your assertion that you are, or were, an habitue of the Rue St. Claude, and secondly, they revive in my mind an old fancy—a superstition."

"What is that, Sir Brian?" inquired M. Max, whose opium vision was a faithful imitation of one related to him by an actual frequenter of the establishment near the Boulevard Beaumarchais.

"Only once before, M. Gaston, have I compared notes with a fellow opium-smoker, and he, also, was a patron of Madame Jean; he, also, met in his dreams that Eastern Circe, in the grove of apes, just as I"…

"Morbleu! Yes?"

"As I meet her!"

"But this is astounding!" cried Max, who actually thought it so. "Your fancy—your superstition—was this: that only habitues of Rue St. Claude met, in poppyland, this vision? And in your fancy you are now confirmed?"

"It is singular, at least."

"It is more than that, Sir Brian! Can it be that some intelligence presides over that establishment and exercises—shall I call it a hypnotic influence upon the inmates?"

M. Max put the question with sincere interest.

"One does not ALWAYS meet her," murmured Sir Brian. "But—yes, it is possible. For I have since renewed those experiences in London."

"What! in London?"

"Are you remaining for some time longer in London?"

"Alas! for several weeks yet."

"Then I will introduce you to a gentleman who can secure you admission to an establishment in London—where you may even hope sometimes to find the orange grove—to meet your dream-bride!"

"What!" cried M. Gaston, rising to his feet, his eyes bright with gratitude, "you will do that?"

"With pleasure," said Sir Brian Malpas, wearily; "nor am I jealous! But—no! do not thank me, for I do not share your views upon the subject, monsieur. You are a devout worshiper; I, an unhappy slave!"

XXVIII. The Opium Agent

Into the Palm Court of the Hotel Astoria, Mr. Gianapolis came, radiant and bowing. M. Gaston rose to greet his visitor. M. Gaston was arrayed in a light gray suit and wore a violet tie of very chaste design; his complexion had assumed a quality of sallowness, and the pupils of his eyes had acquired (as on the occasion of his visit to the chambers of Sir Brian Malpas) a chatoyant quality; they alternately dilated and contracted in a most remarkable manner—in a manner which attracted the immediate attention of Mr. Gianapolis.

"My dear sir," he said, speaking in French, "you suffer. I perceive how grievously you suffer; and you have been denied that panacea which beneficent nature designed for the service of mankind. A certain gentleman known to both of us (we brethren of the poppy are all nameless) has advised me of your requirements—and here I am."

"You are welcome," declared M. Gaston.

He rose and grasped eagerly the hand of the Greek, at the same time looking about the Palm Court suspiciously. "You can relieve my sufferings?"

Mr. Gianapolis seated himself beside the Frenchman.

"I perceive," he said, "that you are of those who abjure the heresies of De Quincey. How little he knew, that De Quincey, of the true ritual of the poppy! He regarded it as the German regards his lager, whereas we know—you and I—that it is an Eleusinian mystery; that true communicants must retreat to the temple of the goddess if they would partake of Paradise with her."

"It is perhaps a question of temperament," said M. Gaston, speaking in a singularly tremulous voice. "De Quincey apparently possessed the type of constitution which is cerebrally stimulated by opium. To such a being the golden gates are closed; and the Easterners, whom he despised for what he termed their beastly lethargies, have taught me the real secret of the poppy. I do not employ opium as an aid to my social activities; I regard it as nepenthe from them and as a key to a brighter realm. It has been my custom, M. Gianapolis, for many years, periodically to visit that fairyland. In Paris I regularly arranged my affairs in such a manner that I found myself occasionally at liberty to spend two or three days, as the case might be, in the company of my bright friends who haunted the Boulevard Beaumarchais."

"Ah! Our acquaintance has mentioned something of this to me, Monsieur. You knew Madame Jean?"

"The dear Madame Jean! Name of a name! She was the hierophant of my Paris Temple"…

"And Sen?"

"Our excellent Sen! Splendid man! It was from the hands of the worthy Sen, the incomparable Sen, that I received the key to the gate! Ah! how I have suffered since the accursed business has exiled me from the"…

"I feel for you," declared Gianapolis, warmly; "I, too, have worshiped at the shrine; and although I cannot promise that the London establishment to which I shall introduce you is comparable with that over which Madame Jean formerly presided"…

"Formerly?" exclaimed M. Gaston, with lifted eyebrows. "You do not tell me"…

"My friend," said Gianapolis, "in Europe we are less enlightened upon certain matters than in Smyrna, in Constantinople—in Cairo. The impertinent police have closed the establishment in the Rue St. Claude!"

"Ah!" exclaimed M. Gaston, striking his brow, "misery! I shall return to Paris, then, only to die?"

"I would suggest, monsieur," said Gianapolis, tapping him confidentially upon the breast, "that you periodically visit London in future. The journey is a short one, and already, I am happy to say, the London establishment (conducted by Mr. Ho-Pin of Canton—a most accomplished gentleman, and a graduate of London)—enjoys the patronage of several distinguished citizens of Paris, of Brussels, of Vienna, and elsewhere."

"You offer me life!" declared M. Gaston, gratefully. "The commoner establishments, for the convenience of sailors and others of that class, at Dieppe, Calais,"—he shrugged his shoulders, comprehensively—"are impossible as resorts. In catering for the true devotees—for those who, unlike De Quincey, plunge and do not dabble—for those who seek to explore the ultimate regions of poppyland, for those who have learnt the mystery from the real masters in Asia and not in Europe—the enterprise conducted by Madame Jean supplied a want long and bitterly experienced. I rejoice to know that London has not been neglected"…

"My dear friend!" cried Gianapolis enthusiastically, "no important city has been neglected! A high priest of the cult has arisen, and from a parent lodge in Pekin he has extended his offices to kindred lodges in most of the capitals of Europe and Asia; he has not neglected the Near East, and America owes him a national debt of gratitude."

"Ah! the great man!" murmured M. Gaston, with closed eyes. "As an old habitue of the Rue St. Claude, I divine that you refer to Mr. King?"

"Beyond doubt," whispered Gianapolis, imparting a quality of awe to his voice. "From you, my friend, I will have no secrets; but"—he glanced about him crookedly, and lowered his voice to an impressive whisper—"the police, as you are aware"…

"Curse their interference!" said M. Gaston.

"Curse it indeed; but the police persist in believing, or in pretending to believe, that any establishment patronized by lovers of the magic resin must necessarily be a resort of criminals."

"Pah!"

"Whilst this absurd state of affairs prevails, it is advisable, it is more than advisable, it is imperative, that all of us should be secret. The… raid—unpleasant word!—upon the establishment in Paris—was so unexpected that there was no time to advise patrons; but the admirable tact of the French authorities ensured the suppression of all names. Since—always as a protective measure—no business relationship exists between any two of Mr. King's establishments (each one being entirely self-governed) some difficulty is being experienced, I believe, in obtaining the names of those who patronized Madame Jean. But I am doubly glad to have met you, M. Gaston, for not only can I put you in touch with the London establishment, but I can impress upon you the necessity of preserving absolute silence"…

M. Gaston extended his palms eloquently.

"To me," he declared, "the name of Mr. King is a sacred symbol."

"It is to all of us!" responded the Greek, devoutly.

M. Gaston in turn became confidential, bending toward Gianapolis so that, as the shadow of the Greek fell upon his face, his pupils contracted catlike.

"How often have I prayed," he whispered, "for a sight of that remarkable man!"

A look of horror, real or simulated, appeared upon the countenance of Gianapolis.

"To see—Mr. King!" he breathed. "My dear friend, I declare to you by all that I hold sacred that I—though one of the earliest patrons of the first establishment, that in Pekin—have never seen Mr. King!"

"He is so cautious and so clever as that?"

"Even as cautious and even as clever—yes! Though every branch of the enterprise in the world were destroyed, no man would ever see Mr. King; he would remain but a NAME!"

"You will arrange for me to visit the house of—Ho-Pin, did you say?—immediately?"

"To-day, if you wish," said Gianapolis, brightly.

"My funds," continued M. Gaston, shrugging his shoulders, "are not limitless at the moment; and until I receive a remittance from Paris"…

The brow of Mr. Gianapolis darkened slightly.

"Our clientele here," he replied, "is a very wealthy one, and the fees are slightly higher than in Paris. An entrance fee of fifty guineas is charged, and

an annual subscription of the same amount"…

"But," exclaimed M. Gaston, "I shall not be in London for so long as a year! In a week or a fortnight from now, I shall be on my way to America!"

"You will receive an introduction to the New York representative, and your membership will be available for any of the United States establishments."

"But I am going to South America."

"At Buenos Aires is one of the largest branches."

"But I am not going to Buenos Aires! I am going with a prospecting party to Yucatan."

"You must be well aware, monsieur, that to go to Yucatan is to exile yourself from all that life holds for you."

"I can take a supply"…

"You will die, monsieur! Already you suffer abominably"…

"I do not suffer because of any lack of the specific," said M. Gaston wearily; "for if I were entirely unable to obtain possession of it, I should most certainly die. But I suffer because, living as I do at present in a public hotel, I am unable to embark upon a protracted voyage into those realms which hold so much for me"…

"I offer you the means"…

"But to charge me one hundred guineas, since I cannot possibly avail myself of the full privileges, is to rob me—is to trade upon my condition!" M. Gaston was feebly indignant.

"Let it be twenty-five guineas, monsieur," said the Greek, reflectively, "entitling you to two visits."

"Good! good!" cried M. Gaston. "Shall I write you a check?"

"You mistake me," said Gianapolis. "I am in no way connected with the management of the establishment. You will settle this business matter with Mr. Ho-Pin"…

"Yes, yes!"

"To whom I will introduce you this evening. Checks, as you must be aware, are unacceptable. I will meet you at Piccadilly Circus, outside the entrance to the London Pavilion, at nine o'clock this evening, and you will bring with you the twenty-five guineas in cash. You will arrange to absent yourself during the following day?"

"Of course, of course! At nine o'clock at Piccadilly Circus?"

"Exactly."

M. Gaston, this business satisfactorily completed, made his way to his own room by a somewhat devious route, not wishing to encounter anyone of his numerous acquaintances whilst in an apparent state of ill-health so calculated to excite compassion. He avoided the lift and ascended the many stairs to his small apartment.

Here he rectified the sallowness of his complexion, which was due, not to outraged nature, but to the arts of make-up. His dilated pupils (a phenomenon traceable to drops of belladonna) he was compelled to suffer for the present; but since their condition tended temporarily to impair his sight, he determined to remain in his room until the time for the appointment with Gianapolis.

"So!" he muttered—"we have branches in Europe, Asia, Africa and America! Eh, bien! to find all those would occupy five hundred detectives for a whole year. I have a better plan: crush the spider and the winds of heaven will disperse his web!"

XXIX. M. Max of London and M. Max of Paris

He seated himself in a cane armchair and, whilst the facts were fresh in his memory, made elaborate notes upon the recent conversation with the Greek. He had achieved almost more than he could have hoped for; but, knowing something of the elaborate organization of the opium group, he recognized that he owed some part of his information to the sense of security which this admirably conducted machine inspired in its mechanics. The introduction from Sir Brian Malpas had worked wonders, without doubt; and his own intimate knowledge of the establishment adjoining the Boulevard Beaumarchais, far from arousing the suspicions of Gianapolis, had evidently strengthened the latter's conviction that he had to deal with a confirmed opium slave.

The French detective congratulated himself upon the completeness of his Paris operation. It was evident that the French police had succeeded in suppressing all communication between the detained members of the Rue St. Claude den and the head office—which he shrewdly suspected to be

situated in London. So confident were the group in the self-contained properties of each of their branches that the raid of any one establishment meant for them nothing more than a temporary financial loss. Failing the clue supplied by the draft on Paris, the case, so far as he was concerned, indeed, must have terminated with the raiding of the opium house. He reflected that he owed that precious discovery primarily to the promptness with which he had conducted the raid—to the finding of the letter (the ONE incriminating letter) from Mr. King.

Evidently the group remained in ignorance of the fact that the little arrangement at the Credit Lyonnais had been discovered. He surveyed—and his eyes twinkled humorously—a small photograph which was contained in his writing-case.

It represented a very typical Parisian gentleman, with a carefully trimmed square beard and well brushed mustache, wearing pince-nez and a white silk knot at his neck. The photograph was cut from a French magazine, and beneath it appeared the legend:

"M. Gaston Max, Service de Surete."

There was marked genius in the conspicuous dressing of M. Gaston Max, who, as M. Gaston, was now patronizing the Hotel Astoria. For whilst there was nothing furtive, nothing secret, about this gentleman, the closest scrutiny (and because he invited it, he was never subjected to it) must have failed to detect any resemblance between M. Gaston of the Hotel Astoria and M. Gaston Max of the Service de Surete.

And which was the original M. Gaston Max? Was the M. Max of the magazine photograph a disguised M. Max? or was that the veritable M. Max, and was the patron of the Astoria a disguised M. Max? It is quite possible that M. Gaston Max, himself, could not have answered that question, so true an artist was he; and it is quite certain that had the occasion arisen he would have refused to do so.

He partook of a light dinner in his own room, and having changed into evening dress, went out to meet Mr. Gianapolis. The latter was on the spot punctually at nine o'clock, and taking the Frenchman familiarly by the arm, he hailed a taxi-cab, giving the man the directions, "To Victoria-Suburban." Then, turning to his companion, he whispered: "Evening dress? And you must return in daylight."

M. Max felt himself to be flushing like a girl. It was an error of artistry that he had committed; a heinous crime! "So silly of me!" he muttered.

"No matter," replied the Greek, genially.

The cab started. M. Max, though silently reproaching himself, made mental notes of the destination. He had not renewed his sallow complexion, for reasons of his own, and his dilated pupils were beginning to contract again, facts which were not very evident, however, in the poor light. He was very twitchy, nevertheless, and the face of the man beside him was that of a sympathetic vulture, if such a creature can be imagined. He inquired casually if the new patron had brought his money with him, but for the most part his conversation turned upon China, with which country he seemed to be well acquainted. Arrived at Victoria, Mr. Gianapolis discharged the cab, and again taking the Frenchman by the arm, walked with him some twenty paces away from the station. A car suddenly pulled up almost beside them.

Ere M. Max had time to note those details in which he was most interested, Gianapolis had opened the door of the limousine, and the Frenchman found himself within, beside Gianapolis, and behind drawn blinds, speeding he knew not in what direction!

"I suppose I should apologize, my dear M. Gaston," said the Greek; and, although unable to see him, for there was little light in the car, M. Max seemed to FEEL him smiling—"but this little device has proved so useful hitherto. In the event of any of those troubles—wretched police interferences—arising, and of officious people obtaining possession of a patron's name, he is spared the necessity of perjuring himself in any way"…

"Perhaps I do not entirely understand you, monsieur?" said M. Max.

"It is so simple. The police are determined to raid one of our establishments: they adopt the course of tracking an habitue. This is not impossible. They question him; they ask, 'Do you know a Mr. King?' He replies that he knows no such person, has never seen, has never spoken with him! I assure you that official inquiries have gone thus far already, in New York, for example; but to what end? They say, 'Where is the establishment of a Mr. King to which you have gone on such and such an occasion?' He replies with perfect truth, 'I do not know.' Believe me this little device is quite in your own interest, M. Gaston."

"But when again I feel myself compelled to resort to the solace of the pipe, how then?"

"So simple! You will step to the telephone and ask for this number: East 18642. You will then ask for Mr. King, and an appointment will be made; I will meet you as I met you this evening—and all will be well."

M. Max began to perceive that he had to deal with a scheme even more elaborate than hitherto he had conjectured. These were very clever people, and through the whole complicated network, as through the petal of a poppy one may trace the veins, he traced the guiding will—the power of a tortuous Eastern mind. The system was truly Chinese in its elaborate, uncanny mystifications.

In some covered place that was very dark, the car stopped, and Gianapolis, leaping out with agility, assisted M. Max to descend.

This was a covered courtyard, only lighted by the head-lamps of the limousine.

"Take my hand," directed the Greek.

M. Max complied, and was conducted through a low doorway and on to descending steps.

Dimly, he heard the gear of the car reversed, and knew that the limousine was backing out from the courtyard. The door behind him was closed, and he heard no more. A dim light shone out below.

He descended, walking more confidently now that the way was visible. A moment later he stood upon the threshold of an apartment which calls for no further description at this place; he stood in the doorway of the incredible, unforgettable cave of the golden dragon; he looked into the beetle eyes of Ho-Pin!

Ho-Pin bowed before him, smiling his mirthless smile. In his left hand he held an amber cigarette tube in which a cigarette smoldered gently, sending up a gray pencil of smoke into the breathless, perfumed air.

"Mr. Ho-Pin," said Gianapolis, indicating the Chinaman, "who will attend to your requirements. This is our new friend from Paris, introduced by Sir B. M——, M. Gaston."

"You are vewry welcome," said the Chinaman in his monotonous, metallic voice. "I understand that a fee of twenty-five guineas"—he bowed again, still smiling.

The visitor took out his pocket-book and laid five notes, one sovereign, and two half-crowns upon a little ebony table beside him. Ho-Pin bowed again and waved his hand toward the lemon-colored door on the left.

"Good night, M. Gaston!" said Gianapolis, in radiant benediction.

"Au revoir, monsieur!"

M. Max followed Ho-Pin to Block A and was conducted to a room at the extreme right of the matting-lined corridor. He glanced about it curiously.

"If you will pwrepare for your flight into the subliminal," said Ho-Pin, bowing in the doorway, "I shall pwresently wreturn with your wings."

In the cave of the golden dragon, Gianapolis sat smoking upon one of the divans. The silence of the place was extraordinary; unnatural, in the very heart of busy commercial London. Ho-Pin reappeared and standing in the open doorway of Block A sharply clapped his hands three times.

Said, the Egyptian, came out of the door at the further end of the place, bearing a brass tray upon which were a little brass lamp of Oriental manufacture wherein burned a blue spirituous flame, a Japanese, lacquered box not much larger than a snuff-box, and a long and most curiously carved pipe of wood inlaid with metal and having a metal bowl. Bearing this, he crossed the room, passed Ho-Pin, and entered the corridor beyond.

"You have, of course, put him in the observation room?" said Gianapolis.

Ho-Pin regarded the speaker unemotionally.

"Assuwredly," he replied; "for since he visits us for the first time, Mr. King will wish to see him"…

A faint shadow momentarily crossed the swarthy face of the Greek at mention of that name—MR. KING. The servants of Mr. King, from the highest to the lowest, served him for gain… and from fear.

XXX. Mahara

Utter silence had claimed again the cave of the golden dragon. Gianapolis sat alone in the place, smoking a cigarette, and gazing crookedly at the image on the ivory pedestal. Then, glancing at his wrist-watch, he stood up, and, stepping to the entrance door, was about to open it…

"Ah, so! You go—already?"—

Gianapolis started back as though he had put his foot upon a viper, and turned.

The Eurasian, wearing her yellow, Chinese dress, and with a red poppy in her hair, stood watching him through half-shut eyes, slowly waving her little fan before her face. Gianapolis attempted the radiant smile, but its brilliancy was somewhat forced tonight.

"Yes, I must be off," he said hurriedly; "I have to see someone—a future client, I think!"

"A future client—yes!"—the long black eyes were closed almost entirely now. "Who is it—this future client, that you have to see?"

"My dear Mahara! How odd of you to ask that"…

"It is odd of me?—so!… It is odd of me that I thinking to wonder why you alway running away from me now?"

"Run away from you! My dear little Mahara!"—He approached the dusky beauty with a certain timidity as one might seek to caress a tiger-cat —"Surely you know"…

She struck down his hand with a sharp blow of her closed fan, darting at him a look from the brilliant eyes which was a living flame.

Resting one hand upon her hip, she stood with her right foot thrust forward from beneath the yellow robe and pivoting upon the heel of its little slipper. Her head tilted, she watched him through lowered lashes.

"It was not so with you in Moulmein," she said, her silvery voice lowered caressingly. "Do you remember with me a night beside the Irawaddi?—where was that I wonder? Was it in Prome?—Perhaps, yes?… you threatened me to leap in, if… and I think to believe you!—I believing you!"

"Mahara!" cried Gianapolis, and sought to seize her in his arms.

Again she struck down his hand with the little fan, watching him continuously and with no change of expression. But the smoldering fire in those eyes told of a greater flame which consumed her slender body and was potent enough to consume many a victim upon its altar. Gianapolis' yellow skin assumed a faintly mottled appearance.

"Whatever is the matter?" he inquired plaintively.

"So you must be off—yes? I hear you say it; I asking you who to meet?"

"Why do you speak in English?" said Gianapolis with a faint irritation. "Let us talk…"

She struck him lightly on the face with her fan; but he clenched his teeth and suppressed an ugly exclamation.

"Who was it?" she asked, musically, "that say to me, 'to hear you speaking English—like rippling water'?"

"You are mad!" muttered Gianapolis, beginning to drill the points of his mustache as was his manner in moments of agitation. His crooked eyes were fixed upon the face of the girl. "You go too far."

"Be watching, my friend, that you also go not too far."

The tones were silvery as ever, but the menace unmistakable. Gianapolis forced a harsh laugh and brushed up his mustache furiously.

"What are you driving at?" he demanded, with some return of self-confidence. "Am I to be treated to another exhibition of your insane jealousies?"…

"AH!" The girl's eyes opened widely; she darted another venomous glance at him. "I am sure now, I am SURE!"

"My dear Mahara, you talk nonsense!"

"Ah!"

She glided sinuously toward him, still with one hand resting upon her hip, stood almost touching his shoulder and raised her beautiful wicked face to his, peering at him through half-closed eyes, and resting the hand which grasped the fan lightly upon his arm.

"You think I do not see? You think I do not watch?"—softer and softer grew the silvery voice—"at Olaf van Noord's studio you think I do not hear? Perhaps you not thinking to care if I see and hear—for it seem you not seeing nor hearing ME. I watch and I see. Is it her so soft brown hair? That color of hair is so more prettier than ugly black! Is it her English eyes? Eyes that born in the dark forests of Burma so hideous and so like the eyes of the apes! Is it her white skin and her red cheeks? A brown skin—though someone, there was, that say it is satin of heaven—is so tiresome; when no more it is a new toy it does not interest"…

"Really," muttered Gianapolis, uneasily, "I think you must be mad! I don't know what you are talking about."

"LIAR!"

One lithe step forward the Eurasian sprang, and, at the word, brought down the fan with all her strength across Gianapolis' eyes!

He staggered away from her, uttering a hoarse cry and instinctively raising his arms to guard himself from further attack; but the girl stood

poised again, her hand upon her hip; and swinging her right toe to and fro. Gianapolis, applying his handkerchief to his eyes, squinted at her furiously.

"Liar!" she repeated, and her voice had something of a soothing whisper. "I say to you, be so careful that you go not too far—with me! I do what I do, not because I am a poor fool"…

"It's funny," declared Gianapolis, an emotional catch in his voice—"it's damn funny for you—for YOU—to adopt these airs with me! Why, you went to Olaf van"…

"Stop!" cried the girl furiously, and sprang at him panther-like so that he fell back again in confusion, stumbled and collapsed upon a divan, with upraised, warding arms. "You Greek rat! you skinny Greek rat! Be careful what you think to say to me—to ME! to ME! Olaf van Noord—the poor, white-faced corpse-man! He is only one of Said's mummies! Be careful what you think to say to me… Oh! be careful—be very careful! It is dangerous of any friend of—MR. KING"…

Gianapolis glanced at her furtively.

"It is dangerous of anyone in a house of—MR. KING to think to make attachments,"—she hissed the words beneath her breath—"outside of ourselves. MR. KING would not be glad to hear of it… I do not like to tell it to MR. KING"…

Gianapolis rose to his feet, unsteadily, and stretched out his arms in supplication.

"Mahara!" he said, "don't treat me like this! dear little Mahara! what have I done to you? Tell me!—only tell me!"

"Shall I tell it in English?" asked the Eurasian softly. Her eyes now were nearly closed; "or does it worry you that I speak so ugly"…

"Mahara!"…

"I only say, be so very careful."

He made a final, bold attempt to throw his arms about her, but she slipped from his grasp and ran lightly across the room.

"Go! hurry off!" she said, bending forward and pointing at him with her fan, her eyes widely opened and blazing—"but remember—there is danger! There is Said, who creeps silently, like the jackal"…

She opened the ebony door and darted into the corridor beyond, closing the door behind her.

Gianapolis looked about him in a dazed manner, and yet again applied his handkerchief to his stinging eyes. Whoever could have seen him now must have failed to recognize the radiant Gianapolis so well-known in Bohemian society, the Gianapolis about whom floated a halo of mystery, but who at all times was such a good fellow and so debonair. He took up his hat and gloves, turned, and resolutely strode to the door. Once he glanced back over his shoulder, but shrugged with a sort of self-contempt, and ascended to the top of the steps.

With a key which he selected from a large bunch in his pocket, he opened the door, and stepped out into the garage, carefully closing the door behind him. An electric pocket-lamp served him with sufficient light to find his way out into the lane, and very shortly he was proceeding along Limehouse Causeway. At the moment, indignation was the major emotion ruling his mind; he resented the form which his anger assumed, for it was a passion of rebellion, and rebellion is only possible in servants. It is the part of a slave resenting the lash. He was an unscrupulous, unmoral man, not lacking in courage of a sort; and upon the conquest of Mahara, the visible mouthpiece of Mr. King, he had entered in much the same spirit as that actuating a Kanaka who dives for pearls in a shark-infested lagoon. He had sought a slave, and lo! the slave was become the master! Otherwise whence this spirit of rebellion… this fear?

He occupied himself with such profitless reflections up to the time that he came to the electric trains; but, from thence onward, his mind became otherwise engaged. On his way to Piccadilly Circus that same evening, he had chanced to find himself upon a crowded pavement walking immediately behind Denise Ryland and Helen Cumberly. His esthetic, Greek soul had been fired at first sight of the beauty of the latter; and now, his heart had leaped ecstatically. His first impulse, of course, had been to join the two ladies; but Gianapolis had trained himself to suspect all impulses.

Therefore he had drawn near—near enough to overhear their conversation without proclaiming himself. What he had learned by this eavesdropping he counted of peculiar value.

Helen Cumberly was arranging to dine with her friend at the latter's hotel that evening. "But I want to be home early," he had heard the girl say, "so if I leave you at about ten o'clock I can walk to Palace Mansions. No! you

need not come with me; I enjoy a lonely walk through the streets of London in the evening"…

Gianapolis registered a mental vow that Helen's walk should not be a lonely one. He did not flatter himself upon the possession of a pleasing exterior, but, from experience, he knew that with women he had a winning way.

Now, his mind aglow with roseate possibilities, he stepped from the tram in the neighborhood of Shoreditch, and chartered a taxi-cab. From this he descended at the corner of Arundel Street and strolled along westward in the direction of the hotel patronized by Miss Ryland. At a corner from which he could command a view of the entrance, he paused and consulted his watch.

It was nearly twenty minutes past ten. Mentally, he cursed Mahara, who perhaps had caused him to let slip this golden opportunity. But his was not a character easily discouraged; he lighted a cigarette and prepared himself to wait, in the hope that the girl had not yet left her friend.

Gianapolis was a man capable of the uttermost sacrifices upon either of two shrines; that of Mammon, or that of Eros. His was a temperament (truly characteristic of his race) which can build up a structure painfully, year by year, suffering unutterable privations in the cause of its growth, only to shatter it at a blow for a woman's smile. He was a true member of that brotherhood, represented throughout the bazaars of the East, of those singular shopkeepers who live by commercial rapine, who, demanding a hundred piastres for an embroidered shawl from a plain woman, will exchange it with a pretty one for a perfumed handkerchief. Externally of London, he was internally of the Levant.

His vigil lasted but a quarter of an hour. At twenty-five minutes to eleven, Helen Cumberly came running down the steps of the hotel and hurried toward the Strand. Like a shadow, Gianapolis, throwing away a half-smoked cigarette, glided around the corner, paused and so timed his return that he literally ran into the girl as she entered the main thoroughfare.

He started back.

"Why!" he cried, "Miss Cumberly!"

Helen checked a frown, and hastily substituted a smile.

"How odd that I should meet you here, Mr. Gianapolis," she said.

"Most extraordinary! I was on my way to visit a friend in Victoria Street upon a rather urgent matter. May I venture to hope that your path lies in a similar direction?"

Helen Cumberly, deceived by his suave manner (for how was she to know that the Greek had learnt her address from Crockett, the reporter?), found herself at a loss for an excuse. Her remarkably pretty mouth was drawn down to one corner, inducing a dimple of perplexity in her left cheek. She had that breadth between the eyes which, whilst not an attribute of perfect beauty, indicates an active mind, and is often found in Scotch women; now, by the slight raising of her eyebrows, this space was accentuated. But Helen's rapid thinking availed her not at all.

"Had you proposed to walk?" inquired Gianapolis, bending deferentially and taking his place beside her with a confidence which showed that her opportunity for repelling his attentions was past.

"Yes," she said, hesitatingly; "but—I fear I am detaining you"…

Of two evils she was choosing the lesser; the idea of being confined in a cab with this ever-smiling Greek was unthinkable.

"Oh, my dear Miss Cumberly!" cried Gianapolis, beaming radiantly, "it is a greater pleasure than I can express to you, and then for two friends who are proceeding in the same direction to walk apart would be quite absurd, would it not?"

The term "friend" was not pleasing to Helen's ears; Mr. Gianapolis went far too fast. But she recognized her helplessness, and accepted this cavalier with as good a grace as possible.

He immediately began to talk of Olaf van Noord and his pictures, whilst Helen hurried along as though her life depended upon her speed. Sometimes, on the pretense of piloting her at crossings, Gianapolis would take her arm; and this contact she found most disagreeable; but on the whole his conduct was respectful to the point of servility.

A pretty woman who is not wholly obsessed by her personal charms, learns more of the ways of mankind than it is vouchsafed to her plainer sister ever to know; and in the crooked eyes of Gianapolis, Helen Cumberly read a world of unuttered things, and drew her own conclusions. These several conclusions dictated a single course; avoidance of Gianapolis in future.

Fortunately, Helen Cumberly's self-chosen path in life had taught her how to handle the nascent and undesirable lover. She chatted upon the subject of art, and fenced adroitly whenever the Greek sought to introduce the slightest personal element into the conversation. Nevertheless, she was relieved when at last she found herself in the familiar Square with her foot upon the steps of Palace Mansions.

"Good night, Mr. Gianapolis!" she said, and frankly offered her hand.

The Greek raised it to his lips with exaggerated courtesy, and retained it, looking into her eyes in his crooked fashion.

"We both move in the world of art and letters; may I hope that this meeting will not be our last?"

"I am always wandering about between Fleet Street and Soho," laughed Helen. "It is quite certain we shall run into each other again before long. Good night, and thank you so much!"

She darted into the hallway, and ran lightly up the stairs. Opening the flat door with her key, she entered and closed it behind her, sighing with relief to be free of the over-attentive Greek. Some impulse prompted her to enter her own room, and, without turning up the light, to peer down into the Square.

Gianapolis was descending the steps. On the pavement he stood and looked up at the windows, lingeringly; then he turned and walked away.

Helen Cumberly stifled an exclamation.

As the Greek gained the corner of the Square and was lost from view, a lithe figure—kin of the shadows which had masked it—became detached from the other shadows beneath the trees of the central garden and stood, a vague silhouette seemingly looking up at her window as Gianapolis had looked.

Helen leaned her hands upon the ledge and peered intently down. The figure was a vague blur in the darkness, but it was moving away along by the rails… following Gianapolis. No clear glimpse she had of it, for bat-like, it avoided the light, this sinister shape—and was gone.

XXXI. Musk and Roses

It is time to rejoin M. Gaston Max in the catacombs of Ho-Pin. Having prepared himself for drugged repose in the small but luxurious apartment to which he had been conducted by the Chinaman, he awaited with interest the next development. This took the form of the arrival of an Egyptian attendant, white-robed, red-slippered, and wearing the inevitable tarboosh. Upon the brass tray which he carried were arranged the necessities of the opium smoker. Placing the tray upon a little table beside the bed, he extracted from the lacquered box a piece of gummy substance upon the end of a long needle. This he twisted around, skilfully, in the lamp flame until it acquired a blue spirituous flame of its own. He dropped it into the bowl of the carven pipe and silently placed the pipe in M. Max's hand.

Max, with simulated eagerness, rested the mouthpiece between his lips and EXHALED rapturously.

Said stood watching him, without the slightest expression of interest being perceptible upon his immobile face. For some time the Frenchman made pretense of inhaling, gently, the potent vapor, lying propped upon one elbow; then, allowing his head gradually to droop, he closed his eyes and lay back upon the silken pillow.

Once more he exhaled feebly ere permitting the pipe to drop from his listless grasp. The mouthpiece yet rested between his lips, but the lower lip was beginning to drop. Finally, the pipe slipped through his fingers on to the rich carpet, and he lay inert, head thrown back, and revealing his lower teeth. The nauseating fumes of opium loaded the atmosphere.

Said silently picked up the pipe, placed it upon the tray and retired, closing the door in the same noiseless manner that characterized all his movements.

For a time, M. Max lay inert, glancing about the place through the veil of his lashes. He perceived no evidence of surveillance, therefore he ventured fully to open his eyes; but he did not move his head.

With the skill in summarizing detail at a glance which contributed largely to make him the great criminal investigator that he was, he noted those particulars which at an earlier time had occasioned the astonishment of Soames.

M. Max was too deeply versed in his art to attempt any further investigations, yet; he contented himself with learning as much as was

possible without moving in any way; and whilst he lay there awaiting whatever might come, the door opened noiselessly—to admit Ho-Pin.

He was about to be submitted to a supreme test, for which, however, he was not unprepared. He lay with closed eyes, breathing nasally.

Ho-Pin, his face a smiling, mirthless mask, bent over the bed. Adeptly, he seized the right eyelid of M. Max, and rolled it back over his forefinger, disclosing the eyeball. M. Max, anticipating this test of the genuineness of his coma, had rolled up his eyes at the moment of Ho-Pin's approach, so that now only the white of the sclerotic showed. His trained nerves did not betray him. He lay like a dead man, never flinching.

Ho-Pin, releasing the eyelid, muttered something gutturally, and stole away from the bed as silently as he had approached it. Very methodically he commenced to search through M. Max's effects, commencing with the discarded garments. He examined the maker's marks upon these, and scrutinized the buttons closely. He turned out all the pockets, counted the contents of the purse, and of the notecase, examined the name inside M. Max's hat, and explored the lining in a manner which aroused the detective's professional admiration. Watch and pocket-knife, Ho-Pin inspected with interest. The little hand-bag which M. Max had brought with him, containing a few toilet necessaries, was overhauled religiously. So much the detective observed through his lowered lashes.

Then Ho-Pin again approached the bed and M. Max became again a dead man.

The silken pyjamas which the detective wore were subjected to gentle examination by the sensitive fingers of the Chinaman, and those same fingers crept beetle-like beneath the pillow.

Silently, Ho-Pin stole from the room and silently closed the door.

M. Max permitted himself a long breath of relief. It was an ordeal through which few men could have passed triumphant.

The SILENCE of the place next attracted the inquirer's attention. He had noted this silence at the moment that he entered the cave of the golden dragon, but here it was even more marked; so that he divined, even before he had examined the walls, that the apartment was rendered sound-proof in the manner of a public telephone cabinet. It was a significant circumstance to which he allotted its full value.

But the question uppermost in his mind at the moment was this: Was the time come yet to commence his explorations?

Patience was included in his complement, and, knowing that he had the night before him, he preferred to wait. In this he did well. Considerable time elapsed, possibly half-an-hour… and again the door opened.

M. Max was conscious of a momentary nervous tremor; for now a WOMAN stood regarding him. She wore a Chinese costume; a huge red poppy was in her hair. Her beauty was magnificently evil; she had the grace of a gazelle and the eyes of a sorceress. He had deceived Ho-Pin, but could he deceive this Eurasian with the witch-eyes wherein burnt ancient wisdom?

He felt rather than saw her approach; for now he ventured to peep no more. She touched him lightly upon the mouth with her fingers and laughed a little low, rippling laugh, the sound of which seemed to trickle along his sensory nerves, icily. She bent over him—lower—lower—and lower yet; until, above the nauseating odor of the place he could smell the musk perfume of her hair. Yet lower she bent; with every nerve in his body he could feel her nearing presence…

She kissed him on the lips.

Again she laughed, in that wicked, eerie glee.

M. Max was conscious of the most singular, the maddest impulses; it was one of the supreme moments of his life. He knew that all depended upon his absolute immobility; yet something in his brain was prompting him—prompting him—to gather the witch to his breast; to return that poisonous, that vampirish kiss, and then to crush out life from the small lithe body.

Sternly he fought down these strange promptings, which he knew to emanate hypnotically from the brain of the creature bending over him.

"Oh, my beautiful dead-baby," she said, softly, and her voice was low, and weirdly sweet. "Oh, my new baby, how I love you, my dead one!" Again she laughed, a musical peal. "I will creep to you in the poppyland where you go… and you shall twine your fingers in my hair and pull my red mouth down to you, kissing me… kissing me, until you stifle and you die of my love… Oh! my beautiful mummy-baby… my baby."…

The witch-crooning died away into a murmur; and the Frenchman became conscious of the withdrawal of that presence from the room. No

sound came to tell of the reclosing of the door; but the obsession was removed, the spell raised.

Again he inhaled deeply the tainted air, and again he opened his eyes.

He had no warranty to suppose that he should remain unmolested during the remainder of the night. The strange words of the Eurasian he did not construe literally; yet could he be certain that he was secure?… Nay! he could be certain that he was NOT!

The shaded lamp was swung in such a position that most of the light was directed upon him where he lay, whilst the walls of the room were bathed in a purple shadow. Behind him and above him, directly over the head of the bunk, a faint sound—a sound inaudible except in such a dead silence as that prevailing—told of some shutter being raised or opened. He had trained himself to watch beneath lowered lids without betraying that he was doing so by the slightest nervous twitching. Now, as he watched the purple shaded lamp above him, he observed that it was swaying and moving very gently, whereas hitherto it had floated motionless in the still air.

No other sound came to guide him, and to have glanced upward would have been to betray all.

For the second time that night he became aware of one who watched him, became conscious of observation without the guaranty of his physical senses. And beneath this new surveillance, there grew up such a revulsion of his inner being as he had rarely experienced. The perfume of ROSES became perceptible; and for some occult reason, its fragrance DISGUSTED.

It was as though a faint draught from the opened shutter poured into the apartment an impalpable cloud of evil; the very soul of the Eurasian, had it taken vapory form and enveloped him, could not have created a greater turmoil of his senses than this!

Some sinister and definitely malignant intelligence was focussed upon him; or was this a chimera of his imagination? Could it be that now he was become en rapport with the thought-forms created in that chamber by its successive occupants?

Scores, perhaps hundreds of brains had there partaken of the unholy sacrament of opium; thousands, millions of evil carnivals had trailed in impish procession about that bed. He knew enough of the creative power of thought to be aware that a sensitive mind coming into contact with such an

atmosphere could not fail to respond in some degree to the suggestions, to the elemental hypnosis, of the place.

Was he, owing to his self-induced receptivity of mind, redreaming the evil dreams of those who had occupied that bed before him?

It might be so, but, whatever the explanation, he found himself unable to shake off that uncanny sensation of being watched, studied, by a powerful and inimical intelligence.

Mr. King!… Mr. King was watching him!

The director of that group, whose structure was founded upon the wreckage of human souls, was watching him! Because of a certain sympathy which existed between his present emotions and those which had threatened to obsess him whilst the Eurasian was in the room, he half believed that it was she who peered down at him, now… or she, and another.

The lamp swung gently to and fro, turning slowly to the right and then revolving again to the left, giving life in its gyrations to the intermingled figures on the walls. The atmosphere of the room was nauseating; it was beginning to overpower him…

Creative power of thought… what startling possibilities it opened up. Almost it seemed, if Sir Brian Malpas were to be credited, that the collective mind-force of a group of opium smokers had created the "glamor" of a woman—an Oriental woman—who visited them regularly in their trances. Or had that vision a prototype in the flesh—whom he had seen?…

Creative power of thought… MR. KING! He was pursuing Mr. King; whilst Mr. King might be nothing more than a thought-form—a creation of cumulative thought—an elemental spirit which became visible to his subjects, his victims, which had power over them; which could slay them as the "shell" slew Frankenstein, his creator; which could materialize:… Mr. King might be the Spirit of Opium…

The faint clicking sound was repeated.

Beads of perspiration stood upon M. Max's forehead; his imagination had been running away with him. God! this was a house of fear! He controlled himself, but only by dint of a tremendous effort of will.

Stealthily watching the lamp, he saw that the arc described by its gyrations was diminishing with each successive swing, and, as he watched,

its movements grew slighter and slighter, until finally it became quite stationary again, floating, purple and motionless, upon the stagnant air.

Very slowly, he ventured to change his position, for his long ordeal was beginning to induce cramp. The faint creaking of the metal bunk seemed, in the dead stillness and to his highly-tensed senses, like the rattling of castanets.

For ten minutes he lay in his new position; then moved slightly again and waited for fully three-quarters of an hour. Nothing happened, and he now determined to proceed with his inquiries.

Sitting upon the edge of the bunk, he looked about him, first directing his attention to that portion of the wall immediately above. So cunningly was the trap contrived that he could find no trace of its existence. Carefully balancing himself upon the rails on either side of the bunk, he stood up, and peered closely about that part of the wall from which the sound had seemed to come. He even ran his fingers lightly over the paper, up as high as he could reach; but not the slightest crevice was perceptible. He began to doubt the evidence of his own senses.

Unless his accursed imagination had been playing him tricks, a trap of some kind had been opened above his head and someone had looked in at him; yet—and his fingers were trained to such work—he was prepared to swear that the surface of the Chinese paper covering the wall was perfectly continuous. He drummed upon it lightly with his finger-tips, here and there over the surface above the bed. And in this fashion he became enlightened.

A portion, roughly a foot in height and two feet long, yielded a slightly different note to his drumming; whereby he knew that that part of the paper was not ATTACHED to the wall. He perceived the truth. The trap, when closed, fitted flush with the back of the wall-paper, and this paper (although when pasted upon the walls it showed no evidence of the fact) must be TRANSPARENT.

From some dark place beyond, it was possible to peer in THROUGH the rectangular patch of paper as through a window, at the occupant of the bunk below, upon whom the shaded lamp directly poured its rays!

He examined more closely a lower part of the wall, which did not fall within the shadow of the purple lamp-shade; for he was thinking of the draught which had followed the opening of the trap. By this examination he learnt two things: The explanation of the draught, and that of a peculiar

property possessed by the mural decorations. These (as Soames had observed before him) assumed a new form if one stared at them closely; other figures, figures human and animal, seemed to take shape and to peer out from BEHIND the more obvious designs which were perceptible at a glance. The longer and the closer one studied these singular walls, the more evident the UNDER design became, until it usurped the field of vision entirely. It was a bewildering delusion; but M. Max had solved the mystery.

There were TWO designs; the first, an intricate Chinese pattern, was painted or printed upon material like the finest gauze. This was attached over a second and vividly colored pattern upon thick parchment-like paper —as he learnt by the application of the point of his pocket-knife.

The observation trap was covered with this paper, and fitted so nicely in the opening that his fingers had failed to detect, through the superimposed gauze, the slightest irregularity there. But, the trap opened, a perfectly clear view of the room could be obtained through the gauze, which, by reason of its texture, also admitted a current of air.

This matter settled, M. Max proceeded carefully to examine the entire room foot by foot. Opening the door in one corner, he entered the bathroom, in which, as in the outer apartment, an electric light was burning. No window was discoverable, and not even an opening for ventilation purposes. The latter fact he might have deduced from the stagnation of the atmosphere.

Half an hour or more he spent in this fashion, without having discovered anything beyond the secret of the observation trap. Again he took out his pocket-knife, which was a large one with a handsome mother-o'-pearl handle. Although Mr. Ho-Pin had examined this carefully, he had solved only half of its secrets. M. Max extracted a little pair of tweezers from the slot in which they were lodged—as Ho-Pin had not neglected to do; but Ho-Pin, having looked at the tweezers, had returned them to their place: M. Max did not do so. He opened the entire knife as though it had been a box, and revealed within it a tiny set of appliances designed principally for the desecration of locks!

Selecting one of these, he took up his watch from the table upon which it lay, and approached the door. It possessed a lever handle of the Continental pattern, and M. Max silently prayed that this might not be a snare and a delusion, but that the lock below might be of the same manufacture.

In order to settle the point, he held the face of his watch close to the keyhole, wound its knob in the wrong direction, and lo! it became an electric lamp!

One glance he cast into the tiny cavity, then dropped back upon the bunk, twisting his mobile mouth in that half smile at once humorous and despairful.

"Nom d'un p'tit bonhomme!—a Yale!" he muttered. "To open that without noise is impossible! Damn!"

M. Max threw himself back upon the pillow, and for an hour afterward lay deep in silent reflection.

He had cigarettes in his case and should have liked to smoke, but feared to take the risk of scenting the air with a perfume so unorthodox.

He had gained something by his exploit, but not all that he had hoped for; clearly his part now was to await what the morning should bring.

XXXII. Blue Blinds

Morning brought the silent opening of the door, and the entrance of Said, the Egyptian, bearing a tiny Chinese tea service upon a lacquered tray.

But M. Max lay in a seemingly deathly stupor, and from this the impassive Oriental had great difficulty in arousing him. Said, having shaken some symptoms of life into the limp form of M. Max, filled the little cup with fragrant China tea, and, supporting the dazed man, held the beverage to his lips. With his eyes but slightly opened, and with all his weight resting upon the arm of the Egyptian, he gulped the hot tea, and noted that it was of exquisite quality.

THEINE is an antidote to opium, and M. Max accordingly became somewhat restored, and lay staring at the Oriental, and blinking his eyes foolishly.

Said, leaving the tea service upon the little table, glided from the room. Something else the Egyptian had left upon the tray in addition to the dainty vessels of porcelain; it was a steel ring containing a dozen or more keys. Most of these keys lay fanwise and bunched together, but one lay isolated

and pointing in an opposite direction. It was a Yale key—the key of the door!

Silently as a shadow, M. Max glided into the bathroom, and silently, swiftly, returned, carrying a cake of soap. Three clear, sharp impressions, he secured of the Yale, the soap leaving no trace of the operation upon the metal. He dropped the precious soap tablet into his open bag.

In a state of semi-torpor, M. Max sprawled upon the bed for ten minutes or more, during which time, as he noted, the door remained ajar. Then there entered a figure which seemed wildly out of place in the establishment of Ho-Pin. It was that of a butler, most accurately dressed and most deferential in all his highly-trained movements. His dark hair was neatly brushed, and his face, which had a pinched appearance, was composed in that "if-it-is-entirely-agreeable-to-you-Sir" expression, typical of his class.

The unhealthy, yellow skin of the new arrival, which harmonized so ill with the clear whites of his little furtive eyes, interested M. Max extraordinarily. M. Max was blinking like a week-old kitten, and one could have sworn that he was but hazily conscious of his surroundings; whereas in reality he was memorizing the cranial peculiarities of the new arrival, the shape of his nose, the disposition of his ears; the exact hue of his eyes; the presence of a discolored tooth in his lower jaw, which a fish-like, nervous trick of opening and closing the mouth periodically revealed.

"Good morning, sir!" said the valet, gently rubbing his palms together and bending over the bed.

M. Max inhaled deeply, stared in glassy fashion, but in no way indicated that he had heard the words.

The valet shook him gently by the shoulder.

"Good morning, sir. Shall I prepare your bath?"

"She is a serpent!" muttered M. Max, tossing one arm weakly above his head… "all yellow… But roses are growing in the mud… of the river!"

"If you will take your bath, sir," insisted the man in black, "I shall be ready to shave you when you return."

"Bath… shave me!"

M. Max began to rub his eyes and to stare uncomprehendingly at the speaker.

"Yes, sir; good morning, sir,"—there was another bow and more rubbing of palms.

"Ah!—of course! Morbleu! This is Paris…"

"No, sir, excuse me, sir, London. Bath hot or cold, sir?"

"Cold," replied M. Max, struggling upright with apparent difficulty; "yes, —cold."

"Very good, sir. Have you brought your own razor, sir?"

"Yes, yes," muttered Max—"in the bag—in that bag."

"I will fill the bath, sir."

The bath being duly filled, M. Max, throwing about his shoulders a magnificent silk kimono which he found upon the armchair, steered a zigzag course to the bathroom. His tooth-brush had been put in place by the attentive valet; there was an abundance of clean towels, soaps, bath salts, with other necessities and luxuries of the toilet. M. Max, following his bath, saw fit to evidence a return to mental clarity; and whilst he was being shaved he sought to enter into conversation with the valet. But the latter was singularly reticent, and again M. Max changed his tactics. He perceived here a golden opportunity which he must not allow to slip through his fingers.

"Would you like to earn a hundred pounds?" he demanded abruptly, gazing into the beady eyes of the man bending over him.

Soames almost dropped the razor. His state of alarm was truly pitiable; he glanced to the right, he glanced to the left, he glanced over his shoulder, up at the ceiling and down at the floor.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, nervously; "I don't think I quite understand you, sir?"

"It is quite simple," replied M. Max. "I asked you if you had some use for a hundred pounds. Because if you have, I will meet you at any place you like to mention and bring with me cash to that amount!"

"Hush, sir!—for God's sake, hush, sir!" whispered Soames.

A dew of perspiration was glistening upon his forehead, and it was fortunate that he had finished shaving M. Max, for his hand was trembling furiously. He made a pretense of hurrying with towels, bay rum, and powder spray, but the beady eyes were ever glancing to right and left and all about.

M. Max, who throughout this time had been reflecting, made a second move.

"Another fifty, or possibly another hundred, could be earned as easily," he said, with assumed carelessness. "I may add that this will not be offered again, and… that you will shortly be out of employment, with worse to follow."

Soames began to exhibit signs of collapse.

"Oh, my God!" he muttered, "what shall I do? I can't promise—I can't promise; but I might—I MIGHT look in at the 'Three Nuns' on Friday evening about nine o'clock."…

He hastily scooped up M. Max's belongings, thrust them into the handbag and closed it. M. Max was now fully dressed and ready to depart. He placed a sovereign in the valet's ready palm.

"That's an appointment," he said softly.

Said entered and stood bowing in the doorway.

"Good morning, sir, good morning," muttered Soames, and covertly he wiped the perspiration from his brow with the corner of a towel—"good morning, and thank you very much."

M. Max, buttoning his light overcoat in order to conceal the fact that he wore evening dress, entered the corridor, and followed the Egyptian into the cave of the golden dragon. Ho-Pin, sleek and smiling, received him there. Ho-Pin was smoking the inevitable cigarette in the long tube, and, opening the door, he silently led the way up the steps into the covered courtyard, Said following with the hand bag. The limousine stood there, dimly visible in the darkness. Said placed the handbag upon the seat inside, and Ho-Pin assisted M. Max to enter, closing the door upon him, but leaning through the open window to shake his hand. The Chinaman's hand was icily cold and limp.

"Au wrevoir, my dear fwriend," he said in his metallic voice. "I hope to have the pleasure of gwreeting you again vewry shortly."

With that he pulled up the window from the outside, and the occupant of the limousine found himself in impenetrable darkness; for dark blue blinds covered all the windows. He lay back, endeavoring to determine what should be his next move. The car started with a perfect action, and without the slightest jolt or jar. By reason of the light which suddenly shone in through the chinks of the blinds, he knew that he was outside the covered courtyard; then he became aware that a sharp turning had been taken to the left, followed almost immediately, by one to the right.

He directed his attention to the blinds.

"Ah! nom d'un nom! they are clever—these!"

The blinds worked in little vertical grooves and had each a tiny lock. The blinds covering the glass doors on either side were attached to the adjustable windows; so that when Ho-Pin had raised the window, he had also closed the blind! And these windows operated automatically, and defied all M. Max's efforts to open them!

He was effectively boxed in and unable to form the slightest impression of his surroundings. He threw himself back upon the soft cushions with a muttered curse of vexation; but the mobile mouth was twisted into that wryly humorous smile. Always, M. Max was a philosopher.

At the end of a drive of some twenty-five minutes or less, the car stopped —the door was opened, and the radiant Gianapolis extended both hands to the occupant.

"My dear M. Gaston!" he cried, "how glad I am to see you looking so well! Hand me your bag, I beg of you!"

M. Max placed the bag in the extended hand of Gianapolis, and leapt out upon the pavement.

"This way, my dear friend!" cried the Greek, grasping him warmly by the arm.

The Frenchman found himself being led along toward the head of the car; and, at the same moment, Said reversed the gear and backed away. M. Max was foiled in his hopes of learning the number of the limousine.

He glanced about him wonderingly.

"You are in Temple Gardens, M. Gaston," explained the Greek, "and here, unless I am greatly mistaken, comes a disengaged taxi-cab. You will drive to your hotel?"

"Yes, to my hotel," replied M. Max.

"And whenever you wish to avail yourself of your privilege, and pay a second visit to the establishment presided over by Mr. Ho-Pin, you remember the number?"

"I remember the number," replied M. Max.

The cab hailed by Gianapolis drew up beside the two, and M. Max entered it.

"Good morning, M. Gaston."

"Good morning, Mr. Gianapolis."

XXXIII. Logic vs. Intuition

And now, Henry Leroux, Denise Ryland and Helen Cumberly were speeding along the Richmond Road beneath a sky which smiled upon Leroux's convalescence; for this was a perfect autumn morning which ordinarily had gladdened him, but which saddened him to-day.

The sun shone and the sky was blue; a pleasant breeze played upon his cheeks; whilst Mira, his wife, was…

He knew that he had come perilously near to the borderland beyond which are gibbering, moving things: that he had stood upon the frontier of insanity; and realizing the futility of such reflections, he struggled to banish them from his mind, for his mind was not yet healed—and he must be whole, be sane, if he would take part in the work, which, now, strangers were doing, whilst he—whilst he was a useless hulk.

Denise Ryland had been very voluble at the commencement of the drive, but, as it progressed, had grown gradually silent, and now sat with her brows working up and down and with a little network of wrinkles alternately appearing and disappearing above the bridge of her nose. A self-reliant woman, it was irksome to her to know herself outside the circle of activity revolving around the mysterious Mr. King. She had had one interview with Inspector Dunbar, merely in order that she might give personal testimony to the fact that Mira Leroux had not visited her that year in Paris. Of the shrewd Scotsman she had formed the poorest opinion; and indeed she never had been known to express admiration for, or even the slightest confidence in, any man breathing. The amiable M. Gaston possessed virtues which appealed to her, but whilst she admitted that his conversation was entertaining and his general behavior good, she always spoke with the utmost contempt of his sartorial splendor.

Now, with the days and the weeks slipping by, and with the spectacle before her of poor Leroux, a mere shadow of his former self, with the case, so far as she could perceive, at a standstill, and with the police (she firmly believed) doing "absolutely… nothing… whatever"—Denise Ryland recognized that what was lacking in the investigation was that intuition and

wit which only a clever woman could bring to bear upon it, and of which she, in particular, possessed an unlimited reserve.

The car sped on toward the purer atmosphere of the riverside, and even the clouds of dust, which periodically enveloped them, with the passing of each motor-'bus, and which at the commencement of the drive had inspired her to several notable and syncopated outbursts, now left her unmoved.

She thought that at last she perceived the secret working of that Providence which ever dances attendance at the elbow of accomplished womankind. Following the lead set by "H.C." in the Planet ("H.C." was Helen Cumberly's nom de plume) and by Crocket in the Daily Monitor, the London Press had taken Olaf van Noord to its bosom; and his exhibition in the Little Gallery was an established financial success, whilst "Our Lady of the Poppies" (which had, of course, been rejected by the Royal Academy) promised to be the picture of the year.

Mentally, Denise Ryland was again surveying that remarkable composition; mentally she was surveying Olaf van Noord's model, also. Into the scheme slowly forming in her brain, the yellow-wrapped cigarette containing "a small percentage of opium" fitted likewise. Finally, but not last in importance, the Greek gentleman, Mr. Gianapolis, formed a unit of the whole.

Denise Ryland had always despised those detective creations which abound in French literature; perceiving in their marvelous deductions a tortured logic incompatible with the classic models. She prided herself upon her logic, possibly because it was a quality which she lacked, and probably because she confused it with intuition, of which, to do her justice, she possessed an unusual share. Now, this intuition was at work, at work well and truly; and the result which this mental contortionist ascribed to pure reason was nearer to the truth than a real logician could well have hoped to attain by confining himself to legitimate data. In short, she had determined to her own satisfaction that Mr. Gianapolis was the clue to the mystery; that Mr. Gianapolis was not (as she had once supposed) enacting the part of an amiable liar when he declared that there were, in London, such apartments as that represented by Olaf van Noord; that Mr. Gianapolis was acquainted with the present whereabouts of Mrs. Leroux; that Mr. Gianapolis knew who murdered Iris Vernon; and that Scotland Yard was a benevolent institution for the support of those of enfeebled intellect.

These results achieved, she broke her long silence at the moment that the car was turning into Richmond High Street.

"My dear!" she exclaimed, clutching Helen's arm, "I see it all!"

"Oh!" cried the girl, "how you startled me! I thought you were ill or that you had seen something frightful."…

"I HAVE… seen something… frightful," declared Denise Ryland. She glared across at the haggard Leroux. "Harry… Leroux," she continued, "it is very fortunate… that I came to London… very fortunate."

"I am sincerely glad that you did," answered the novelist, with one of his kindly, weary smiles.

"My dear," said Denise Ryland, turning again to Helen Cumberly, "you say you met that… cross-eyed… being… Gianapolis, again?"

"Good Heavens!" cried Helen; "I thought I should never get rid of him; a most loathsome man!"

"My dear… child"—Denise squeezed her tightly by the arm, and peered into her face, intently—"cul-tivate… DELIBERATELY cul-tivate that man's acquaintance!"

Helen stared at her friend as though she suspected the latter's sanity.

"I am afraid I do not understand at all," she said, breathlessly.

"I am positive that I do not," declared Leroux, who was as much surprised as Helen. "In the first place I am not acquainted with this cross-eyed being."

"You are… out of this!" cried Denise Ryland with a sweeping movement of the left hand; "entirely… out of it! This is no MAN'S… business."…

"But my dear Denise!" exclaimed Helen…

"I beseech you; I entreat you;… I ORDER… you to cultivate… that… execrable… being."

"Perhaps," said Helen, with eyes widely opened, "you will condescend to give me some slight reason why I should do anything so extraordinary and undesirable?"

"Undesirable!" cried Denise. "On the contrary;… it is MOST… desirable! It is essential. The wretched… cross-eyed… creature has presumed to fall in love… with you."…

"Oh!" cried Helen, flushing, and glancing rapidly at Leroux, who now was thoroughly interested, "please do not talk nonsense!"

"It is no… nonsense. It is the finger… of Providence. Do you know where you can find… him?"

"Not exactly; but I have a shrewd suspicion," again she glanced in an embarrassed way at Leroux, "that he will know where to find ME."

"Who is this presumptuous person?" inquired the novelist, leaning forward, his dark blue eyes aglow with interest.

"Never mind," replied Denise Ryland, "you will know… soon enough. In the meantime… as I am simply… starving, suppose we see about… lunch?"

Moved by some unaccountable impulse, Helen extended her hand to Leroux, who took it quietly in his own and held it, looking down at the slim fingers as though he derived strength and healing from their touch.

"Poor boy," she said softly.

XXXIV. M. Max Reports Progress

Detective-Sergeant Sowerby was seated in Dunbar's room at New Scotland Yard. Some days had elapsed since that critical moment when, all unaware of the fact, they had stood within three yards of the much-wanted Soames, in the fauteuils of the east-end music-hall. Every clue thus far investigated had proved a cul-de-sac. Dunbar, who had literally been working night and day, now began to show evidence of his giant toils. The tawny eyes were as keen as ever, and the whole man as forceful as of old, but in the intervals of conversation, his lids would droop wearily; he would only arouse himself by a perceptible effort.

Sowerby, whose bowler hat lay upon Dunbar's table, was clad in the familiar raincoat, and his ruddy cheerfulness had abated not one whit.

"Have you ever read 'The Adventures of Martin Zeda'?" he asked suddenly, breaking a silence of some minutes' duration.

Dunbar looked up with a start, as…

"Never!" he replied; "I'm not wasting my time with magazine trash."

"It's not trash," said Sowerby, assuming that unnatural air of reflection which sat upon him so ill. "I've looked up the volumes of the Ludgate Magazine in our local library, and I've read all the series with much interest."

Dunbar leaned forward, watching him frowningly.

"I should have thought," he replied, "that you had enough to do without wasting your time in that way!"

"IS it a waste of time?" inquired Sowerby, raising his eyebrows in a manner which lent him a marked resemblance to a famous comedian. "I tell you that the man who can work out plots like those might be a second Jack-the-Ripper and not a soul the wiser!"…

"Ah!"

"I've never met a more innocent LOOKING man, I'll allow; but if you'll read the 'Adventures of Martin Zeda,' you'll know that"…

"Tosh!" snapped Dunbar, irritably; "your ideas of psychology would make a Manx cat laugh! I suppose, on the same analogy, you think the leader-writers of the dailies could run the Government better than the Cabinet does it?"

"I think it very likely"…

"Tosh! Is there anybody in London knows more about the inside workings of crime than the Commissioner? You will admit there isn't; very good. Accordingly to your ideas, the Commissioner must be the biggest blackguard in the Metropolis! I have said it twice before, and I'll be saying it again, Sowerby: TOSH!"

"Well," said Sowerby with an offended air, "has anybody ever seen Mr. King?"

"What are you driving at?"

"I am driving at this: somebody known in certain circles as Mr. King is at the bottom of this mystery. It is highly probable that Mr. King himself murdered Mrs. Vernon. On the evidence of your own notes, nobody left Palace Mansions between the time of the crime and the arrival of witnesses. Therefore, ONE of your witnesses must be a liar; and the liar is Mr. King!"

Inspector Dunbar glared at his subordinate. But the latter continued undaunted:—

"You won't believe it's Leroux; therefore it must be either Mr. Exel, Dr. Cumberly, or Miss Cumberly."…

Inspector Dunbar stood up very suddenly, thrusting his chair from him with much violence.

"Do you recollect the matter of Soames leaving Palace Mansions?" he snapped.

Sowerby's air of serio-comic defiance began to leave him. He scratched his head reflectively.

"Soames got away like that because no one was expecting him to do it. In the same way, neither Leroux, Exel, nor Dr. Cumberly knew that there was any one else IN the flat at the very time when the murderer was making his escape. The cases are identical. They were not looking for a fugitive. He had gone before the search commenced. A clever man could have slipped out in a hundred different ways unobserved. Sowerby, you are…"

What Sowerby was, did not come to light at the moment; for, the door quietly opened and in walked M. Gaston Max arrayed in his inimitable traveling coat, and holding his hat of velour in his gloved hand. He bowed politely.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said.

"Good morning," said Dunbar and Sowerby together.

Sowerby hastened to place a chair for the distinguished visitor. M. Max, thanking him with a bow, took his seat, and from an inside pocket extracted a notebook.

"There are some little points," he said with a deprecating wave of the hand, "which I should like to confirm." He opened the book, sought the wanted page, and continued: "Do either of you know a person answering to the following description: Height, about four feet eight-and-a-half inches, medium build and carries himself with a nervous stoop. Has a habit of rubbing his palms together when addressing anyone. Has plump hands with rather tapering fingers, and a growth of reddish down upon the backs thereof, indicating that he has red or reddish hair. His chin recedes slightly and is pointed, with a slight cleft parallel with the mouth and situated equidistant from the base of the chin and the lower lip. A nervous mannerism of the latter periodically reveals the lower teeth, one of which, that immediately below the left canine, is much discolored. He is clean-shaven, but may at some time have worn whiskers. His eyes are small and ferret-like, set very closely together and of a ruddy brown color. His nose is wide at the bridge, but narrows to an unusual point at the end. In profile it is irregular, or may have been broken at some time. He has scanty eyebrows set very high, and a low forehead with two faint, vertical wrinkles starting from the inner points of the eyebrows. His natural complexion is probably sallow, and his hair (as hitherto mentioned) either red or of sandy color. His

ears are set far back, and the lobes are thin and pointed. His hair is perfectly straight and sparse, and there is a depression of the cheeks where one would expect to find a prominence: that is—at the cheekbone. The cranial development is unusual. The skull slopes back from the crown at a remarkable angle, there being no protuberance at the back, but instead a straight slope to the spine, sometimes seen in the Teutonic races, and in this case much exaggerated. Viewed from the front the skull is narrow, the temples depressed, and the crown bulging over the ears, and receding to a ridge on top. In profile the forehead is almost apelike in size and contour…"

"SOAMES!" exclaimed Inspector Dunbar, leaping to his feet, and bringing both his palms with a simultaneous bang upon the table before him —"Soames, by God!"

M. Max, shrugging and smiling slightly, returned his notebook to his pocket, and, taking out a cigar-case, placed it, open, upon the table, inviting both his confreres, with a gesture, to avail themselves of its contents.

"I thought so," he said simply. "I am glad."

Sowerby selected a cigar in a dazed manner, but Dunbar, ignoring the presence of the cigar-case, leant forward across the table, his eyes blazing, and his small, even, lower teeth revealed in a sort of grim smile.

"M. Max," he said tensely—"you are a clever man! Where have you got him?"

"I have not got him," replied the Frenchman, selecting and lighting one of his own cigars. "He is much too useful to be locked up"…

"But"…

"But yes, my dear Inspector—he is safe; oh! he is quite safe. And on Tuesday night he is going to introduce us to Mr. King!"

"MR. KING!" roared Dunbar; and in three strides of the long legs he was around the table and standing before the Frenchman.

In passing he swept Sowerby's hat on to the floor, and Sowerby, picking it up, began mechanically to brush it with his left sleeve, smoking furiously the while.

"Soames," continued M. Max, quietly—"he is now known as Lucas, by the way—is a man of very remarkable character; a fact indicated by his quite unusual skull. He has no more will than this cigar"—he held the cigar up between his fingers, illustratively—"but of stupid pig obstinacy, that canaille—saligaud!—has enough for all the cattle in Europe! He is like a

man who knows that he stands upon a sinking ship, yet, who whilst promising to take the plunge every moment, hesitates and will continue to hesitate until someone pushes him in. Pardieu! I push! Because of his pig obstinacy I am compelled to take risks most unnecessary. He will not consent, that Soames, to open the door for us…"

"What door?" snapped Dunbar.

"The door of the establishment of Mr. King," explained Max, blandly.

"But where is it?"

"It is somewhere between Limehouse Causeway—is it not called so?—and the riverside. But although I have been there, myself, I can tell you no more…"

"What! you have been there yourself?"

"But yes—most decidedly. I was there some nights ago. But they are ingenious, ah! they are so ingenious!—so Chinese! I should not have known even the little I do know if it were not for the inquiries which I made last week. I knew that the letters to Mr. Leroux which were supposed to come from Paris were handed by Soames to some one who posted them to Paris from Bow, East. You remember how I found the impression of the postmark?"

Dunbar nodded, his eyes glistening; for that discovery of the Frenchman's had filled him with a sort of envious admiration.

"Well, then," continued Max, "I knew that the inquiry would lead me to your east-end, and I suspected that I was dealing with Chinamen; therefore, suitably attired, of course, I wandered about in those interesting slums on more than one occasion; and I concluded that the only district in which a Chinaman could live without exciting curiosity was that which lies off the West India Dock Road."…

Dunbar nodded significantly at Sowerby, as who should say: "What did I tell you about this man?"

"On one of these visits," continued the Frenchman, and a smile struggled for expression upon his mobile lips, "I met you two gentlemen with a Mr.—I think he is called Stringer—"…

"You met US!" exclaimed Sowerby.

"My sense of humor quite overcoming me," replied M. Max, "I even tried to swindle you. I think I did the trick very badly!"

Dunbar and Sowerby were staring at one another amazedly.

"It was in the corner of a public house billiard-room," added the Frenchman, with twinkling eyes; "I adopted the ill-used name of Levinsky on that occasion."…

Dunbar began to punch his left palm and to stride up and down the floor; whilst Sowerby, his blue eyes opened quite roundly, watched M. Max as a schoolboy watches an illusionist.

"Therefore," continued M. Max, "I shall ask you to have a party ready on Tuesday night in Limehouse Causeway—suitably concealed, of course; and as I am almost sure that the haunt of Mr. King is actually upon the riverside (I heard one little river sound as I was coming away) a launch party might cooperate with you in affecting the raid."

"The raid!" said Dunbar, turning from a point by the window, and looking back at the Frenchman. "Do you seriously tell me that we are going to raid Mr. King's on Tuesday night?"

"Most certainly," was the confident reply. "I had hoped to form one of the raiding party; but nom d'un nom!"—he shrugged, in his graceful fashion—"I must be one of the rescued!"

"Of the rescued!"

"You see I visited that establishment as a smoker of opium"…

"You took that risk?"

"It was no greater risk than is run by quite a number of people socially well known in London, my dear Inspector Dunbar! I was introduced by an habitue and a member of the best society; and since nobody knows that Gaston Max is in London—that Gaston Max has any business in hand likely to bring him to London—pardieu, what danger did I incur? But, excepting the lobby—the cave of the dragon (a stranger apartment even than that in the Rue St. Claude) and the Chinese cubiculum where I spent the night—mon dieu! what a night!—I saw nothing of the establishment"…

"But you must know where it is!" cried Dunbar.

"I was driven there in a closed limousine, and driven away in the same vehicle"…

"You got the number?"

"It was impossible. These are clever people! But it must be a simple matter, Inspector, to trace a fine car like that which regularly appears in those east-end streets?"

"Every constable in the division must be acquainted with it," replied Dunbar, confidently. "I'll know all about that car inside the next hour!"

"If on Tuesday night you could arrange to have it followed," continued M. Max, "it would simplify matters. What I have done is this: I have bought the man, Soames—up to a point. But so deadly is his fear of the mysterious Mr. King that although he has agreed to assist me in my plans, he will not consent to divulge an atom of information until the raid is successfully performed."

"Then for heaven's sake what IS he going to do?"

"Visitors to the establishment (it is managed by a certain Mr. Ho-Pin; make a note of him, that Ho-Pin) having received the necessary dose of opium are locked in for the night. On Tuesday, Soames, who acts as valet to poor fools using the place, has agreed—for a price—to unlock the door of the room in which I shall be"…

"What!" cried Dunbar, "you are going to risk yourself alone in that place AGAIN?"

"I have paid a very heavy fee," replied the Frenchman with his odd smile, "and it entitles me to a second visit; I shall pay that second visit on Tuesday night, and my danger will be no greater than on the first occasion."

"But Soames may betray you!"

"Fear nothing; I have measured my Soames, not only anthropologically, but otherwise. I fear only his folly, not his knavery. He will not betray me. Morbleu! he is too much a frightened man. I do not know what has taken place; but I could see that, assured of escaping the police for complicity in the murder, he would turn King's evidence immediately"…

"And you gave him that assurance?"

"At first I did not reveal myself. I weighed up my man very carefully; I measured that Soames-pig. I had several stories in readiness, but his character indicated which I should use. Therefore, suddenly I arrested him!"

"Arrested him?"

"Pardieu! I arrested him very quietly in a corner of the bar of 'Three Nuns' public house. My course was justified. He saw that the reign of his mysterious Mr. King was nearing its close, and that I was his only hope"…

"But still he refused"…

"His refusal to reveal anything whatever under those circumstances impressed me more than all. It showed me that in Mr. King I had to deal

with a really wonderful and powerful man; a man who ruled by means of FEAR; a man of gigantic force. I had taken the pattern of the key fitting the Yale lock of the door of my room, and I secured a duplicate immediately. Soames has not access to the keys, you understand. I must rely upon my diplomacy to secure the same room again—all turns upon that; and at an hour after midnight, or later if advisable, Soames has agreed to let me out. Beyond this, I could induce him to do nothing—nothing whatever. Cochon! Therefore, having got out of the locked room, I must rely upon my own wits—and the Browning pistol which I have presented to Soames together with the duplicate key"…

"Why not go armed?" asked Dunbar.

"One's clothes are searched, my dear Inspector, by an expert! I have given the key, the pistol, and the implements of the house-breaker (a very neat set which fits easily into the breast-pocket) to Soames, to conceal in his private room at the establishment until Tuesday night. All turns upon my securing the same apartment. If I am unable to do so, the arrangements for the raid will have to be postponed. Opium smokers are faddists essentially, however, and I think I can manage to pretend that I have formed a strange penchant for this particular cubiculum"…

"By whom were you introduced to the place?" asked Dunbar, leaning back against the table and facing the Frenchman.

"That I cannot in honor divulge," was the reply; "but the representative of Mr. King who actually admitted me to the establishment is one Gianapolis; address unknown, but telephone number 18642 East. Make a note of him, that Gianapolis."

"I'll arrest him in the morning," said Sowerby, writing furiously in his notebook.

"Nom d'un p'tit bonhomme! M. Sowerby, you will do nothing of that foolish description, my dear friend," said Max; and Dunbar glared at the unfortunate sergeant. "Nothing whatever must be done to arouse suspicion between now and the moment of the raid. You must be circumspect—ah, morbleu! so circumspect. By all means trace this Mr. Gianapolis; yes. But do not let him SUSPECT that he is being traced"…

XXXV. Tracker Tracked

Helen Cumberly and Denise Ryland peered from the window of the former's room into the dusk of the Square, until their eyes ached with the strain of an exercise so unnatural.

"I tell you," said Denise with emphasis, "that… sooner or later… he will come prowling… around. The mere fact that he did not appear… last night… counts for nothing. His own crooked… plans no doubt detain him… very often… at night."

Helen sighed wearily. Denise Ryland's scheme was extremely distasteful to her, but whenever she thought of the pathetic eyes of Leroux she found new determination. Several times she had essayed to analyze the motives which actuated her; always she feared to pursue such inquiries beyond a certain point. Now that she was beginning to share her friend's views upon the matter, all social plans sank into insignificance, and she lived only in the hope of again meeting Gianapolis, of tracing out the opium group, and of finding Mrs. Leroux. In what state did she hope and expect to find her? This was a double question which kept her wakeful through the dreary watches of the night…

"Look!"

Denise Ryland grasped her by the arm, pointing out into the darkened Square. A furtive figure crossed from the northeast corner into the shade of some trees and might be vaguely detected coming nearer and nearer.

"There he is!" whispered Denise Ryland, excitedly; "I told you he couldn't… keep away. I know that kind of brute. There is nobody at home, so listen: I will watch… from the drawing-room, and you… light up here and move about… as if preparing to go out."

Helen, aware that she was flushed with excitement, fell in with the proposal readily; and having switched on the lights in her room and put on her hat so that her moving shadow was thrown upon the casement curtain, she turned out the light again and ran to rejoin her friend. She found the latter peering eagerly from the window of the drawing-room.

"He thinks you are coming out!" gasped Denise. "He has slipped… around the corner. He will pretend to be… passing… this way… the cross-eyed… hypocrite. Do you feel capable… of the task?"

"Quite," Helen declared, her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkling. "You will follow us as arranged; for heaven's sake, don't lose us!"

"If the doctor knew of this," breathed Denise, "he would never… forgive me. But no woman… no true woman… could refuse to undertake… so palpable… a duty"…

Helen Cumberly, wearing a warm, golfing jersey over her dress, with a woolen cap to match, ran lightly down the stairs and out into the Square, carrying a letter. She walked along to the pillar-box, and having examined the address upon the envelope with great care, by the light of an adjacent lamp, posted the letter, turned—and there, radiant and bowing, stood Mr. Gianapolis!

"Kismet is really most kind to me!" he cried. "My friend, who lives, as I think I mentioned once before, in Peer's Chambers, evidently radiates good luck. I last had the good fortune to meet you when on my way to see him, and I now meet you again within five minutes of leaving him! My dear Miss Cumberly, I trust you are quite well?"

"Quite," said Helen, holding out her hand. "I am awfully glad to see you again, Mr. Gianapolis!"

He was distinctly encouraged by her tone. He bent forward confidentially.

"The night is young," he said; and his smile was radiant. "May I hope that your expedition does not terminate at this post-box?"

Helen glanced at him doubtfully, and then down at her jersey. Gianapolis was unfeignedly delighted with her naivete.

"Surely you don't want to be seen with me in this extraordinary costume!" she challenged.

"My dear Miss Cumberly, it is simply enchanting! A girl with such a figure as yours never looks better than when she dresses sportily!"

The latent vulgarity of the man was escaping from the bondage in which ordinarily he confined it. A real passion had him in its grip, and the real Gianapolis was speaking. Helen hesitated for one fateful moment; it was going to be even worse than she had anticipated. She glanced up at Palace Mansions.

Across a curtained window moved a shadow, that of a man wearing a long gown and having his hands clasped behind him, whose head showed as an indistinct blur because the hair was wildly disordered. This shadow

passed from side to side of the window and was lost from view. It was the shadow of Henry Leroux.

"I am afraid I have a lot of work to do," said Helen, with a little catch in her voice.

"My dear Miss Cumberly," cried Gianapolis, eagerly, placing his hand upon her arm, "it is precisely of your work that I wish to speak to you! Your work is familiar to me—I never miss a line of it; and knowing how you delight in the outre and how inimitably you can describe scenes of Bohemian life, I had hoped, since it was my privilege to meet you, that you would accept my services as cicerone to some of the lesser-known resorts of Bohemian London. Your article, 'Dinner in Soho,' was a delightful piece of observation, and the third—I think it was the third—of the same series: 'Curiosities of the Cafe Royal,' was equally good. But your powers of observation would be given greater play in any one of the three establishments to which I should be honored to escort you."

Helen Cumberly, though perfectly self-reliant, as only the modern girl journalist can be, was fully aware that, not being of the flat-haired, bespectacled type, she was called upon to exercise rather more care in her selection of companions for copy-hunting expeditions than was necessary in the case of certain fellow-members of the Scribes' Club. No power on earth could have induced her to accept such an invitation from such a man, under ordinary circumstances; even now, with so definite and important an object in view, she hesitated. The scheme might lead to nothing; Denise Ryland (horrible thought!) might lose the track; the track might lead to no place of importance, so far as her real inquiry was concerned.

In this hour of emergency, new and wiser ideas were flooding her brain. For instance, they might have admitted Inspector Dunbar to the plot. With Inspector Dunbar dogging her steps, she should have felt perfectly safe; but Denise—she had every respect for Denise's reasoning powers, and force of character—yet Denise nevertheless might fail her.

She glanced into the crooked eyes of Gianapolis, then up again at Palace Mansions.

The shadow of Henry Leroux recrossed the cream-curtained window.

"So early in the evening," pursued the Greek, rapidly, "the more interesting types will hardly have arrived; nevertheless, at the Memphis Cafe"…

"Memphis Cafe!" muttered Helen, glancing at him rapidly; "what an odd name."

"Ah! my dear Miss Cumberly!" cried Gianapolis, with triumph—"I knew that you had never heard of the true haunts of Bohemia! The Memphis Cafe—it is actually a club—was founded by Olaf van Noord two years ago, and at present has a membership including some of the most famous artistic folk of London; not only painters, but authors, composers, actors, actresses. I may add that the peerage, male and female, is represented."

"It is actually a gaming-house, I suppose?" said Helen, shrewdly.

"A gaming-house? Not at all! If what you wish to see is play for high stakes, it is not to the Memphis Cafe you must go. I can show you Society losing its money in thousands, if the spectacle would amuse you. I only await your orders"…

"You certainly interest me," said Helen; and indeed this half-glimpse into phases of London life hidden from the world—even from the greater part of the ever-peering journalistic world—was not lacking in fascination.

The planning of a scheme in its entirety constitutes a mental effort which not infrequently blinds us to the shortcomings of certain essential details. Denise's plan, a good one in many respects, had the fault of being over-elaborate. Now, when it was too late to advise her friend of any amendment, Helen perceived that there was no occasion for her to suffer the society of Gianapolis.

To bid him good evening, and then to follow him, herself, was a plan much superior to that of keeping him company whilst Denise followed both!

Moreover, he would then be much more likely to go home, or to some address which it would be useful to know. What a VERY womanish scheme theirs had been, after all; Helen told herself that the most stupid man imaginable could have placed his finger upon its weak spot immediately.

But her mind was made up. If it were possible, she would warn Denise of the change of plan; if it were not, then she must rely upon her friend to see through the ruse which she was about to practise upon the Greek.

"Good night, Mr. Gianapolis!" she said abruptly, and held out her hand to the smiling man. His smile faded. "I should love to join you, but really you must know that it's impossible. I will arrange to make up a party, with pleasure, if you will let me know where I can 'phone you?"

"But," he began…

"Many thanks, it's really impossible; there are limits even to the escapades allowed under the cloak of 'Copy'! Where can I communicate with you?"

"Oh! how disappointed I am! But I must permit you to know your own wishes better than I can hope to know them, Miss Cumberly. Therefore"—Helen was persistently holding out her hand—"good night! Might I venture to telephone to YOU in the morning? We could then come to some arrangement, no doubt"…

"You might not find me at home"…

"But at nine o'clock!"

"It allows me no time to make up my party!"

"But such a party must not exceed three: yourself and two others"…

"Nevertheless, it has to be arranged."

"I shall ring up to-morrow evening, and if you are not at home, your maid will tell me when you are expected to return."

Helen quite clearly perceived that no address and no telephone number were forthcoming.

"You are committing yourself to endless and unnecessary trouble, Mr. Gianapolis, but if you really wish to do as you suggest, let it be so. Good night!"

She barely touched his extended hand, turned, and ran fleetly back toward the door of Palace Mansions. Ere reaching the entrance, however, she dropped a handkerchief, stooped to recover it, and glanced back rapidly.

Gianapolis was just turning the corner.

Helen perceived the unmistakable form of Denise Ryland lurking in the Palace Mansions doorway, and, waving frantically to her friend, who was nonplussed at this change of tactics, she hurried back again to the corner and peeped cautiously after the retreating Greek.

There was a cab rank some fifty paces beyond, with three taxis stationed there. If Gianapolis chartered a cab, and she were compelled to follow in another, would Denise come upon the scene in time to take up the prearranged role of sleuth-hound?

Gianapolis hesitated only for a few seconds; then, shrugging his shoulders, he stepped out into the road and into the first cab on the rank. The man cranked his engine, leapt into his seat and drove off. Helen

Cumberly, ignoring the curious stares of the two remaining taxi-men, ran out from the shelter of the corner and jumped into the next cab, crying breathlessly:

"Follow that cab! Don't let the man in it suspect, but follow, and don't lose sight of it!"

They were off!

Helen glanced ahead quickly, and was just in time to see Gianapolis' cab disappear; then, leaning out of the window, she indulged in an extravagant pantomime for the benefit of Denise Ryland, who was hurrying after her.

"Take the next cab and follow ME!" she cried, whilst her friend raised her hand to her ear the better to detect the words. "I cannot wait for you or the track will be lost"…

Helen's cab swung around the corner—and she was not by any means certain that Denise Ryland had understood her; but to have delayed would have been fatal, and she must rely upon her friend's powers of penetration to form a third in this singular procession.

Whilst these thoughts were passing in the pursuer's mind, Gianapolis, lighting a cigarette, had thrown himself back in a corner of the cab and was mentally reviewing the events of the evening—that is, those events which were associated with Helen Cumberly. He was disappointed but hopeful: at any rate he had suffered no definite repulse. Without doubt, his reflections had been less roseate had he known that he was followed, not only by two, but by THREE trackers.

He had suspected for some time now, and the suspicion had made him uneasy, that his movements were being watched. Police surveillance he did not fear; his arrangements were too complete, he believed, to occasion him any ground for anxiety even though half the Criminal Investigation Department were engaged in dogging his every movement. He understood police methods very thoroughly, and all his experience told him that this elusive shadow which latterly had joined him unbidden, and of whose presence he was specially conscious whenever his steps led toward Palace Mansions, was no police officer.

He had two theories respecting the shadow—or, more properly, one theory which was divisible into two parts; and neither part was conducive to peace of mind. Many years, crowded with many happenings, some of which he would fain forget, had passed since the day when he had entered the

service of Mr. King, in Pekin. The enterprises of Mr. King were always of a secret nature, and he well remembered the fate of a certain Burmese gentleman of Rangoon who had attempted to throw the light of publicity into the dark places of these affairs.

From a confidant of the doomed man, Gianapolias had learned, fully a month before a mysterious end had come to the Burman, how the latter (by profession a money-lender) had complained of being shadowed night and day by someone or something, of whom or of which he could never succeed in obtaining so much as a glimpse.

Gianapolis shuddered. These were morbid reflections, for, since he had no thought of betraying Mr. King, he had no occasion to apprehend a fate similar to that of the unfortunate money-lender of Rangoon. It was a very profitable service, that of Mr. King, yet there were times when the fear of his employer struck a chill to his heart; there were times when almost he wished to be done with it all…

By Whitechapel Station he discharged the cab, and, standing on the pavement, lighted a new cigarette from the glowing stump of the old one. A fair amount of traffic passed along the Whitechapel Road, for the night was yet young; therefore Gianapolis attached no importance to the fact that almost at the moment when his own cab turned and was driven away, a second cab swung around the corner of Mount Street and disappeared.

But, could he have seen the big limousine drawn up to the pavement some fifty yards west of London Hospital, his reflections must have been terrible, indeed.

Fate willed that he should know nothing of this matter, and, his thoughts automatically reverting again to Helen Cumberly, he enjoyed that imaginary companionship throughout the remainder of his walk, which led him along Cambridge Road, and from thence, by a devious route, to the northern end of Globe Road.

It may be enlightening to leave Gianapolis for a moment and to return to Mount Street.

Helen Cumberly's cabman, seeing the cab ahead pull up outside the railway station, turned around the nearest corner on the right (as has already appeared), and there stopped. Helen, who also had observed the maneuver of the taxi ahead, hastily descended, and giving the man half-a-sovereign, said rapidly:

"I must follow on foot now, I am afraid! but as I don't know this district at all, could you bring the cab along without attracting attention, and manage to keep me in sight?"

"I'll try, miss," replied the man, with alacrity; "but it won't be an easy job."

"Do your best," cried Helen, and ran off rapidly around the corner, and into Whitechapel Road.

She was just in time to see Gianapolis throw away the stump of his first cigarette and stroll off, smoking a second. She rejoiced that she was inconspicuously dressed, but, simple as was her attire, it did not fail to attract coarse comment from some whom she jostled on her way. She ignored all this, however, and, at a discreet distance followed the Greek, never losing sight of him for more than a moment.

When, leaving Cambridge Road—a considerable thoroughfare—he plunged into a turning, crooked and uninviting, which ran roughly at right angles with the former, she hesitated, but only for an instant. Not another pedestrian was visible in the street, which was very narrow and ill-lighted, but she plainly saw Gianapolis passing under a street-lamp some thirty yards along. Glancing back in quest of the cabman, but failing to perceive him, she resumed the pursuit.

She was nearly come to the end of the street (Gianapolis already had disappeared into an even narrower turning on the left) when a bright light suddenly swept from behind and cast her shadow far out in front of her upon the muddy road. She heard the faint thudding of a motor, but did not look back, for she was confident that this was the taxi-man following. She crept to the corner and peered around it; Gianapolis had disappeared.

The light grew brighter—brighter yet; and, with the engine running very silently, the car came up almost beside her. She considered this unwise on the man's part, yet welcomed his presence, for in this place not a soul was visible, and for the first time she began to feel afraid…

A shawl, or some kind of silken wrap, was suddenly thrown over her head!

She shrieked frenziedly, but the arm of her captor was now clasped tightly about her mouth and head. She felt herself to be suffocating. The silken thing which enveloped her was redolent of the perfume of roses; it was stifling her. She fought furiously, but her arms were now seized in an

irresistible grasp, and she felt herself lifted—and placed upon a cushioned seat.

Instantly there was a forward movement of the vehicle which she had mistaken for a taxi-cab, and she knew that she was speeding through those unknown east-end streets—God! to what destination?

She could not cry out, for she was fighting for air—she seemed to be encircled by a swirling cloud of purplish mist. On—and on—and on, she was borne; she knew that she must have been drugged in some way, for consciousness was slipping—slipping…

Helpless as a child in that embrace which never faltered, she was lifted again and carried down many steps. Insensibility was very near now, but with all the will that was hers she struggled to fend it off. She felt herself laid down upon soft cushions…

A guttural voice was speaking, from a vast distance away:

"What is this that you bwring us, Mahara?"

Answered a sweet, silvery voice:

"Does it matter to you what I bringing? It is one I hate—hate—HATE! There will be TWO cases of 'ginger' to go away some day instead of ONE—that is all! Said, yalla!"

"Your pwrimitive passions will wruin us"…

The silvery voice grew even more silvery:

"Do you quarrel with me, Ho-Pin, my friend?"

"This is England, not Burma! Gianapolis"…

"Ah! Whisper—WHISPER it to HIM, and"…

Oblivion closed in upon Helen Cumberly; she seemed to be sinking into the heart of a giant rose.

XXXVI. In Dunbar's Room

Dr. Cumberly, his face unusually pale, stood over by the window of Inspector Dunbar's room, his hands locked behind him. In the chair nearest to the window sat Henry Leroux, so muffled up in a fur-collared motor-coat that little of his face was visible; but his eyes were tragic as he leant forward resting his elbows upon his knees and twirling his cap between his

thin fingers. He was watching Inspector Dunbar intently; only glancing from the gaunt face of the detective occasionally to look at Denise Ryland, who sat close to the table. At such times his gaze was pathetically reproachful, but always rather sorrowful than angry.

As for Miss Ryland, her habitual self-confidence seemed somewhat to have deserted her, and it was almost with respectful interest that she followed Dunbar's examination of a cabman who, standing cap in hand, completed the party so strangely come together at that late hour.

"This is what you have said," declared Dunbar, taking up an official form, and, with a movement of his hand warning the taxi-man to pay attention: "'I, Frederick Dean, motor-cab driver, was standing on the rank in Little Abbey Street to-night at about a quarter to nine. My cab was the second on the rank. A young lady who wore, I remember, a woolen cap and jersey, with a blue serge skirt, ran out from the corner of the Square and directed me to follow the cab in front of me, which had just been chartered by a dark man wearing a black overcoat and silk hat. She ordered me to keep him in sight; and as I drove off I heard her calling from the window of my cab to another lady who seemed to be following her. I was unable to see this other lady, but my fare addressed her as 'Denise.' I followed the first cab to Whitechapel Station; and as I saw it stop there, I swung into Mount Street. The lady gave me half-a-sovereign, and told me that she proposed to follow the man on foot. She asked me if I could manage to keep her in sight, without letting my cab be seen by the man she was following. I said I would try, and I crept along at some distance behind her, going as slowly as possible until she went into a turning branching off to the right of Cambridge Road; I don't know the name of this street. She was some distance ahead of me, for I had had trouble in crossing Whitechapel Road.

"'A big limousine had passed me a moment before, but as an electric tram was just going by on my off-side, between me and the limousine, I don't know where the limousine went. When I was clear of the tram I could not see it, and it may have gone down Cambridge Road and then down the same turning as the lady. I pulled up at the end of this turning, and could not see a sign of any one. It was quite deserted right to the end, and although I drove down, bore around to the right and finally came out near the top of Globe Road, I did not pass anyone. I waited about the district for over a

quarter-of-an-hour and then drove straight to the police station, and they sent me on here to Scotland Yard to report what had occurred.'

"Have you anything to add to that?" said Dunbar, fixing his tawny eyes upon the cabman.

"Nothing at all," replied the man—a very spruce and intelligent specimen of his class and one who, although he had moved with the times, yet retained a slightly horsey appearance, which indicated that he had not always been a mechanical Jehu.

"It is quite satisfactory as far as it goes," muttered Dunbar. "I'll get you to sign it now and we need not detain you any longer."

"There is not the slightest doubt," said Dr. Cumberly, stepping forward and speaking in an unusually harsh voice, "that Helen endeavored to track this man Gianapolis, and was abducted by him or his associates. The limousine was the car of which we have heard so much"…

"If my cabman had not been such a… fool," broke in Denise Ryland, clasping her hands, "we should have had a different… tale to tell."

"I have no wish to reproach anybody," said Dunbar, sternly; "but I feel called upon to remark, madam, that you ought to have known better than to interfere in a case like this; a case in which we are dealing with a desperate and clever gang."

For once in her life Denise Ryland found herself unable to retort suitably. The mildly reproachful gaze of Leroux she could not meet; and although Dr. Cumberly had spoken no word of complaint against her, from his pale face she persistently turned away her eyes.

The cabman having departed, the door almost immediately reopened, and Sergeant Sowerby came in.

"Ah! there you are, Sowerby!" cried Dunbar, standing up and leaning eagerly across the table. "You have the particulars respecting the limousine?"

Sergeant Sowerby, removing his hat and carefully placing it upon the only vacant chair in the room, extracted a bulging notebook from a pocket concealed beneath his raincoat, cleared his throat, and reported as follows:

"There is only one car known to members of that division which answers to the description of the one wanted. This is a high-power, French car which seems to have been registered first in Paris, where it was made, then in Cairo, and lastly in London. It is the property of the gentleman whose

telephone number is 18642 East—Mr. I. Gianapolis; and the reason of its frequent presence in the neighborhood of the West India Dock Road, is this: it is kept in a garage in Wharf-End Lane, off Limehouse Causeway. I have interviewed two constables at present on that beat, and they tell me that there is nothing mysterious about the car except that the chauffeur is a foreigner who speaks no English. He is often to be seen cleaning the car in the garage, and both the men are in the habit of exchanging good evening with him when passing the end of the lane. They rarely go that far, however, as it leads nowhere."

"But if you have the telephone number of this man, Gianapolis," cried Dr. Cumberly, "you must also have his address"…

"We obtained both from the Eastern Exchange," interrupted Inspector Dunbar. "The instrument, number 18642 East, is installed in an office in Globe Road. The office, which is situated in a converted private dwelling, bears a brass plate simply inscribed, 'I. Gianapolis, London and Smyrna.'"

"What is the man's reputed business?" jerked Cumberly.

"We have not quite got to the bottom of that, yet," replied Sowerby; "but he is an agent of some kind, and evidently in a large way of business, as he runs a very fine car, and seems to live principally in different hotels. I am told that he is an importer of Turkish cigarettes and"…

"He is an importer and exporter of hashish!" snapped Dunbar irritably. "If I could clap my eyes upon him I should know him at once! I tell you, Sowerby, he is the man who was convicted last year of exporting hashish to Egypt in faked packing cases which contained pottery ware, ostensibly, but had false bottoms filled with cakes of hashish"…

"But," began Dr. Cumberly…

"But because he came before a silly bench," snapped Dunbar, his eyes flashing angrily, "he got off with a fine—a heavy one, certainly, but he could well afford to pay it. It is that kind of judicial folly which ties the hands of Scotland Yard!"

"What makes you so confident that this is the man?" asked the physician.

"He was convicted under the name of G. Ionagis," replied the detective; "which I believe to be either his real name or his real name transposed. Do you follow me? I. Gianapolis is Ionagis Gianapolis, and G. Ionagis is Gianapolis Ionagis. I was not associated with the hashish case; he stored the stuff in a china warehouse within the city precincts, and at that time he did

not come within my sphere. But I looked into it privately, and I could see that the prosecution was merely skimming the surface; we are only beginning to get down to the depths NOW."

Dr. Cumberly raised his hand to his head in a distracted manner.

"Surely," he said, and he was evidently exercising a great restraint upon himself—"surely we're wasting time. The office in Globe Road should be raided without delay. No stone should be left unturned to effect the immediate arrest of this man Gianapolis or Ionagis. Why, God almighty! while we are talking here, my daughter"…

"Morbleu! who talks of arresting Gianapolis?" inquired the voice of a man who silently had entered the room.

All turned their heads; and there in the doorway stood M. Gaston Max.

"Thank God you've come!" said Dunbar with sincerity. He dropped back into his chair, a strong man exhausted. "This case is getting beyond me!"

Denise Ryland was staring at the Frenchman as if fascinated. He, for his part, having glanced around the room, seemed called upon to give her some explanation of his presence.

"Madame," he said, bowing in his courtly way, "only because of very great interests did I dare to conceal my true identity. My name is Gaston, that is true, but only so far as it goes. My real name is Gaston Max, and you who live in Paris will perhaps have heard it."

"Gaston Max!" cried Denise Ryland, springing upright as though galvanized; "you are M. Gaston Max! But you are not the least bit in the world like"…

"Myself?" said the Frenchman, smiling. "Madame, it is only a man fortunate enough to possess no enemies who can dare to be like himself."

He bowed to her in an oddly conclusive manner, and turned again to Inspector Dunbar.

"I am summoned in haste," he said; "tell me quickly of this new development."

Sowerby snatched his hat from the vacant chair, and politely placed the chair for M. Max to sit upon. The Frenchman, always courteous, gently forced Sergeant Sowerby himself to occupy the chair, silencing his muttered protests with upraised hand. The matter settled, he lowered his hand, and, resting it fraternally upon the sergeant's shoulder, listened to Inspector

Dunbar's account of what had occurred that night. No one interrupted the Inspector until he was come to the end of his narrative.

"Mille tonnerres!" then exclaimed M. Max; and, holding a finger of his glove between his teeth, he tugged so sharply that a long rent appeared in the suede.

His eyes were on fire; the whole man quivered with electric force.

In silence that group watched the celebrated Frenchman; instinctively they looked to him for aid. It is at such times that personality proclaims itself. Here was the last court of appeal, to which came Dr. Cumberly and Inspector Dunbar alike; whose pronouncement they awaited, not questioning that it would be final.

"To-morrow night," began Max, speaking in a very low voice, "we raid the headquarters of Ho-Pin. This disappearance of your daughter, Dr. Cumberly, is frightful; it could not have been foreseen or it should have been prevented. But the least mistake now, and"—he looked at Dr. Cumberly as if apologizing for his barbed words—"she may never return!"

"My God!" groaned the physician, and momentarily dropped his face into his hands.

But almost immediately he recovered himself and with his mouth drawn into a grim straight line, looked again at M. Max, who continued:

"I do not think that this abduction was planned by the group; I think it was an accident and that they were forced, in self-protection, to detain your daughter, who unwisely—morbleu! how unwisely!—forced herself into their secrets. To arrest Gianapolis (even if that were possible) would be to close their doors to us permanently; and as we do not even know the situation of those doors, that would be to ruin everything. Whether Miss Cumberly is confined in the establishment of Ho-Pin or somewhere else, I cannot say; whether she is a captive of Gianapolis or of Mr. King, I do not know. But I know that the usual conduct of the establishment is not being interrupted at present; for only half-an-hour ago I telephoned to Mr. Gianapolis!"

"At Globe Road?" snapped Dunbar, with a flash of the tawny eyes.

"At Globe Road—yes (oh! they would not detain her there!). Mr. Gianapolis was present to speak to me. He met me very agreeably in the matter of occupying my old room in the delightful Chinese hotel of Mr. Ho-Pin. Therefore"—he swept his left hand around forensically, as if to include

the whole of the company—"to-morrow night at eleven o'clock I shall be meeting Mr. Gianapolis at Piccadilly Circus, and later we shall join the limousine and be driven to the establishment of Ho-Pin." He turned to Inspector Dunbar. "Your arrangements for watching all the approaches to the suspected area are no doubt complete?"

"Not a stray cat," said Dunbar with emphasis, "can approach Limehouse Causeway or Pennyfields, or any of the environs of the place, to-morrow night after ten o'clock, without the fact being reported to me! You will know at the moment that you step from the limousine that a cyclist scout, carefully concealed, is close at your heels with a whole troup to follow; and if, as you suspect, the den adjoins the river bank, a police cutter will be lying at the nearest available point."

"Eh bien!" said M. Max; then, turning to Denise Ryland and Dr. Cumberly, and shrugging his shoulders: "you see, frightful as your suspense must be, to make any foolish arrests to-night, to move in this matter at all to-night—would be a case of more haste and less speed"…

"But," groaned Cumberly, "is Helen to lie in that foul, unspeakable den until the small hours of to-morrow morning? Good God! they may"…

"There is one little point," interrupted M. Max with upraised hand, "which makes it impossible that we should move to-night—quite apart from the advisability of such a movement. We do not know exactly where this place is situated. What can we do?"

He shrugged his shoulders, and, with raised eyebrows, stared at Dr. Cumberly.

"It is fairly evident," replied the other slowly, and with a repetition of the weary upraising of his hand to his head, "it is fairly evident that the garage used by the man Gianapolis must be very near to—most probably adjoining—the entrance to this place of which you speak."

"Quite true," agreed the Frenchman. "But these are clever, these people of Mr. King. They are Chinese, remember, and the Chinese—ah, I know it!—are the most mysterious and most cunning people in the world. The entrance to the cave of black and gold will not be as wide as a cathedral door. A thousand men might search this garage, which, as Detective Sowerby" (he clapped the latter on the shoulder) "informed me this afternoon, is situated in Wharf-End Lane—all day and all night, and become none the wiser. To-morrow evening"—he lowered his voice—"I

myself, shall be not outside, but inside that secret place; I shall be the concierge for one night—Eh bien, that concierge will admit the policeman!"

A groan issued from Dr. Cumberly's lips; and M. Max, with ready sympathy, crossed the room and placed his hands upon the physician's shoulders, looking steadfastly into his eyes.

"I understand, Dr. Cumberly," he said, and his voice was caressing as a woman's. "Pardieu! I understand. To wait is agony; but you, who are a physician, know that to wait sometimes is necessary. Have courage, my friend, have courage!"

XXXVII. The Whistle

Luke Soames, buttoning up his black coat, stood in the darkness, listening.

His constitutional distaste for leaping blindfolded had been over-ridden by circumstance. He felt himself to be a puppet of Fate, and he drifted with the tide because he lacked the strength to swim against it. That will-o'-the-wisp sense of security which had cheered him when first he had realized how much he owed to the protective wings of Mr. King had been rudely extinguished upon the very day of its birth; he had learnt that Mr. King was a sinister protector; and almost hourly he lived again through the events of that night when, all unwittingly, he had become a witness of strange happenings in the catacombs.

Soames had counted himself a lost man that night; the only point which he had considered debatable was whether he should be strangled or poisoned. That his employers were determined upon his death, he was assured; yet he had lived through the night, had learnt from his watch that the morning was arrived… and had seen the flecks at the roots of his dyed hair, blanched by the terrors of that vigil—of that watching, from moment to moment, for the second coming of Ho-Pin.

Yes, the morning had dawned, and with it a faint courage. He had shaved and prepared himself for his singular duties, and Said had brought him his breakfast as usual. The day had passed uneventfully, and once, meeting Ho-Pin, he had found himself greeted with the same mirthless smile but with no

menace. Perhaps they had believed his story, or had disbelieved it but realized that he was too closely bound to them to be dangerous.

Then his mind had reverted to the conversation overheard in the music-hall. Should he seek to curry favor with his employers by acquainting them with the fact that, contrary to Gianapolis' assertion, an important clue had fallen into the hands of the police? Did they know this already? So profound was his belief in the omniscience of the invisible Mr. King that he could not believe that Power ignorant of anything appertaining to himself.

Yet it was possible that those in the catacombs were unaware how Scotland Yard, night and day, quested for Mr. King. The papers made no mention of it; but then the papers made no mention of another fact—the absence of Mrs. Leroux. Now that he was no longer panic-ridden, he could mentally reconstruct that scene of horror, could hear again, imaginatively, the shrieks of the maltreated woman. Perhaps this same active imagination of his was playing him tricks, but, her voice… Always he preferred to dismiss these ideas.

He feared Ho-Pin in the same way that an average man fears a tarantula, and he was only too happy to avoid the ever smiling Chinaman; so that the days passed on, and, finding himself unmolested and the affairs of the catacombs proceeding apparently as usual, he kept his information to himself, uncertain if he shared it with his employers or otherwise, but hesitating to put the matter to the test—always fearful to approach Ho-Pin, the beetlesque.

But this could not continue indefinitely; at least he must speak to Ho-Pin in order to obtain leave of absence. For, since that unforgettable night, he had lived the life of a cave-man indeed, and now began to pine for the wider vault of heaven. Meeting the impassive Chinaman in the corridor one morning, on his way to valet one of the living dead, Soames ventured to stop him.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, confusedly, "but would there be any objection to my going out on Friday evening for an hour?"

"Not at all, Soames," replied Ho-Pin, with his mirthless smile: "you may go at six, wreturn at ten."

Ho-Pin passed on.

Soames heaved a gentle sigh of relief. The painful incident was forgotten, then. He hurried into the room, the door of which Said was holding open,

quite eager for his unsavory work.

In crossing its threshold, he crossed out of his new peace into a mental turmoil greater in its complexities than any he yet had known; he met M. Gaston Max, and his vague doubts respecting the omniscience of Mr. King were suddenly reinforced.

Soames' perturbation was so great on that occasion that he feared it must unfailingly be noticed. He realized that now he was definitely in communication with the enemies of Mr. King! Ah; but Mr. King did not know how formidable was the armament of those enemies! He (Soames) had overrated Mr. King; and because that invisible being could inspire Fear in an inconceivable degree, he had thought him all-powerful. Now, he realized that Mr. King was unaware of the existence of at least one clue held by the police; was unaware that his name was associated with the Palace Mansions murder.

The catacombs of Ho-Pin were a sinking ship, and Soames was first of the rats to leave.

He kept his appointment at the "Three Nuns" as has appeared; he accepted the blood-money that was offered him, and he returned to the garage adjoining Kan-Suh Concessions, that night, hugging in his bosom a leather case containing implements by means whereof his new accomplice designed to admit the police to the cave of the golden dragon.

Also, in the pocket of his overcoat, he had a neat Browning pistol; and when the door at the back of the garage was opened for him by Said, he found that the touch of this little weapon sent a thrill of assurance through him, and he began to conceive a sentiment for the unknown investigator to whom he was bound, akin to that which formerly he had cherished for Mr. King!

Now the time was come.

The people of the catacombs acquired a super-sensitive power of hearing, and Soames was able at this time to detect, as he sat or lay in his own room, the movements of persons in the corridor outside and even in the cave of the golden dragon. That mysterious trap in the wall gave him many qualms, and to-night he had glanced at it a thousand times. He held the pistol in his hand, and buttoned up within his coat was the leather case. Only remained the opening of his door in order to learn if the lights were extinguished in the corridor.

He did not anticipate any serious difficulty, provided he could overcome his constitutional nervousness. In his waistcoat pocket was a brand new Yale key which, his latest employer had assured him, fitted the lock of the end door of Block A. The door between the cave of the dragon and Block A was never locked, so far as Soames was aware, nor was that opening from the corridor in which his own room was situated. Therefore, only a few moments—fearful moments, certainly—need intervene, ere he should have a companion; and within a few minutes of that time, the police—his friends!—would be there to protect him! He recognized that the law, after all, was omnipotent, and of all masters was the master to be served.

There was no light in the corridor. Leaving his door ajar, he tiptoed cautiously along toward the cave. Assuring himself once again that the pistol lay in his pocket, he fumbled for the lever which opened the door, found it, depressed it, and stepped quietly forward in his slippered feet.

The unmistakable odor of the place assailed his nostrils. All was in darkness, and absolute silence prevailed. He had a rough idea of the positions of the various little tables, and he stepped cautiously in order to skirt them; but evidently he had made a miscalculation. Something caught his foot, and with a muffled thud he sprawled upon the floor, barely missing one of the tables which he had been at such pains to avoid.

Trembling like a man with an ague, he lay there, breathing in short, staccato breaths, and clutching the pistol in his pocket. Certainly he had made no great noise, but…

Nothing stirred.

Soames summoned up courage to rise and to approach again the door of Block A. Without further mishap he reached it, opened it, and entered the blackness of the corridor. He could make no mistake in regard to the door, for it was the end one. He stole quietly along, his fingers touching the matting, until he came in contact with the corner angle; then, feeling along from the wall until he touched the strip of bamboo which marked the end of the door, he probed about gently with the key; for he knew to within an inch or so where the keyhole was situated.

Ah! he had it! His hand trembling slightly, he sought to insert the key in the lock. It defied his efforts. He felt it gently with the fingers of his left hand, thinking that he might have been endeavoring to insert the key with

the irregular edge downward, and not uppermost; but no—such was not the case.

Again he tried, and with no better result. His nerves were threatening to overcome him, now; he had not counted upon any such hitch as this: but fear sharpened his wits. He recollected the fall which he had sustained, and how he had been precipitated upon the polished floor, outside.

Could he have mistaken his direction? Was it not possible that owing to his momentary panic, he had arisen, facing not the door at the foot of the steps, as he had supposed, but that by which a moment earlier he had entered the cave of the golden dragon?

Desperation was with him now; he was gone too far to draw back. Trailing his fingers along the matting covering of the wall, he retraced his steps, came to the open door, and reentered the apartment of the dragon. He complimented himself, fearfully, upon his own address, for he was inspired with an idea whereby he might determine his position. Picking his way among the little tables and the silken ottomans, he groped about with his hands in the impenetrable darkness for the pedestal supporting the dragon. At last his fingers touched the ivory. He slid them downward, feeling for the great vase of poppies which always stood before the golden image…

The vase was on the LEFT and not on the RIGHT of the pedestal. His theory was correct; he had been groping in the mysterious precincts of that Block B which he had never entered, which he had never seen any one else enter, and from whence he had never known any one to emerge! It was the fall that had confused him; now, he took his bearings anew, bent down to feel for any tables that might lie in his path, and crept across the apartment toward the door which he sought.

Ah! this time there could be no mistake! He depressed the lever handle, and, as the door swung open before him, crept furtively into the corridor.

Repeating the process whereby he had determined the position of the end door, he fumbled once again for the keyhole. He found it with even less difficulty than he had experienced in the wrong corridor, inserted the key in the lock, and with intense satisfaction felt it slip into place.

He inhaled a long breath of the lifeless air, turned the key, and threw the door open. One step forward he took…

A whistle (God! he knew it!) a low, minor whistle, wavered through the stillness. He was enveloped, mantled, choked, by the perfume of ROSES!

The door, which, although it had opened easily, had seemed to be a remarkably heavy one, swung to behind him; he heard the click of the lock. Like a trapped animal, he turned, leaped back, and found his quivering hands in contact with books—books—books…

A lamp lighted up in the center of the room.

Soames turned and stood pressed closely against the book-shelves, against the book-shelves which magically had grown up in front of the door by which he had entered. He was in the place of books and roses—in the haunt of MR. KING!

A great clarity of mind came to him, as it comes to a drowning man; he knew that those endless passages, through which once he had been led in darkness, did not exist, that he had been deceived, had been guided along the same corridor again and again; he knew that this room of roses did not lie at the heart of a labyrinth, but almost adjoined the cave of the golden dragon.

He knew that he was a poor, blind fool; that his plotting had been known to those whom he had thought to betray; that the new key which had opened a way into this place of dread was not the key which his accomplice had given him. He knew that that upon which he had tripped at the outset of his journey had been set in his path by cunning design, in order that the fall might confuse his sense of direction. He knew that the great vase of poppies had been moved, that night…

God! his brain became a seething furnace.

There, before him, upstood the sandalwood screen, with one corner of the table projecting beyond it. Nothing of life was visible in the perfumed place, where deathly silence prevailed…

No lion has greater courage than a cornered rat. Soames plucked the pistol from his pocket and fired at the screen—ONCE!—TWICE!

He heard the muffled report, saw the flash of the little weapon, saw the two holes in the carven woodwork, and gained a greater, hysterical courage —the courage of a coward's desperation.

Immediately before him was a little ebony table, bearing a silver bowl, laden to the brim with sulphur-colored roses. He overturned the table with his foot, laughing wildly. In three strides he leapt across the room, grasped the sandalwood screen, and hurled it to the floor…

In the instant of its fall, he became as Lot's wife. The pistol dropped from his nerveless grasp, thudding gently on the carpet, and, with his fingers crooked paralytically, he stood swaying… and looking into the face of MR. KING!

Soames' body already was as rigid as it would be in death; his mind was numbed—useless. But his outraged soul forced utterance from the lips of the man.

A scream, a scream to have made the angels shudder, to have inspired pity in the devils of Hell, burst from him. Two yellow hands leaped at his throat…

XXXVIII. The Secret Traps

Gaston Max, from his silken bed in the catacombs of Ho-Pin, watched the hand of his watch which lay upon the little table beside him. Already it was past two o'clock, and no sign had come from Soames; a hundred times his imagination had almost tricked him into believing that the door was opening; but always the idea had been illusory and due to the purple shadow of the lamp-shade which overcast that side of the room and the door.

He had experienced no difficulty in arranging with Gianapolis to occupy the same room as formerly; and, close student of human nature though he was, he had been unable to detect in the Greek's manner, when they had met that night, the slightest restraint, the slightest evidence of uneasiness. His reception by Ho-Pin had varied scarce one iota from that accorded him on his first visit to the cave of the golden dragon. The immobile Egyptian had brought him the opium, and had departed silently as before. On this occasion, the trap above the bed had not been opened. But hour after hour had passed, uneventfully, silently, in that still, suffocating room…

A key in the lock!—yes, a key was being inserted in the lock! He must take no unnecessary risks; it might be another than Soames. He waited—the faint sound of fumbling ceased. Still, he waited, listening intently.

Half-past-two. If it had been Soames, why had he withdrawn? M. Max arose noiselessly and looked about him. He was undecided what to do,

when…

Two shots, followed by a most appalling shriek—the more frightful because it was muffled; the shriek of a man in extremis, of one who stands upon the brink of Eternity, brought him up rigid, tense, with fists clenched, with eyes glaring; wrought within this fearless investigator an emotion akin to terror.

Just that one gruesome cry there was and silence again.

What did it mean?

M. Max began hastily to dress. He discovered, in endeavoring to fasten his collar, that his skin was wet with cold perspiration.

"Pardieu!" he said, twisting his mouth into that wry smile, "I know, now, the meaning of fright!"

He was ever glancing toward the door, not hopefully as hitherto, but apprehensively, fearfully.

That shriek in the night might portend merely the delirium of some other occupant of the catacombs; but the shots…

"It was SOAMES!" he whispered aloud; "I have risked too much; I am fast in the rat-trap!"

He looked about him for a possible weapon. The time for inactivity was past. It would be horrible to die in that reeking place, whilst outside, it might be, immediately above his head, Dunbar and the others waited and watched.

The construction of the metal bunk attracted his attention. As in the case of steamer bunks one of the rails—that nearer to the door—was detachable in order to facilitate the making of the bed. Rapidly, nervously, he unscrewed it; but the hinges were riveted to the main structure, and after a brief examination he shrugged his shoulders despairingly. Then, he recollected that in the adjoining bathroom there was a metal towel rail, nickeled, and with a heavy knock at either end, attached by two brackets to the wall.

He ran into the inner room and eagerly examined these fastenings. They were attached by small steel screws. In an instant he was at work with the blade of his pocket-knife. Six screws in all there were to be dealt with, three at either end. The fifth snapped the blade and he uttered an exclamation of dismay. But the shortened implement proved to be an even better screw-

driver than the original blade, and half a minute later he found himself in possession of a club such as would have delighted the soul of Hercules.

He managed to unscrew one of the knobs, and thus to slide off from the bar the bracket attachments; then, replacing the knob, he weighed the bar in his hand, appreciatively. His mind now was wholly composed, and his course determined. He crossed the little room and rapped loudly upon the door.

The rapping sounded muffled and dim in that sound-proof place. Nothing happened, and thrice he repeated the rapping with like negative results. But he had learnt something: the door was a very heavy one.

He made a note of the circumstance, although it did not interfere with the plan which he had in mind. Wheeling the armchair up beside the bed, he mounted upon its two arms and, ONCE—TWICE—THRICE—crashed the knob of the iron bar against that part of the wall which concealed the trap.

Here the result was immediate. At every blow of the bar the trap behind yielded. A fourth blow sent the knob crashing through the gauze material, and far out into some dark place beyond. There was a sound as of a number of books falling.

He had burst the trap.

Up on the back of the chair he mounted, resting his bar against the wall, and began in feverish haste to tear away the gauze concealing the rectangular opening.

An almost overpowering perfume of roses was wafted into his face. In front of him was blackness.

Having torn away all the gauze, he learned that the opening was some two feet long by one foot high. Resting the bar across the ledge he extended his head and shoulders forward through this opening into the rose-scented place beyond, and without any great effort drew himself up with his hands, so that, provided he could find some support upon the other side, it would be a simple matter to draw himself through entirely.

He felt about with his fingers, right and left, and in doing so disturbed another row of books, which fell upon the floor beneath him. He had apparently come out in the middle of a large book-shelf. To the left of him projected the paper-covered door of the trap, at right angles; above and below were book-laden shelves, and on the right there had been other books, until his questing fingers had disturbed them.

M. Max, despite his weight, was an agile man. Clutching the shelf beneath, he worked his way along to the right, gradually creeping further and further into the darkened room, until at last he could draw his feet through the opening and crouch sideways upon the shelf.

He lowered his left foot, sought for and found another shelf beneath, and descended as by a ladder to the thickly carpeted floor. Grasping the end of the bar, he pulled that weapon down; then he twisted the button which converted his timepiece into an electric lantern, and, holding the bar in one tensely quivering hand, looked rapidly about him.

This was a library; a small library, with bowls of roses set upon tables, shelves, in gaps between the books, and one lying overturned upon the floor. Although it was almost drowned by their overpowering perfume, he detected a faint smell of powder. In one corner stood a large writing-table with papers strewn carelessly upon it. Its appointments were markedly Chinese in character, from the singular, gold inkwell to the jade paperweight; markedly Chinese—and—FEMININE. A very handsome screen lay upon the floor in front of this table, and the rich carpet he noted to be disordered as if a struggle had taken place upon it. But, most singular circumstance of all, and most disturbing… there was no door to this room!

For a moment he failed to appreciate the entire significance of this. A secret room difficult to enter he could comprehend, but a secret room difficult to QUIT passed his comprehension completely. Moreover, he was no better off for his exploit.

Three minutes sufficed him in which to examine the shelves covering the four walls of the room from floor to ceiling. None of the books were dummies, and slowly the fact began to dawn upon his mind that what at first he had assumed to be a rather simple device, was, in truth, almost incomprehensible.

For how, in the name of Sanity, did the occupant of this room—and obviously it was occupied at times—enter and leave it?

"Ah!" he muttered, shining the light upon a row of yellow-bound volumes from which he had commenced his tour of inspection and to which that tour had now led him back, "it is uncanny—this!"

He glanced back at the rectangular patch of light which marked the trap whereby he had entered this supernormal room. It was situated close to one corner of the library, and, acting upon an idea which came to him (any idea

was better than none) he proceeded to throw down the books occupying the corresponding position at the other end of the shelf.

A second trap was revealed, identical with that through which he had entered!

It was fastened with a neat brass bolt; and, standing upon one of the little Persian tables—from which he removed a silver bowl of roses—he opened this trap and looked into the lighted room beyond. He saw an apartment almost identical with that which he himself recently had quitted; but in one particular it differed. It was occupied… AND BY A WOMAN!

Arrayed in a gossamer nightrobe she lay in the bed, beneath the trap, her sunken face matching the silken whiteness. Her thin arms drooped listlessly over the rails of the bunk, and upon her left hand M. Max perceived a wedding ring. Her hair, flaxen in the electric light, was spread about in wildest disorder upon the pillow, and a breath of fetid air assailed his nostrils as he pressed his face close to the gauze masking the opening in order to peer closely at this victim of the catacombs.

He watched the silken covering of her bosom, intently, but failed to detect the slightest movement.

"Morbleu!" he muttered, "is she dead?"

He rent the gauze with a sweep of his left hand, and standing upon the bottom shelf of the case, craned forward into the room, looking all about him. A purple shaded lamp burnt above the bed as in the adjoining apartment which he himself had occupied. There were dainty feminine trifles littered in the big armchair, and a motor-coat hung upon the hook of the bathroom door. A small cabin-trunk in one corner of the room bore the initials: "M.L."

Max dropped back into the incredible library with a stifled gasp.

"Pardieu!" he said. "It is Mrs. Leroux that I have found!"

A moment he stood looking from trap to trap; then turned and surveyed again the impassable walls, the rows of works, few of which were European, some of them bound in vellum, some in pigskin, and one row of huge volumes, ten in number, on the bottom shelf, in crocodile hide.

"It is weird, this!" he muttered, "nightmare!"—turning the light from row to row. "How is this lamp lighted that swings here?"

He began to search for the switch, and, even before he found it, had made up his mind that, once discovered, it would not only enable him more fully

to illuminate the library, but would constitute a valuable clue.

At last he found it, situated at the back of one of the shelves, and set above a row of four small books, so that it could readily be reached by inserting the hand.

He flooded the place with light; and perceived at a glance that a length of white flex crossing the ceiling enabled anyone seated at the table to ignite the lamp from there also. Then, replacing his torch in his pocket, and assuring himself that the iron bar lay within easy reach, he began deliberately to remove all of the books from the shelves covering that side of the room upon which the switch was situated. His theory was a sound one; he argued that the natural and proper place for such a switch in such a room would be immediately inside the door, so that one entering could ignite the lamp without having to grope in the darkness. He was encouraged, furthermore, by the fact that at a point some four feet to the left of this switch there was a gap in the bookcases, running from floor to ceiling; a gap no more than four inches across.

Having removed every book from its position, save three, which occupied a shelf on a level with his shoulder and adjoining the gap, he desisted wearily, for many of the volumes were weighty, and the heat of the room was almost insufferable. He dropped with a sigh upon a silk ottoman close beside him…

A short, staccato, muffled report split the heavy silence… and a little round hole appeared in the woodwork of the book-shelf before which, an instant earlier, M. Max had been standing—in the woodwork of that shelf, which had been upon a level with his head.

In one giant leap he hurled himself across the room—… as a second bullet pierced the yellow silk of the ottoman.

Close under the trap he crouched, staring up, fearful-eyed…

A yellow hand and arm—a hand and arm of great nervous strength and of the hue of old ivory, directed a pistol through the opening above him. As he leaped, the hand was depressed with a lightning movement, but, lunging suddenly upward, Max seized the barrel of the pistol, and with a powerful wrench, twisted it from the grasp of the yellow hand. It was his own Browning!

At the time—in that moment of intense nervous excitement—he ascribed his sensations to his swift bout with Death—with Death who almost had

conquered; but later, even now, as he wrenched the weapon into his grasp, he wondered if physical fear could wholly account for the sickening revulsion which held him back from that rectangular opening in the bookcase. He thought that he recognized in this a kindred horror—as distinct from terror—to that which had come to him with the odor of roses through this very trap, upon the night of his first visit to the catacombs of Ho-Pin.

It was not as the fear which one has of a dangerous wild beast, but as the loathing which is inspired by a thing diseased, leprous, contagious…

A mighty effort of will was called for, but he managed to achieve it. He drew himself upright, breathing very rapidly, and looked through into the room—the room which he had occupied, and from which a moment ago the murderous yellow hand had protruded.

That room was empty… empty as he had left it!

"Mille tonnerres! he has escaped me!" he cried aloud, and the words did not seem of his own choosing.

WHO had escaped? Someone—man or woman; rather some THING, which, yellow handed, had sought to murder him!

Max ran across to the second trap and looked down at the woman whom he knew, beyond doubt, to be Mrs. Leroux. She lay in her death-like trance, unmoved.

Strung up to uttermost tension, he looked down at her and listened—listened, intently.

Above the fumes of the apartment in which the woman lay, a stifling odor of roses was clearly perceptible. The whole place was tropically hot. Not a sound, save the creaking of the shelf beneath him, broke the heavy stillness.

XXXIX. The Labyrinth

Feverishly, Max clutched at the last three books upon the shelf adjoining the gap. Of these, the center volume, a work bound in yellow calf and bearing no title, proved to be irremovable; right and left it could be inclined, but not moved outward. It masked the lever handle of the door!

But that door was locked.

Max, with upraised arms, swept the perspiration from his brows and eyes; he leant dizzily up against the door which defied him; his mind was working with febrile rapidity. He placed the pistol in his pocket, and, recrossing the room, mounted up again upon the shelves, and crept through into the apartment beyond, from which the yellow hand had protruded. He dropped, panting, upon the bed, then, eagerly leaping to the door, grasped the handle.

"Pardieu!" he muttered, "it is unlocked!"

Though the light was still burning in this room, the corridor outside was in darkness. He pressed the button of the ingenious lamp which was also a watch, and made for the door communicating with the cave of the dragon. It was readily to be detected by reason of its visible handle; the other doors being externally indistinguishable from the rest of the matting-covered wall.

The cave of the dragon proved to be empty, and in darkness. He ran across its polished floor and opened at random the door immediately facing him. A corridor similar to the one which he had just quitted was revealed. Another door was visible at one end, and to this he ran, pulled it open, stepped through the opening, and found himself back in the cave of the dragon!

"Morbleu!" he muttered, "it is bewildering—this!"

Yet another door, this time one of ebony, he opened; and yet another matting-lined corridor presented itself to his gaze. He swept it with the ray of the little lamp, detected a door, opened it, and entered a similar suite to those with which he already was familiar. It was empty, but, unlike the one which he himself had tenanted, this suite possessed two doors, the second opening out of the bathroom. To this he ran; it was unlocked; he opened it, stepped ahead… and was back again in the cave of the dragon.

"Mon dieu!" he cried, "this is Chinese—quite Chinese!"

He stood looking about him, flashing the ray of light upon doors which were opened and upon openings in the walls where properly there should have been no doors.

"I am too late!" he muttered; "they had information of this and they have 'unloaded.' That they intend to fly the country is proven by their leaving Mrs. Leroux behind. Ah, nom d'un nom, the good God grant that they have left also."…

Coincident with his thoughts of her, the voice of Helen Cumberly reached his ears! He stood there quivering in every nerve, as: "Help! Help!" followed by a choking, inarticulate cry, came, muffled, from somewhere—he could not determine where.

But the voice was the voice of Helen Cumberly. He raised his left fist and beat his brow as if to urge his brain to super-activity. Then, leaping, he was off.

Door after door he threw open, crying, "Miss Cumberly! Miss Cumberly! Where are you? Have courage! Help is here!"

But the silence remained unbroken—and always his wild search brought him back to the accursed cave of the golden dragon. He began to grow dizzy; he felt that his brain was bursting. For somewhere—somewhere but a few yards removed from him—a woman was in extreme peril!

Clutching dizzily at the pedestal of the dragon, he cried at the top of his voice:—

"Miss Cumberly! For the good God's sake answer me! Where are you?"

"Here, M. Max!" he was answered; "the door on your right… and then to your right again—quick! QUICK! Saints! she has killed me!"

It was Gianapolis who spoke!

Max hurled himself through the doorway indicated, falling up against the matting wall by reason of the impetus of his leap. He turned, leaped on, and one of the panels was slightly ajar; it was a masked door. Within was darkness out of which came the sounds of a great turmoil, as of wild beasts in conflict.

Max kicked the door fully open and flashed the ray of the torch into the room. It poured its cold light upon a group which, like some masterpiece of classic statuary, was to remain etched indelibly upon his mind.

Helen Cumberly lay, her head and shoulders pressed back upon the silken pillows of the bed, with both hands clutching the wrist of the Eurasian and striving to wrench the latter's fingers from her throat, in the white skin of which they were bloodily embedded. With his left arm about the face and head of the devilish half-caste, and grasping with his right hand her slender right wrist—putting forth all his strength to hold it back—was Gianapolis!

His face was of a grayish pallor and clammy with sweat; his crooked eyes had the glare of madness. The lithe body of the Eurasian writhing in his grasp seemed to possess the strength of two strong men; for palpably the

Greek was weakening. His left sleeve was torn to shreds—to bloody shreds beneath the teeth of the wild thing with which he fought; and lower, lower, always nearer to the throat of the victim, the slender, yellow arm forced itself, forced the tiny hand clutching a poniard no larger than a hatpin but sharp as an adder's tooth.

"Hold her!" whispered Gianapolis in a voice barely audible, as Max burst into the room. "She came back for this and… I followed her. She has the strength of… a tigress!"

Max hurled himself into the melee, grasping the wrist of the Eurasian below where it was clutched by Gianapolis. Nodding to the Greek to release his hold, he twisted it smartly upward.

The dagger fell upon the floor, and with an animal shriek of rage, the Eurasian tottered back. Max caught her about the waist and tossed her unceremoniously into a corner of the room.

Helen Cumberly slipped from the bed, and lay very white and still upon the garish carpet, with four tiny red streams trickling from the nail punctures in her throat. Max stooped and raised her shoulders; he glanced at the Greek, who, quivering in all his limbs, and on the verge of collapse, only kept himself upright by dint of clutching at the side of the doorway. Max realized that Gianapolis was past aiding him; his own resources were nearly exhausted, but, stooping, he managed to lift the girl and to carry her out into the corridor.

"Follow me!" he gasped, glancing back at Gianapolis; "Morbleu, make an effort! The keys—the keys!"

Laying Helen Cumberly upon one of the raised divans, with her head resting upon a silken cushion, Max, teeth tightly clenched and dreadfully conscious that his strength was failing him, waited for Gianapolis. Out from the corridor the Greek came staggering, and Max now perceived that he was bleeding profusely from a wound in the breast.

"She came back," whispered Gianapolis, clutching at the Frenchman for support… "the hellcat!… I did not know… that… Miss Cumberly was here. As God is my witness I did not know! But I followed… HER—Mahara… thank God I did! She has finished me, I think, but"—he lowered the crooked eyes to the form of Helen Cumberly—"never mind… Saints!"

He reeled and sank upon his knees. He clutched at the edge of his coat and raised it to his lips, wherefrom blood was gushing forth. Max stooped

eagerly, for as the Greek had collapsed upon the floor, he had heard the rattle of keys.

"She had… the keys," whispered Gianapolis. "They have… tabs… upon them… Mrs. Leroux… number 3 B. The door to the stair"—very, very slowly, he inclined his head toward the ebony door near which Max was standing—"is marked X. The door… at the top—into garage… B."

"Tell me," said Max, his arm about the dying man's shoulders—"try to tell me: who killed Mrs. Vernon and why?"

"MR. KING!" came in a rattling voice. "Because of the… carelessness of someone… Mrs. Vernon wandered into the room… of Mrs. Leroux. She seems to have had a fit of remorse… or something like it. She begged Mrs. Leroux to pull up… before… too late. Ho-Pin arrived just as she was crying to… Mrs. Leroux… and asking if she could ever forgive her… for bringing her here… It was Mrs. Vernon who… introduced Mrs.… Leroux. Ho-Pin heard her… say that she… would tell… Leroux the truth… as the only means"…

"Yes, yes, morbleu! I understand! And then?"

"Ho-Pin knows… women… like a book. He thought Mrs. Vernon would… shirk the scandal. We used to send our women… to Nurse Proctor's, then… to steady up a bit… We let Mrs. Vernon go… as usual. The scene with… Mrs. Leroux had shaken… her and she fainted… in the car… Victoria Street… I was with her. Nurse Proctor had… God! I am dying!… a time with her;… she got so hysterical that they had to… detain her… and three days later… her husband died; Proctor, the… fool… somehow left a paper containing the news in Mrs. Vernon's room… They had had to administer an injection that afternoon… and they thought she was… sleeping."…

"Morbleu! Yes, yes!—a supreme effort, my friend!"

"Directly Ho-Pin heard of Vernon's death, he knew that his hold… on Mrs. Vernon… was lost… He… and Mahara… and… MR. KING… drove straight to… Gillingham… Street… to… arrange… Ah!… she rushed like a mad woman into the street, a moment before… they arrived. A cab was passing, and"…

"I know this! I know this! What happened at Palace Mansions?"

The Greek's voice grew fainter.

"Mr. King followed… her… upstairs. Too late;… but whilst Leroux was in… Cumberly's flat… leaving door open… Mr. King went… in… Mahara… was watching… gave signal… whistle… of someone's approach. It was thought… Mr. King… had secured ALL the message… Mrs. Vernon… was… writing… Mr. King opened the door of… the lift-shaft… lift not working… climbed down that way… and out by door on… ground floor… when Mr.… the Member of Parliament… went upstairs."…

"Ah! pardieu! one last word! WHO IS MR. KING?"

Gianapolis lurched forward, his eyes glazing, half raised his arm—pointing back into the cave of the dragon—and dropped, face downward, on the floor, with a crimson pool forming slowly about his head.

An unfamiliar sound had begun to disturb the silence of the catacombs. Max glanced at the white face of Helen Cumberly, then directed the ray of the little lamp toward the further end of the apartment. A steady stream of dirty water was pouring into the cave of the dragon through the open door ahead of him.

Into the disc of light, leaped, fantastic, the witch figure of the Eurasian. She turned and faced him, threw up both her arms, and laughed shrilly, insanely. Then she turned and ran like a hare, her yellow silk dress gleaming in the moving ray. Inhaling sibilantly, Max leaped after her. In three strides he found his foot splashing in water. An instant he hesitated. Through the corridor ahead of him sped the yellow figure, and right to the end. The seemingly solid wall opened before her; it was another masked door.

Max crossed the threshold hard upon her heels. Three descending steps were ahead of him, and then a long brick tunnel in which swirled fully three feet of water, which, slowly rising, was gradually flooding the cave of the dragon.

On went the Eurasian, up to her waist in the flood, with Max gaining upon her, now, at every stride. There was a damp freshness in the air of the passage, and a sort of mist seemed to float above the water. This mist had a familiar smell…

They were approaching the river, and there was a fog to-night!

Even as he realized the fact, the quarry vanished, and the ray of light from Max's lamp impinged upon the opening in an iron sluice gate. The Eurasian had passed it, but Max realized that he must lower his head if he

would follow. He ducked rapidly, almost touching the muddy water with his face. A bank of yellow fog instantly enveloped him, and he pulled up short, for, instinctively, he knew that another step might precipitate him into the Thames.

He strove to peer about him, but the feeble ray of the lamp was incapable of penetrating the fog. He groped with his fingers, right and left, and presently found slimy wooden steps. He drew himself closely to these, and directed the light upon them. They led upward. He mounted cautiously, and was clear of the oily water, now, and upon a sort of gangway above which lowered a green and rotting wooden roof.

Obviously, the tide was rising; and, after seeking vainly to peer through the fog ahead, he turned and descended the steps again, finding himself now nearly up to his armpits in water. He just managed to get in under the sluice gate without actually submerging his head, and to regain the brick tunnel.

He paused for a moment, hoping to be able to lower the gate, but the apparatus was out of his reach, and he had nothing to stand upon to aid him in manipulating it.

Three or four inches of water now flooded the cave of the golden dragon. Max pulled the keys from his pocket, and unlocked the door at the foot of the steps. He turned, resting the electric lamp upon one of the little ebony tables, and lifting Helen Cumberly, carried her half-way up the steps, depositing her there with her back to the wall. He staggered down again; his remarkable physical resources were at an end; it must be another's work to rescue Mrs. Leroux. He stooped over Gianapolis, and turned his head. The crooked eyes glared up at him deathly.

"May the good God forgive you," he whispered. "You tried to make your peace with Him."

The sound of muffled blows began to be audible from the head of the steps. Max staggered out of the cave of the golden dragon. A slight freshness and dampness was visible in its atmosphere, and the gentle gurgling of water broke its heavy stillness. There was a new quality come into it, and, strangely, an old quality gone out from it. As he lifted the lamp from the table—now standing in slowly moving water—the place seemed no longer to be the cave of the golden dragon he had known…

He mounted the steps again, with difficulty, resting his shaking hands upon the walls. Shattering blows were being delivered upon the door,

above.

"Dunbar!" he cried feebly, stepping aside to avoid Helen Cumberly, where she lay. "Dunbar!"…

XL. Dawn at the Nore

The river police seemed to be floating, suspended in the fog, which now was so dense that the water beneath was invisible. Inspector Rogers, who was in charge, fastened up his coat collar about his neck and turned to Stringer, the Scotland Yard man, who sat beside him in the stern of the cutter gloomily silent.

"Time's wearing on," said Rogers, and his voice was muffled by the fog as though he were speaking from inside a box. "There must be some hitch."

"Work it out for yourself," said the C.I.D. man gruffly. "We know that the office in Globe Road belongs to Gianapolis, and according to the Eastern Exchange he was constantly ringing up East 39951; that's the warehouse of Kan-Suh Concessions. He garages his car next door to the said warehouse, and to-night our scouts follow Gianapolis and Max from Piccadilly Circus to Waterloo Station, where they discharge the taxi and pick up Gianapolis' limousine. Still followed, they drive—where? Straight to the garage at the back of that wharf yonder! Neither Gianapolis, Max, nor the chauffeur come out of the garage. I said, and I still say, that we should have broken in at once, but Dunbar was always pigheaded, and he thinks Max is a tin god."…

"Well, there's no sign from Max," said Rogers; "and as we aren't ten yards above the wharf, we cannot fail to hear the signal. For my part I never noticed anything suspicious, and never had anything reported, about this ginger firm, and where the swell dope-shop I've heard about can be situated, beats me. It can't very well be UNDER the place, or it would be below the level of the blessed river!"

"This waiting makes me sick!" growled Stringer. "If I understand aright —and I'm not sure that I do—there are two women tucked away there somewhere in that place"—he jerked his thumb aimlessly into the fog; "and

here we are hanging about with enough men in yards, in doorways, behind walls, and freezing on the river, to raid the Houses of Parliament!"

"It's a pity we didn't get the word from the hospitals before Max was actually inside," said Rogers. "For three wealthy ladies to be driven to three public hospitals in a sort of semi-conscious condition, with symptoms of opium, on the same evening isn't natural. It points to the fact that the boss of the den has UNLOADED! He's been thoughtful where his lady clients were concerned, but probably the men have simply been kicked out and left to shift for themselves. If we only knew one of them it might be confirmed."

"It's not worth worrying about, now," growled Stringer. "Let's have a look at the time."

He fumbled inside his overcoat and tugged out his watch.

"Here's a light," said Rogers, and shone the ray of an electric torch upon the watch-face.

"A quarter-to-three," grumbled Stringer. "There may be murder going on, and here we are."…

A sudden clamor arose upon the shore, near by; a sound as of sledge-hammers at work. But above this pierced shrilly the call of a police whistle.

"What's that?" snapped Rogers, leaping up. "Stand by there!"

The sound of the whistle grew near and nearer; then came a voice—that of Sergeant Sowerby—hailing them through the fog.

"DUNBAR'S IN! But the gang have escaped! They've got to a motor launch twenty yards down, on the end of the creek"…

But already the police boat was away.

"Let her go!" shouted Rogers—"close inshore! Keep a sharp lookout for a cutter, boys!"

Stringer, aroused now to excitement, went blundering forward through the fog, joining the men in the bows. Four pairs of eyes were peering through the mist, the damnable, yellow mist that veiled all things.

"Curse the fog!" said Stringer; "it's just our damn luck!"

"Cutter 'hoy!" bawled a man at his side suddenly, one of the river police more used to the mists of the Thames. "Cutter on the port bow, sir!"

"Keep her in sight," shouted Rogers from the stern; "don't lose her for your lives!"

Stringer, at imminent peril of precipitating himself into the water, was craning out over the bows and staring until his eyes smarted.

"Don't you see her?" said one of the men on the lookout. "She carries no lights, of course, but you can just make out the streak of her wake."

Harder, harder stared Stringer, and now a faint, lighter smudge in the blackness, ahead and below, proclaimed itself the wake of some rapidly traveling craft.

"I can hear her motor!" said another voice.

Stringer began, now, also to listen.

Muffled sirens were hooting dismally all about Limehouse Reach, and he knew that this random dash through the night was fraught with extreme danger, since this was a narrow and congested part of the great highway. But, listen as he might, he could not detect the sounds referred to.

The brazen roar of a big steamer's siren rose up before them. Rogers turned the head of the cutter sharply to starboard but did not slacken speed. The continuous roar grew deeper, grew louder.

"Sharp lookout there!" cried the inspector from the stern.

Suddenly over their bows uprose a black mass.

"My God!" cried Stringer, and fell back with upraised arms as if hoping to fend off that giant menace.

He lurched, as the cutter was again diverted sharply from its course, and must have fallen under the very bows of the oncoming liner, had not one of the lookouts caught him by the collar and jerked him sharply back into the boat.

A blaze of light burst out over them, and there were conflicting voices raised one in opposition to another. Above them all, even above the beating of the twin screws and the churning of the inky water, arose that of an officer from the bridge of the steamer.

"Where the flaming hell are YOU going?" inquired this stentorian voice; "haven't you got any blasted eyes and ears"…

High on the wash of the liner rode the police boat; down she plunged again, and began to roll perilously; up again—swimming it seemed upon frothing milk.

The clangor of bells, of voices, and of churning screws died, remote, astern.

"Damn close shave!" cried Rogers. "It must be clear ahead; they've just run into it."

One of the men on the lookout in the bows, who had never departed from his duty for an instant throughout this frightful commotion, now reported:

"Cutter crossing our bow, sir! Getting back to her course."

"Keep her in view," roared Rogers.

"Port, sir!"

"How's that?"

"Starboard, easy!"

"Keep her in view!"

"As she is, sir!"

Again they settled down to the pursuit, and it began to dawn upon Stringer's mind that the boat ahead must be engined identically with that of the police; for whilst they certainly gained nothing upon her, neither did they lose.

"Try a hail," cried Rogers from the stern. "We may be chasing the wrong boat!"

"Cutter 'hoy!" bellowed the man beside Stringer, using his hands in lieu of a megaphone—"heave to!"

"Give 'em 'in the King's name!'" directed Rogers again.

"Cutter 'hoy," roared the man through his trumpeted hands,—"heave to—in the King's name!"

Stringer glared through the fog, clutching at the shoulder of the shouter almost convulsively.

"Take no notice, sir," reported the man.

"Then it's the gang!" cried Rogers from the stern; "and we haven't made a mistake. Where the blazes are we?"

"Well on the way to Blackwall Reach, sir," answered someone. "Fog lifting ahead."

"It's the rain that's doing it," said the man beside Stringer.

Even as he spoke, a drop of rain fell upon the back of Stringer's hand. This was the prelude; then, with ever-increasing force, down came the rain in torrents, smearing out the fog from the atmosphere, as a painter, with a sponge, might wipe a color from his canvas. Long tails of yellow vapor, twining—twining—but always coiling downward, floated like snakes about them; and the oily waters of the Thames became pock-marked in the growing light.

Stringer now quite clearly discerned the quarry—a very rakish-looking motor cutter, painted black, and speeding seaward ahead of them. He quivered with excitement.

"Do you know the boat?" cried Rogers, addressing his crew in general.

"No, sir," reported his second-in-command; "she's a stranger to me. They must have kept her hidden somewhere." He turned and looked back into the group of faces, all directed toward the strange craft. "Do any of you know her?" he demanded.

A general shaking of heads proclaimed the negative.

"But she can shift," said one of the men. "They must have been going slow through the fog; she's creeping up to ten or twelve knots now, I should reckon."

"Your reckoning's a trifle out!" snapped Rogers, irritably, from the stern; "but she's certainly showing us her heels. Can't we put somebody ashore and have her cut off lower down?"

"While we're doing that," cried Stringer, excitedly, "she would land somewhere and we should lose the gang!"

"That's right," reluctantly agreed Rogers. "Can you see any of her people?"

Through the sheets of rain all peered eagerly.

"She seems to be pretty well loaded," reported the man beside Stringer, "but I can't make her out very well."

"Are we doing our damnedest?" inquired Rogers.

"We are, sir," reported the engineer; "she hasn't got another oat in her!"

Rogers muttered something beneath his breath, and sat there glaring ahead at the boat ever gaining upon her pursuer.

"So long as we keep her in sight," said Stringer, "our purpose is served. She can't land anybody."

"At her present rate," replied the man upon whose shoulders he was leaning, "she'll be out of sight by the time we get to Tilbury or she'll have hit a barge and gone to the bottom!"

"I'll eat my hat if I lose her!" declared Rogers angrily. "How the blazes they slipped away from the wharf beats me!"

"They didn't slip away from the wharf," cried Stringer over his shoulder. "You heard what Sowerby said; they lay in the creek below the wharf, and there was some passageway underneath."

"But damn it all, man!" cried Rogers, "it's high tide; they must be a gang of bally mermaids. Why, we were almost level with the wharf when we left, and if they came from BELOW that, as you say, they must have been below water!"

"There they are, anyway," growled Stringer.

Mile after mile that singular chase continued through the night. With every revolution of the screw, the banks to right and left seemed to recede, as the Thames grew wider and wider. A faint saltiness was perceptible in the air; and Stringer, moistening his dry lips, noted the saline taste.

The shipping grew more scattered. Whereas, at first, when the fog had begun to lift, they had passed wondering faces peering at them from lighters and small steamers, tow boats and larger anchored craft, now they raced, pigmy and remote, upon open waters, and through the raindrift gray hulls showed, distant, and the banks were a faint blur. It seemed absurd that, with all those vessels about, they nevertheless could take no steps to seek assistance in cutting off the boat which they were pursuing, but must drive on through the rain, ever losing, ever dropping behind that black speck ahead.

A faint swell began to be perceptible. Stringer, who throughout the whole pursuit thus far had retained his hold upon the man in the bows, discovered that his fingers were cramped. He had much difficulty in releasing that convulsive grip.

"Thank you!" said the man, smiling, when at last the detective released his grip. "I'll admit I'd scarcely noticed it myself, but now I come to think of it, you've been fastened onto me like a vise for over two hours!"

"Two hours!" cried Stringer; and, crouching down to steady himself, for the cutter was beginning to roll heavily, he pulled out his watch, and in the gray light inspected the dial.

It was true! They had been racing seaward for some hours!

"Good God!" he muttered.

He stood up again, unsteadily, feet wide apart, and peered ahead through the grayness.

The banks he could not see. Far away on the port bow a long gray shape lay—a moored vessel. To starboard were faint blurs, indistinguishable, insignificant; ahead, a black dot with a faint comet-like tail—the pursued

cutter—and ahead of that, again, a streak across the blackness, with another dot slightly to the left of the quarry…

He turned and looked along the police boat, noting that whereas, upon the former occasion of his looking, forms and faces had been but dimly visible, now he could distinguish them all quite clearly. The dawn was breaking.

"Where are we?" he inquired hoarsely.

"We're about one mile northeast of Sheerness and two miles southwest of the Nore Light!" announced Rogers—and he laughed, but not in a particularly mirthful manner.

Stringer temporarily found himself without words.

"Cutter heading for the open sea, sir," announced a man in the bows, unnecessarily.

"Quite so," snapped Rogers. "So are you!"

"We have got them beaten," said Stringer, a faint note of triumph in his voice. "We've given them no chance to land."

"If this breeze freshens much," replied Rogers, with sardonic humor, "they'll be giving US a fine chance to sink!"

Indeed, although Stringer's excitement had prevented him from heeding the circumstance, an ever-freshening breeze was blowing in his face, and he noted now that, quite mechanically, he had removed his bowler hat at some time earlier in the pursuit and had placed it in the bottom of the boat. His hair was blown in the wind, which sang merrily in his ears, and the cutter, as her course was slightly altered by Rogers, ceased to roll and began to pitch in a manner very disconcerting to the lands-man.

"It'll be rather fresh outside, sir," said one of the men, doubtfully. "We're miles and miles below our proper patrol"…

"Once we're clear of the bank it'll be more than fresh," replied Rogers; "but if they're bound for France, or Sweden, or Denmark, that's OUR destination, too!"…

On—and on—and on they drove. The Nore Light lay astern; they were drenched with spray. Now green water began to spout over the nose of the laboring craft.

"I've only enough juice to run us back to Tilbury, sir, if we put about now!" came the shouted report.

"It's easy to TALK!" roared Rogers. "If one of these big 'uns gets us broadside on, our number's up!"…

"Cutter putting over for Sheppey coast, sir!" bellowed the man in the bows.

Stringer raised himself, weakly, and sought to peer through the driving spray and rain-mist.

"By God! THEY'VE TURNED—TURTLE!"…

"Stand by with belts!" bellowed Rogers.

Rapidly life belts were unlashed; and, ahead, to port, to starboard, brine-stung eyes glared out from the reeling craft. Gray in the nascent dawn stretched the tossing sea about them; and lonely they rode upon its billows.

"PORT! PORT! HARD A-PORT!" screamed the lookout.

But Rogers, grimly watching the oncoming billows, knew that to essay the maneuver at that moment meant swamping the cutter. Straight ahead they drove. A wave, higher than any they yet had had to ride, came boiling down upon them… and twisting, writhing, upcasting imploring arms to the elements—the implacable elements—a girl, a dark girl, entwined, imprisoned in silken garments, swept upon its crest!

Out shot a cork belt into the boiling sea… and fell beyond her reach. She was swept past the cutter. A second belt was hurled from the stern…

The Eurasian, uttering a wailing cry like that of a seabird, strove to grasp it…

Close beside her, out of the wave, uprose a yellow hand, grasping—seeking—clutching. It fastened itself into the meshes of her floating hair…

"Here goes!" roared Rogers.

They plunged down into an oily trough; they turned; a second wave grew up above them, threateningly, built its terrible wall higher and higher over their side. Round they swung, and round, and round…

Down swept the eager wave… down—down—down… It lapped over the stern of the cutter; the tiny craft staggered, and paused, tremulous—dragged back by that iron grip of old Neptune—then leaped on—away—headed back into the Thames estuary, triumphant.

"God's mercy!" whispered Stringer—"that was touch-and-go!"

No living thing moved upon the waters.

XLI. Westminster—Midnight

Detective-Sergeant Sowerby reported himself in Inspector Dunbar's room at New Scotland Yard.

"I have completed my inquiries in Wharf-end Lane," he said; and pulling out his bulging pocketbook, he consulted it gravely.

Inspector Dunbar looked up.

"Anything important?" he asked.

"We cannot trace the makers of the sanitary fittings, and so forth, but they are all of American pattern. There's nothing in the nature of a trademark to be found from end to end of the place; even the iron sluice-gate at the bottom of the brick tunnel has had the makers' name chipped off, apparently with a cold chisel. So you see they were prepared for all emergencies!"

"Evidently," said Dunbar, resting his chin on the palms of his hands and his elbows upon the table.

"The office and warehouse staff of the ginger importing concern are innocent enough, as you know already. Kan-Suh Concessions was conducted merely as a blind, of course, but it enabled the Chinaman, Ho-Pin, to appear in Wharf-end Lane at all times of the day and night without exciting suspicion. He was supposed to be the manager, of course. The presence of the wharf is sufficient to explain how they managed to build the place without exciting suspicion. They probably had all the material landed there labeled as preserved ginger, and they would take it down below at night, long after the office and warehouse staff of Concessions had gone home. The workmen probably came and went by way of the river, also, commencing work after nightfall and going away before business commenced in the morning."

"It beats me," said Dunbar, reflectively, "how masons, plumbers, decorators, and all the other artisans necessary for a job of that description, could have been kept quiet."

"Foreigners!" said Sowerby triumphantly. "I'll undertake to say there wasn't an Englishman on the job. The whole of the gang was probably imported from abroad somewhere, boarded and lodged during the day-time in the neighborhood of Limehouse, and watched by Mr. Ho-Pin or

somebody else until the job was finished; then shipped back home again. It's easily done if money is no object."

"That's right enough," agreed Dunbar; "I have no doubt you've hit upon the truth. But now that the place has been dismantled, what does it look like? I haven't had time to come down myself, but I intend to do so before it's closed up."

"Well," said Sowerby, turning over a page of his notebook, "it looks like a series of vaults, and the Rev. Mr. Firmingham, a local vicar whom I got to inspect it this morning, assures me, positively, that it's a crypt."

"A crypt!" exclaimed Dunbar, fixing his eyes upon his subordinate.

"A crypt—exactly. A firm dealing in grease occupied the warehouse before Kan-Suh Concessions rented it, and they never seem to have suspected that the place possessed any cellars. The actual owner of the property, Sir James Crozel, an ex-Lord Mayor, who is also ground landlord of the big works on the other side of the lane, had no more idea than the man in the moon that there were any cellars beneath the place. You see the vaults are below the present level of the Thames at high tide; that's why nobody ever suspected their existence. Also, an examination of the bare walls—now stripped—shows that they were pretty well filled up to the top with ancient debris, to within a few years ago, at any rate."

"You mean that our Chinese friends excavated them?"

"No doubt about it. They were every bit of twenty feet below the present street level, and, being right on the bank of the Thames, nobody would have thought of looking for them unless he knew they were there."

"What do you mean exactly, Sowerby?" said Dunbar, taking out his fountain-pen and tapping his teeth with it.

"I mean," said Sowerby, "that someone connected with the gang must have located the site of these vaults from some very old map or book."

"I think you said that the Reverend Somebody-or-Other avers that they were a crypt?"

"He does; and when he pointed out to me the way the pillars were placed, as if to support the nave of a church, I felt disposed to agree with him. The place where the golden dragon used to stand (it isn't really gold, by the way!) would be under the central aisle, as it were; then there's a kind of side aisle on the right and left and a large space at top and bottom. The pillars are stone and of very early Norman pattern, and the last three or four steps

leading down to the place appear to belong to the original structure. I tell you it's the crypt of some old forgotten Norman church or monastery chapel."

"Most extraordinary!" muttered Dunbar.

"But I suppose it is possible enough. Probably the church was burnt or destroyed in some other way; deposits of river mud would gradually cover up the remaining ruins; then in later times, when the banks of the Thames were properly attended to, the site of the place would be entirely forgotten, of course. Most extraordinary!"

"That's the reverend gentleman's view, at any rate," said Sowerby, "and he's written three books on the subject of early Norman churches! He even goes so far as to say that he has heard—as a sort of legend—of the existence of a very large Carmelite monastery, accommodating over two hundred brothers, which stood somewhere adjoining the Thames within the area now covered by Limehouse Causeway and Pennyfields. There is a little turning not far from the wharf, known locally—it does not appear upon any map—as Prickler's Lane; and my friend, the vicar, tells me that he has held the theory for a long time"—Sowerby referred to his notebook with great solemnity—"that this is a corruption of Pre-aux-Clerce Lane."

"H'm!" said Dunbar; "very ingenious, at any rate. Anything else?"

"Nothing much," said Sowerby, scanning his notes, "that you don't know already. There was some very good stuff in the place—Oriental ware and so on, a library of books which I'm told is unique, and a tremendous stock of opium and hashish. It's a perfect maze of doors and observation-traps. There's a small kitchen at the end, near the head of the tunnel—which, by the way, could be used as a means of entrance and exit at low tide. All the electric power came through the meter of Kan-Suh Concessions."

"I see," said Dunbar, reflectively, glancing at his watch; "in a word, we know everything except"…

"What's that?" said Sowerby, looking up.

"The identity of Mr. King!" replied the inspector, reaching for his hat which lay upon the table.

Sowerby replaced his book in his pocket.

"I wonder if any of the bodies will ever come ashore?" he said.

"God knows!" rapped Dunbar; "we can't even guess how many were aboard. You might as well come along, Sowerby, I've just heard from Dr.

Cumberly. Mrs. Leroux"…

"Dead?"

"Dying," replied the inspector; "expected to go at any moment. But the doctor tells me that she may—it's just possible—recover consciousness before the end; and there's a bare chance"…

"I see," said Sowerby eagerly; "of course she must know!"

The two hastened to Palace Mansions. Despite the lateness of the hour, Whitehall was thronged with vehicles, and all the glitter and noise of midnight London surrounded them.

"It only seems like yesterday evening," said Dunbar, as they mounted the stair of Palace Mansions, "that I came here to take charge of the case. Damme! it's been the most exciting I've ever handled, and it's certainly the most disappointing."

"It is indeed," said Sowerby, gloomily, pressing the bell-button at the side of Henry Leroux's door.

The door was opened by Garnham; and these two, fresh from the noise and bustle of London's streets, stepped into the hushed atmosphere of the flat where already a Visitant, unseen but potent, was arrived, and now was beckoning, shadowlike, to Mira Leroux.

"Will you please sit down and wait," said Garnham, placing chairs for the two Scotland Yard men in the dining-room.

"Who's inside?" whispered Dunbar, with that note of awe in his voice which such a scene always produces; and he nodded in the direction of the lobby.

"Mr. Leroux, sir," replied the man, "the nurse, Miss Cumberly, Dr. Cumberly and Miss Ryland"…

"No one else?" asked the detective sharply.

"And Mr. Gaston Max," added the man. "You'll find whisky and cigars upon the table there, sir."

He left the room. Dunbar glanced across at Sowerby, his tufted brows raised, and a wry smile upon his face.

"In at the death, Sowerby!" he said grimly, and lifted the stopper from the cut-glass decanter.

In the room where Mira Leroux lay, so near to the Borderland that her always ethereal appearance was now positively appalling, a hushed group stood about the bed.

"I think she is awake, doctor," whispered the nurse softly, peering into the emaciated face of the patient.

Mira Leroux opened her eyes and smiled at Dr. Cumberly, who was bending over her. The poor faded eyes turned from the face of the physician to that of Denise Ryland, then to M. Max, wonderingly; next to Helen, whereupon an indescribable expression crept into them; and finally to Henry Leroux, who, with bowed head, sat in the chair beside her. She feebly extended her thin hand and laid it upon his hair. He looked up, taking the hand in his own. The eyes of the dying woman filled with tears as she turned them from the face of Leroux to Helen Cumberly—who was weeping silently.

"Look after… him," whispered Mira Leroux.

Her hand dropped and she closed her eyes again. Cumberly bent forward suddenly, glancing back at M. Max who stood in a remote corner of the room watching this scene.

Big Ben commenced to chime the hour of midnight. That frightful coincidence so startled Leroux that he looked up and almost rose from his chair in his agitation. Indeed it startled Cumberly, also, but did not divert him from his purpose.

"It is now or never!" he whispered.

He took the seemingly lifeless hand in his own, and bending over Mira Leroux, spoke softly in her ear:

"Mrs. Leroux," he said, "there is something which we all would ask you to tell us; we ask it for a reason—believe me."

Throughout the latter part of this scene the big clock had been chiming the hour, and now was beating out the twelve strokes of midnight; had struck six of them and was about to strike the seventh.

SEVEN! boomed the clock.

Mira Leroux opened her eyes and looked up into the face of the physician.

EIGHT!…

"Who," whispered Dr. Cumberly, "is he?"

NINE!

In the silence following the clock-stroke, Mira Leroux spoke almost inaudibly.

"You mean… MR. KING?"

TEN!

"Yes, yes! Did you ever SEE him?"…

Every head in the room was craned forward; every spectator tensed up to the highest ultimate point.

"Yes," said Mira Leroux quite clearly; "I saw him, Dr. Cumberly… He is"…

ELEVEN!

Mira Leroux moved her head and smiled at Helen Cumberly; then seemed to sink deeper into the downy billows of the bed. Dr. Cumberly stood up very slowly, and turned, looking from face to face.

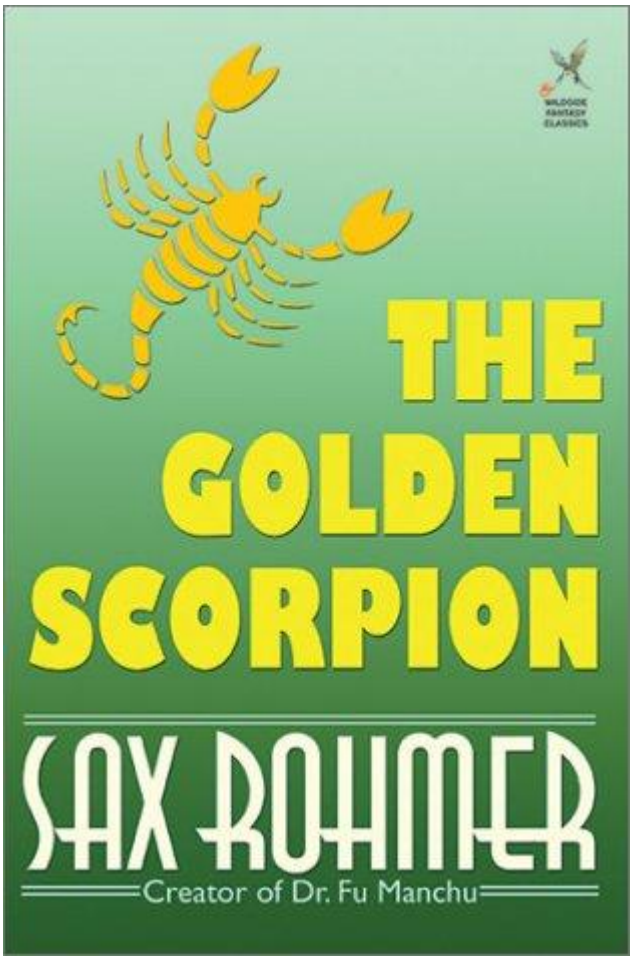
"It is finished," he said—"we shall never know!"

But Henry Leroux and Helen Cumberly, their glances meeting across the bed of the dead Mira, knew that for them it was not finished, but that Mr. King, the invisible, invisibly had linked them.

TWELVE!…

The Golden Scorpion

First Published 1919



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PART I

THE COWLED MAN

I. THE SHADOW OF A COWL

Keppel Stuart, M.D., F.R.S., awoke with a start and discovered himself to be bathed in cold perspiration. The moonlight shone in at his window, but did not touch the bed, therefore his awakening could not be due to this cause. He lay for some time listening for any unfamiliar noise which might account for the sudden disturbance of his usually sound slumbers. In the house below nothing stirred. His windows were widely open and he could detect that vague drumming which is characteristic of midnight London; sometimes, too, the clashing of buffers upon some siding of the Brighton railway where shunting was in progress and occasional siren notes from the Thames. Otherwise—nothing.

He glanced at the luminous disk of his watch. The hour was half-past two. Dawn was not far off. The night seemed to have become almost intolerably hot, and to this heat Stuart felt disposed to ascribe both his awakening and also a feeling of uncomfortable tension of which he now became aware. He continued to listen, and, listening and hearing nothing, recognized with anger that he was frightened. A sense of some presence oppressed him. Someone or something evil was near him—perhaps in the room, veiled by the shadows. This uncanny sensation grew more and more marked.

Stuart sat up in bed, slowly and cautiously, looking all about him. He remembered to have awakened once thus in India—and to have found a great cobra coiled at his feet. His inspection revealed the presence of nothing unfamiliar, and he stepped out on to the floor.

A faint clicking sound reached his ears. He stood quite still. The clicking was repeated.

"There is someone downstairs in my study!" muttered Stuart.

He became aware that the fear which held him was such that unless he acted and acted swiftly he should become incapable of action, but he remembered that whereas the moonlight poured into the bedroom, the staircase would be in complete darkness. He walked barefooted across to the dressing-table and took up an electric torch which lay there. He had not used it for some time, and he pressed the button to learn if the torch was

charged. A beam of white light shone out across the room, and at the same instant came another sound.

If it came from below or above, from the adjoining room or from outside in the road, Stuart knew not. But following hard upon the mysterious disturbance which had aroused him it seemed to pour ice into his veins, it added the complementary touch to his panic. For it was a kind of low wail —a ghostly minor wail in falling cadences—unlike any sound he had heard. It was so excessively horrible that it produced a curious effect.

Discovering from the dancing of the torch-ray that his hand was trembling, Stuart concluded that he had awakened from a nightmare and that this fiendish wailing was no more than an unusually delayed aftermath of the imaginary horrors which had bathed him in cold perspiration.

He walked resolutely to the door, threw it open and cast the beam of light on to the staircase. Softly he began to descend. Before the study door he paused. There was no sound. He threw open the door, directing the torch-ray into the room.

Cutting a white lane through the blackness, it shone fully upon his writing-table, which was a rather fine Jacobean piece having a sort of quaint bureau superstructure containing cabinets and drawers. He could detect nothing unusual in the appearance of the littered table. A tobacco jar stood there, a pipe resting in the lid. Papers and books were scattered untidily as he had left them, surrounding a tray full of pipe and cigarette ash. Then, suddenly, he saw something else.

One of the bureau drawers was half opened.

Stuart stood quite still, staring at the table. There was no sound in the room. He crossed slowly, moving the light from right to left. His papers had been overhauled methodically. The drawers had been replaced, but he felt assured that all had been examined. The light switch was immediately beside the outer door, and Stuart walked over to it and switched on both lamps. Turning, he surveyed the brilliantly illuminated room. Save for himself, it was empty. He looked out into the hallway again. There was no one there. No sound broke the stillness. But that consciousness of some near presence asserted itself persistently and uncannily.

"My nerves are out of order!" he muttered. "No one has touched my papers. I must have left the drawer open myself."

He switched off the light and walked across to the door. He had actually passed out intending to return to his room, when he became aware of a slight draught. He stopped.

Someone or something, evil and watchful, seemed to be very near again. Stuart turned and found himself gazing fearfully in the direction of the open study door. He became persuaded anew that someone was hiding there, and snatching up an ash stick which lay upon a chair in the hall he returned to the door. One step into the room he took and paused—palsied with a sudden fear which exceeded anything he had known.

A white casement curtain was drawn across the French windows ... and outlined upon this moon-bright screen he saw a tall figure. It was that of a *cowled man*!

Such an apparition would have been sufficiently alarming had the cowl been that of a monk, but the outline of this phantom being suggested that of one of the Misericordia brethren or the costume worn of old by the familiars of the Inquisition!

His heart leapt wildly, and seemed to grow still. He sought to cry out in his terror, but only emitted a dry gasping sound.

The psychology of panic is obscure and has been but imperfectly explored. The presence of the terrible cowled figure afforded a confirmation of Stuart's theory that he was the victim of a species of waking nightmare.

Even as he looked, the shadow of the cowled man moved—and was gone.

Stuart ran across the room, jerked open the curtains and stared out across the moon-bathed lawn, its prospect terminated by high privet hedges. One of the French windows was wide open. There was no one on the lawn; there was no sound.

"Mrs. M'Gregor swears that I always forget to shut these windows at night!" he muttered.

He closed and bolted the window, stood for a moment looking out across the empty lawn, then turned and went out of the room.

II. THE PIBROCH OF THE M'GREGORS

Dr. Stuart awoke in the morning and tried to recall what had occurred during the night. He consulted his watch and found the hour to be six a.m. No one was stirring in the house, and he rose and put on a bath robe. He felt perfectly well and could detect no symptoms of nervous disorder. Bright sunlight was streaming into the room, and he went out on to the landing, fastening the cord of his gown as he descended the stairs.

His study door was locked, with the key outside. He remembered having locked it. Opening it, he entered and looked about him. He was vaguely disappointed. Save for the untidy litter of papers upon the table, the study was as he had left it on retiring. If he could believe the evidence of his senses, nothing had been disturbed.

Not content with a casual inspection, he particularly examined those papers which, in his dream adventure, he had believed to have been submitted to mysterious inspection. They showed no signs of having been touched. The casement curtains were drawn across the recess formed by the French windows, and sunlight streamed in where, silhouetted against the pallid illumination of the moon, he had seen the man in the cowl. Drawing back the curtains, he examined the window fastenings. They were secure. If the window had really been open in the night, he must have left it so himself.

"Well," muttered Stuart—"of all the amazing nightmares!"

He determined, immediately he had bathed and completed his toilet, to write an account of the dream for the Psychical Research Society, in whose work he was interested. Half an hour later, as the movements of an awakened household began to proclaim themselves, he sat down at his writing-table and commenced to write.

Keppel Stuart was a dark, good-looking man of about thirty-two, an easy-going bachelor who, whilst not over ambitious, was nevertheless a brilliant physician. He had worked for the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine and had spent several years in India studying snake poisons. His purchase of this humdrum suburban practice had been dictated by a desire to make a home for a girl who at the eleventh hour had declined to share it. Two years had elapsed since then, but the shadow still lay upon Stuart's life, its influence being revealed in a certain apathy, almost indifference, which characterised his professional conduct.

His account of the dream completed, he put the paper into a pigeon-hole and forgot all about the matter. That day seemed to be more than usually dull and the hours to drag wearily on. He was conscious of a sort of suspense. He was waiting for something, or for someone. He did not choose to analyse this mental condition. Had he done so, the explanation was simple—and one that he dared not face.

At about ten o'clock that night, having been called out to a case, he returned to his house, walking straight into the study as was his custom and casting a light Burberry with a soft hat upon the sofa beside his stick and bag. The lamps were lighted, and the book-lined room, indicative of a studious and not over-wealthy bachelor, looked cheerful enough with the firelight dancing on the furniture.

Mrs. M'Gregor, a grey-haired Scotch lady, attired with scrupulous neatness, was tending the fire at the moment, and hearing Stuart come in she turned and glanced at him.

"A fire is rather superfluous to-night, Mrs. M'Gregor," he said. "I found it unpleasantly warm walking."

"May is a fearsome treacherous month, Mr. Keppel," replied the old housekeeper, who from long association with the struggling practitioner had come to regard him as a son. "An' a wheen o' dry logs is worth a barrel o' pheesic. To which I would add that if ye're hintin' it's time ye shed ye're woolsies for ye're summer wear, all I have to reply is that I hope sincerely ye're patients are more prudent than yoursel'."

She placed his slippers in the fender and took up the hat, stick and coat from the sofa. Stuart laughed.

"Most of the neighbors exhibit their wisdom by refraining from becoming patients of mine, Mrs. M'Gregor."

"That's no weesdom; it's just preejudice." "Prejudice!" cried Stuart, dropping down upon the sofa.

"Aye," replied Mrs. M'Gregor firmly—"preejudice! They're no' that daft but they're well aware o' who's the cleverest physeecian in the deestrict, an' they come to nane other than Dr. Keppel Stuart when they're sair sick and think they're dying; but ye'll never establish the practice you desairve, Mr. Keppel—never—until—"

"Until when, Mrs. M'Gregor?"

"Until ye take heed of an auld wife's advice and find a new housekeeper."

"Mrs. M'Gregor!" exclaimed Stuart with concern. "You don't mean that you want to desert me? After—let me see—how many years is it, Mrs. M'Gregor?"

"Thirty years come last Shrove Tuesday; I dandled ye on my knee, and eh! but ye were bonny! God forbid, but I'd like to see ye thriving as ye desairve, and that ye'll never do whilst ye're a bachelor."

"Oh!" cried Stuart, laughing again—"oh, that's it, is it? So you would like me to find some poor inoffensive girl to share my struggles?"

Mrs. M'Gregor nodded wisely. "She'd have nane so many to share. I know ye think I'm old-fashioned, Mr. Keppel and it may be I am; but I do assure you I would be sair harassed, if stricken to my bed—which, please God, I won't be—to receive the veesits of a pairsonable young bachelor—"

"Er—Mrs. M'Gregor!" interrupted Stuart, coughing in mock rebuke —"quite so! I fancy we have discussed this point before, and as you say your ideas are a wee bit, just a wee bit, behind the times. On this particular point I mean. But I am very grateful to you, very sincerely grateful, for your disinterested kindness; and if ever I should follow your advice——"

Mrs. M'Gregor interrupted him, pointing to his boots. "Ye're no' that daft as to sit in wet boots?"

"Really they are perfectly dry. Except for a light shower this evening, there has been no rain for several days. However, I may as well, since I shall not be going out again."

He began to unlace his boots as Mrs. M'Gregor pulled the white casement curtains across the windows and then prepared to retire. Her hand upon the door knob, she turned again to Stuart.

"The foreign lady called half an hour since, Mr. Keppel."

Stuart desisted from unlacing his boots and looked up with lively interest. "Mlle. Dorian! Did she leave any message?"

"She obsairved that she might repeat her veesit later," replied Mrs. M'Gregor, and, after a moment's hesitation; "she awaited ye're return with exemplary patience."

"Really, I am sorry I was detained," declared Stuart, replacing his boot. "How long has she been gone, then?"

"Just the now. No more than two or three minutes. I trust she is no worse."

"Worse!"

"The lass seemed o'er anxious to see you."

"Well, you know, Mrs. M'Gregor, she comes a considerable distance."

"So I am given to understand, Mr. Keppel," replied the old lady; "and in a grand luxurious car."

Stuart assumed an expression of perplexity to hide his embarrassment. "Mrs. M'Gregor," he said rather ruefully, "you watch over me as tenderly as my own mother would have done. I have observed a certain restraint in your manner whenever you have had occasion to refer to Mlle. Dorian. In what way does she differ from my other lady patients?" And even as he spoke the words he knew in his heart that she differed from every other woman in the world.

Mrs. M'Gregor sniffed. "Do your other lady patients wear furs that your airnings for six months could never pay for, Mr. Keppel?" she inquired.

"No, unfortunately they pin their faith, for the most part, to gaily coloured shawls. All the more reason why I should bless the accident which led Mlle. Dorian to my door."

Mrs. M'Gregor, betraying, in her interest, real suspicion, murmured *sotto voce*: "Then she *is* a patient?"

"What's that?" asked Stuart, regarding her surprisedly. "A patient? Certainly. She suffers from insomnia."

"I'm no' surprised to hear it."

"What do you mean, Mrs. M'Gregor?"

"Now, Mr. Keppel, laddie, ye're angry with me, and like enough I am a meddlesome auld woman. But I know what a man will do for shining een and a winsome face—nane better to my sorrow—and twa times have I heard the Warning."

Stuart stood up in real perplexity. "Pardon my density, Mrs. M'Gregor, but—er—the Warning? To what 'warning' do you refer?"

Seating herself in the chair before the writing-table, Mrs. M'Gregor shook her head pensively. "What would it be," she said softly, "but the Pibroch o' the M'Gregors?"

Stuart came across and leaned upon a corner of the table. "The Pibroch of the M'Gregors?" he repeated.

"Nane other. 'Tis said to be Rob Roy's ain piper that gives warning when danger threatens ane o' the M'Gregors or any they love."

Stuart restrained a smile, and, "A well-meaning but melancholy retainer!" he commented.

"As well as I hear you now, laddie, I heard the pibroch on the day a certain woman first crossed my threshold, nigh thirty years ago, in Inverary. And as plainly as I heard it wailing then, I heard it the first evening that Miss Dorian came to this house!"

Torn between good-humoured amusement and real interest, "If I remember rightly," said Stuart, "Mlle. Dorian first called here just a week ago, and immediately before I returned from an Infirmary case?"

"Your memory is guid, Mr. Keppel."

"And when, exactly, did you hear this Warning?"

"Twa minutes before you entered the house; and I heard it again the now."

"What! you heard it to-night?"

"I heard it again just the now and I lookit out the window."

"Did you obtain a glimpse of Rob Roy's piper?"

"Ye're laughing at an old wife, laddie. No, but I saw Miss Dorian away in her car and twa minutes later I saw yourself coming round the corner."

"If she had only waited another two minutes," murmured Stuart. "No matter; she may return. And are these the only occasions upon which you have heard this mysterious sound, Mrs. M'Gregor?"

"No, Master Keppel, they are not. I assure ye something threatens. It wakened me up in the wee sma' hours last night—the piping—an' I lay awake shaking for long eno'."

"How extraordinary. Are you sure your imagination is not playing you tricks?"

"Ah, you're no' takin' me seriously, laddie."

"Mrs. M'Gregor"—he leaned across the table and rested his hands upon her shoulders—"you are a second mother to me, your care makes me feel like a boy again; and in these grey days it's good to feel like a boy again. You think I am laughing at you, but I'm not. The strange tradition of your family is associated with a tragedy in your life; therefore I respect it. But have no fear with regard to Mlle. Dorian. In the first place she is a patient; in the second—I am merely a penniless suburban practitioner. Good-night, Mrs. M'Gregor. Don't think of waiting up. Tell Mary to show Mademoiselle in here directly she arrives—that is if she really returns."

Mrs. M'Gregor stood up and walked slowly to the door. "I'll show Mademoiselle in mysel', Mr. Keppel," she said,—"and show her out."

She closed the door very quietly.

III. THE SCORPION'S TAIL

Seating himself at the writing-table, Stuart began mechanically to arrange his papers. Then from the tobacco jar he loaded his pipe, but his manner remained abstracted. Yet he was not thinking of the phantom piper but of Mlle. Dorian.

Until he had met this bewilderingly pretty woman he had thought that his heart was for evermore proof against the glances of bright eyes. Mademoiselle had disillusioned him. She was the most fragrantly lovely creature he had ever met, and never for one waking moment since her first visit, had he succeeded in driving her bewitching image from his mind. He had tried to laugh at his own folly, then had grown angry with himself, but finally had settled down to a dismayed acceptance of a wild infatuation.

He had no idea who Mlle. Dorian was; he did not even know her exact nationality, but he strongly suspected there was a strain of Eastern blood in her veins. Although she was quite young, apparently little more than twenty years of age, she dressed like a woman of unlimited means, and although all her visits had been at night he had had glimpses of the big car which had aroused Mrs. M'Gregor's displeasure.

Yes—so ran his musings, as, pipe in mouth, he rested his chin in his hands and stared grimly into the fire—she had always come at night and always alone. He had supposed her to be a Frenchwoman, but an unmarried French girl of good family does not make late calls, even upon a medical man, unattended. Had he perchance unwittingly made himself a party to the escapade of some unruly member of a noble family? From the first he had shrewdly suspected the ailments of Mlle. Dorian to be imaginary—Mlle. Dorian? It was an odd name.

"I shall be imagining she is a disguised princess if I wonder about her any more!" he muttered angrily.

Detecting himself in the act of heaving a weary sigh, he coughed in self-reproval and reached into a pigeon-hole for the MS. of his unfinished paper on "Snake Poisons and Their Antidotes." By chance he pulled out the brief account, written the same morning, of his uncanny experience during the night. He read it through reflectively.

It was incomplete. A certain mental haziness which he had noted upon awakening had in some way obscured the facts. His memory of the dream had been imperfect. Even now, whilst recognizing that some feature of the experience was missing from his written account, he could not identify the omission. But one memory arose starkly before him—that of the cowled man who had stood behind the curtains. It had power to chill him yet. The old incredulity returned and methodically he re-examined the contents of some of the table drawers. Ere long, however, he desisted impatiently.

"What the devil could a penniless doctor have hidden in his desk that was worth stealing!" he said aloud. "I must avoid cold salmon and cucumber in future."

He tossed the statement aside and turned to his scientific paper.

There came knock at the door.

"Come in!" snapped Stuart irritably; but the next moment he had turned, eager-eyed to the servant who had entered.

"Inspector Dunbar has called, sir."

"Oh, all right," said Stuart, repressing another sigh. "Show him in here."

There entered, shortly, a man of unusual height, a man gaunt and square both of figure and of face. He wore his clothes and his hair untidily. He was iron grey and a grim mouth was ill concealed by the wiry moustache. The most notable features of a striking face were the tawny leonine eyes, which could be fierce, which could be pensive and which were often kindly.

"Good evening, doctor," he said—and his voice was pleasant and unexpectedly light in tome. "Hope I don't intrude."

"Not at all, Inspector," Stuart assured him.

"Make yourself comfortable in the armchair and fill your pipe."

"Thanks," said Dunbar. "I will." He took out his pipe and reached out a long arm for the tobacco jar. "I came to see if you could give me a tip on a matter that has cropped up."

"Something in my line?" asked Stuart, a keen professional look coming momentarily into his eyes.

"It's supposed to be a poison case, although I can't see it myself," answered the detective—to whom Keppel Stuart's unusual knowledge of poisons had been of service in the past; "but if what I suspect is true, it's a very big case all the same."

Laying down his pipe, which he had filled but not lighted, Inspector Dunbar pulled out from the inside pocket of his tweed coat a bulging note-book and extracted therefrom some small object wrapped up in tissue paper. Unwrapping this object, he laid it upon the table.

"Tell me what that is, doctor," he said, "and I shall be obliged."

Stuart peered closely at that which lay before him. It was a piece of curiously shaped gold, cunningly engraved in a most unusual way. Rather less than an inch in length, it formed a crescent made up of six oval segments joined one to another, the sixth terminating in a curled point. The first and largest segment ended jaggedly where it had evidently been snapped off from the rest of the ornament—if the thing had formed part of an ornament. Stuart looked up, frowning in a puzzled way.

"It is a most curious fragment of jewellery—possibly of Indian origin," he said.

Inspector Dunbar lighted his pipe and tossed the match-end into the fire. "But what does it represent?" he asked.

"Oh, as to that—I said a *curious* fragment advisedly, because I cannot imagine any woman wearing such a beastly thing. It is the *tail of a scorpion.*"

"Ah!" cried Dunbar, the tawny eyes glittering with excitement. "The tail of a scorpion! I thought so! And Sowerby would have it that it represented the stem of a Cactus or Prickly Pear!"

"Not so bad a guess," replied Stuart. "There *are* resemblances—not in the originals but in such a miniature reproduction as this. He was wrong, however. May I ask where you obtained the fragment?"

"I'm here to tell you, doctor, for now that I know it's a scorpion's tail I know that I'm out of my depth as well. You've travelled in the East and lived in the East—two very different things. Now, while you were out there, in India, China, Burma, and so on, did you ever come across a religion or a cult that worshipped scorpions?"

Stuart frowned thoughtfully, rubbing his chin with the mouthpiece of his pipe. Dunbar watched him expectantly.

"Help yourself to whiskey-and-soda, Inspector," said Stuart absently. "You'll find everything on the side-table yonder. I'm thinking."

Inspector Dunbar nodded, stood up and crossed the room, where he busied himself with syphon and decanter. Presently he returned, carrying two full glasses, one of which he set before Stuart. "What's the answer, doctor?" he asked.

"The answer is *no*. I am not acquainted with any sect of scorpion-worshippers, Inspector. But I once met with a curious experience at Su-Chow in China, which I have never been able to explain, but which may interest you. It wanted but a few minutes to sunset, and I was anxious to get back to my quarters before dusk fell. Therefore I hurried up my boy, who was drawing the rickshaw, telling him to cross the Canal by the Wu-men Bridge. He ran fleetly in that direction, and we were actually come to the steep acclivity of the bridge, when suddenly the boy dropped the shafts and fell down on his knees, hiding his face in his hands.

"'Shut your eyes tightly, master!' he whispered. 'The Scorpion is coming!'

"I stared down at him in amazement, as was natural, and not a little angrily; for his sudden action had almost pitched me on my head. But there he crouched, immovable, and staring up the slope I say that it was entirely deserted except for one strange figure at that moment crossing the crown of the bridge and approaching. It was the figure of a tall and dignified Chinaman, or of one who wore the dress of a Chinaman. For the extra-ordinary thing about the stranger's appearance was this; he also wore a thick green veil!"

"Covering his face?"

"So as to cover his face completely. I was staring at him in wonder, when the boy, seeming to divine the other's approach, whispered, 'Turn your head away! Turn your head away!"

"He was referring to the man with the veil?"

"Undoubtedly. Of course I did nothing of the kind, but it was impossible to discern the stranger's features through the thick gauze, although he passed quite close to me. He had not proceeded another three paces, I should think, before my boy had snatched up the shafts and darted across the bridge as though all hell were after him! Here's the odd thing, though; I could never induce him to speak a word on the subject afterwards! I bullied him and bribed him, but all to no purpose. And although I must have asked

more than a hundred Chinamen in every station of society from mandarin to mendicant, 'Who or what is *The Scorpion?*' one and all looked stupid, blandly assuring me that they did not know what I meant."

"H'm!" said Dunbar, "it's a queer yarn, certainly. How long ago would that be, doctor?"

"Roughly—five years."

"It sounds as though it might belong to the case. Some months back, early in the winter, we received instructions at the Yard to look out everywhere in the press, in buffets, theatres, but particularly in criminal quarters, for any reference (of any kind whatever) to a scorpion. I was so puzzled that I saw the Commissioner about it, and he could tell me next to nothing. He said the word had come through from Paris, but that Paris seemed to know no more about it than we did. It was associated in some way with the sudden deaths of several notable public men about that time; but as there was no evidence of foul play in any of the cases, I couldn't see what it meant at all. Then, six weeks ago, Sir Frank Narcombe, the surgeon, fell dead in the foyer of a West-End theatre—you remember?"

IV. MADEMOISELLE DORIAN

The telephone bell rang.

Stuart reached across for the instrument and raised the receiver. "Yes," he said—"Dr. Stuart speaking. Inspector Dunbar is here. Hold on."

He passed the instrument to Dunbar, who had stood up on hearing his name mentioned. "Sergeant Sowerby at Scotland Yard wishes to speak to you, Inspector."

"Hullo," said Dunbar—"that you, Sowerby. Yes—but I arrived here only a short time ago. What's that?—Max? Good God! what does it all mean! Are you sure of the number—49685? Poor chap—he should have worked with us instead of going off alone like that. But he was always given to that sort of thing. Wait for me. I'll be with you in a few minutes. I can get a taxi. And, Sowerby—listen! It's 'The Scorpion' case right enough. That bit of gold found on the dead man is not a cactus stem; it's a scorpion's tail!"

He put down the telephone and turned to Stuart, who had been listening to the words with growing concern. Dunbar struck his open palm down on to the table with a violent gesture.

"We have been asleep!" he exclaimed. "Gaston Max of the Paris Service has been at work in London for a month, and we didn't know it!"

"Gaston Max!" cried Start—"then it must be a big case indeed."

As a student of criminology the name of the celebrated Frenchman was familiar to him as that of the foremost criminal investigator in Europe, and he found himself staring at the fragment of gold with a new and keener interest.

"Poor chap," continued Dunbar—"it was his last. The body brought in from Hanover Hole has been identified as his."

"What! it is the body of Gaston Max!"

"Paris has just wired that Max's reports ceased over a week ago. He was working on the case of Sir Frank Narcombe, it seems, and I never knew! But I predicted a long time ago that Max would play the lone-hand game once too often. They sent particulars. The identification disk is his. Oh! there's no doubt about it, unfortunately. The dead man's face is unrecognizable, but it's not likely there are two disks of that sort bearing the initials G.M. and the number 49685. I'm going along now. Should you care to come, doctor?"

"I am expecting a patient, Inspector," replied Stuart—"er—a special case. But I hope you will keep me in touch with this affair?"

"Well, I shouldn't have suggested your coming to the Yard if I hadn't wanted to do that. As a matter of fact, this scorpion job seems to resolve itself into a case of elaborate assassination by means of some unknown poison; and although I should have come to see you in any event, because you have helped me more than once, I came to-night at the suggestion of the Commissioner. He instructed me to retain your services if they were available."

"I am honoured," replied Stuart. "But after all, Inspector, I am merely an ordinary suburban practitioner. My reputation has yet to be made. What's the matter with Halesowen of Upper Wimpole Street? He's the big man."

"And if Sir Frank Narcombe was really poisoned—as Paris seems to think he was—he's also a big fool." retorted Dunbar bluntly. "He agreed that death was due to heart trouble."

"I know he did; unsuspected ulcerative endocarditis. Perhaps he was right."

"If he was right," said Dunbar, taking up the piece of gold from the table, "what was Gaston Max doing with this thing in his possession?"

"There may be no earthly connection between Max's inquiries and the death of Sir Frank."

"On the other hand—there may! Leaving Dr. Halesowen out of the question, are you open to act as expert adviser in this case?"

"Certainly; delighted."

"Your fee is your own affair, doctor. I will communicate with you later, if you wish, or call again in the morning."

Dunbar wrapped up the scorpion's tail in the piece of tissue paper and was about to replace it in his note-case. Then:

"I'll leave this with you, doctor," he said. "I know it will be safe enough, and you might like to examine it at greater leisure."

"Very well," replied Stuart. "Some of the engraving is very minute. I will have a look at it through a glass later."

He took the fragment from Dunbar, who had again unwrapped it, and, opening a drawer of the writing-table in which he kept his cheque-book and some few other personal valuables, he placed the curious piece of gold-work within and relocked the drawer.

"I will walk as far as the cab-rank with you," he said, finding himself to be possessed of a spirit of unrest. Whereupon the two went out of the room, Stuart extinguishing the lamps as he came to the door.

They had not left the study for more than two minutes ere a car drew up outside the house, and Mrs. M'Gregor ushered a lady into the room but lately quitted by Stuart and Dunbar, turning up the lights as she entered.

"The doctor has gone out but just now, Miss Dorian," she said stiffly. "I am sorry that ye are so unfortunate in your veesits. But I know he'll be no more than a few minutes."

The girl addressed was of a type fully to account for the misgivings of the shrewd old Scotswoman. She had the slim beauty of the East allied to the elegance of the West. Her features, whilst cast in a charming European mould, at the same time suggested in some subtle way the Oriental. She had the long, almond-shaped eyes of the Egyptian, and her hair, which she wore unconventionally in a picturesque fashion reminiscent of the *harem*, was

inclined to be "fuzzy," but gleamed with coppery tints where the light touched its waves.

She wore a cloak of purple velvet having a hooded collar of white fox fur; it fastened with golden cords. Beneath it was a white and gold robe, cut with classic simplicity of line and confined at the waist by an ornate Eastern girdle. White stockings and dull gold shoes exhibited to advantage her charming little feet and slim ankles, and she carried a handbag of Indian beadwork. Mlle. Dorian was a figure calculated to fire the imagination of any man and to linger long and sweetly in the memory.

Mrs. M'Gregor, palpably ill at ease, conducted her to an armchair.

"You are very good," said the visitor, speaking with a certain hesitancy and with a slight accent most musical and fascinating. "I wait a while if I may."

"Dear, dear," muttered Mrs. M'Gregor, beginning to poke the fire, "he has let the fire down, of course! Is it out? No ... I see a wee sparkie!"

She set the poker upright before the nearly extinguished fire and turned triumphantly to Mlle. Dorian, who was watching her with a slight smile.

"That will be a comforting blaze in a few minutes, Miss Dorian," she said, and went towards the door.

"If you please," called the girl, detaining her—"do you permit me to speak on the telephone a moment? As Dr. Stuart is not at home, I must explain that I wait for him."

"Certainly, Miss Dorian," replied Mrs. M'Gregor; "use the telephone by all means. But I think the doctor will be back any moment now."

"Thank you so much."

Mrs. M'Gregor went out, not without a final backward glance at the elegant figure in the armchair. Mlle. Dorian was seated, her chin resting in her hand and her elbow upon the arm of the chair, gazing into the smoke arising from the nearly extinguished ember of the fire. The door closed, and Mrs. M'Gregor's footsteps could be heard receding along the corridor.

Mlle. Dorian sprang from the chair and took out of her handbag a number of small keys attached to a ring. Furtively she crossed the room, all the time listening intently, and cast her cloak over the back of the chair which was placed before the writing-table. Her robe of white and gold clung to her shapely figure as she bent over the table and tried three of the keys in the lock of the drawer which contained Stuart's cheque-book and in which he

had recently placed the mysterious gold ornament. The third key fitted the lock, and Mlle. Dorian pulled open the drawer. She discovered first the cheque-book and next a private account-book; then from under the latter she drew out a foolscap envelope sealed with red wax and bearing, in Stuart's handwriting, the address:

Lost Property Office,
Metropolitan Police,
New Scotland Yard, S.W. 1

She uttered a subdued exclamation; then, as a spark of light gleamed within the open drawer, she gazed as if stupefied at the little ornament which she had suddenly perceived lying near the cheque-book. She picked it up and stared at it aghast. A moment she hesitated; then, laying down the fragment of gold and also the long envelope upon the table, she took up the telephone. Keeping her eyes fixed upon the closed door of the study, she asked for the number East 89512, and whilst she waited for the connection continued that nervous watching and listening. Suddenly she began to speak, in a low voice.

"Yes! ... Miska speaks. Listen! One of the new keys—it fits. I have the envelope. But, also in the same drawer, I find a part of a broken gold *'agrab* (scorpion). Yes, it is broken. It must be they find it, on him." Her manner grew more and more agitated. "Shall I bring it? The envelope it is very large. I do not know if——"

From somewhere outside the house came a low, wailing cry—a cry which Stuart, if he had heard it, must have recognized to be identical with that which he had heard in the night—but which he had forgotten to record in his written account.

"Ah!" whispered the girl—"there is the signal! It is the doctor who returns." She listened eagerly, fearfully, to the voice which spoke over the wires. "Yes—yes!"

Always glancing toward the door, she put down the instrument, took up the long envelope and paused for a moment, thinking that she had heard the sound of approaching footsteps. She exhibited signs of nervous indecision, tried to thrust the envelope into her little bag and realized that even folded it would not fit so as to escape observation. She ran across to the grate and

dropped the envelope upon the smouldering fire. As she did so, the nicely balanced poker fell with a clatter upon the tiled hearth.

She started wildly, ran back to the table, took up the broken ornament and was about to thrust it into the open drawer, when the study door was flung open and Stuart came in.

V. THE SEALED ENVELOPE

"MADEMOISELLE DORIAN!" cried Stuart joyously, advancing with outstretched hand. She leaned back against the table watching him—and suddenly he perceived the open drawer. He stopped. His expression changed to one of surprise and anger, and the girl's slim fingers convulsively clutched the table edge as she confronted him. Her exquisite colour fled and left her pallid, dark-eyed and dismayed.

"So," he said bitterly—"I returned none too soon, Mlle.—*Dorian*"

"Oh! she whispered, and shrank from him as he approached nearer.

"Your object in selecting an obscure practitioner for your medical adviser becomes painfully evident to me. Diagnosis of your case would have been much more easy if I had associated your symptoms with the presence in my table drawer of"—he hesitated—"of something which you have taken out. Give me whatever you have stolen and compose yourself to await the arrival of the police."

He was cruel in his disillusionment. Here lay the explanation of his romance; here was his disguised princess—a common thief! She stared at him wildly.

"I take nothing!" she cried. "Oh, let me go! Please, please let me go!"

"Pleading is useless. What have you stolen?"

"Nothing—see." She cast the little gold ornament on the table. "I look at this, but I do not mean to steal it."

She raised her beautiful eyes to his face again, and he found himself wavering. That she had made his acquaintance in order to steal the fragment of the golden scorpion was impossible, for he had not possessed it at the time of her first visit. He was hopelessly mystified and utterly miserable.

"How did you open the drawer?" he asked sternly.

She took up the bunch of keys which lay upon the table and naively exhibited that which fitted the lock of the drawer. Her hands were shaking.

"Where did you obtain this key; and why?"

She watched him intently, her lips trembling and her eyes wells of sorrow into which he could not gaze unmoved.

"If I tell you—will you let me go?"

"I shall make no promises, for I can believe nothing that you may tell me. You gained my confidence by a lie—and now, by another lie, you seem to think that you can induce me to overlook a deliberate attempt at burglary—common burglary." He clenched his hands. "Heavens! I could never have believed it of you!"

She flinched as though from a blow and regarded him pitifully as he stood, head averted.

"Oh, please listen to me," she whispered. "At first I tell you a lie, yes."

"And now?"

"Now—I tell you the truth."

"That you are a petty thief?"

"Ah! you are cruel—you have no pity! You judge me as you judge—one of your Englishwomen. Perhaps I cannot help what I do. In the East a woman is a chattel and has no will of her own."

"A chattel!" cried Stuart scornfully. "Your resemblance to the 'chattels' of the East is a remote one. There is Eastern blood in your veins, no doubt, but you are educated, you are a linguist, you know the world. Right and wrong are recognizable to the lowest savage."

"And if they recognize, but are helpless?"

Stuart made a gesture of impatience.

"You are simply seeking to enlist my sympathy," he said bitterly. "But you have said nothing which inclines me to listen to you any longer. Apart from the shock of finding you to be—what you are, I am utterly mystified as to your object. I am a poor man. The entire contents of my house would fetch only a few hundred pounds if sold to-morrow. Yet you risk your liberty to rifle my bureau. For the last time—what have you taken from that drawer?"

She leaned back against the table, toying with the broken piece of gold and glancing down at it as she did so. Her long lashes cast shadows below her eyes, and a hint of colour was returning to her cheeks. Stuart studied her

attentively—even delightedly, for all her shortcomings, and knew in his heart that he could never give her in charge of the police. More and more the wonder of it all grew upon him, and now he suddenly found himself thinking of the unexplained incident of the previous night.

"You do not answer," he said. "I will ask you another question: have you attempted to open that drawer prior to this evening?"

Mlle. Dorian looked up rapidly, and her cheeks, which had been pale, now flushed rosily.

"I try twice before," she confessed, "and cannot open it."

"Ah! And—has *someone else* tried also?"

Instantly her colour fled again, and she stared at him wide-eyed, fearful.

"Someone else?" she whispered.

"Yes—someone else. A man ... wearing a sort of cowl——"

"Oh?" she cried and threw out her hands in entreaty. "Do not ask me of *him*! I dare not answer—I dare not!"

"You have answered," said Stuart, in a voice unlike his own; for a horrified amazement was creeping upon him and supplanting the contemptuous anger which the discovery of this beautiful girl engaged in pilfering his poor belongings had at first aroused.

The mystery of her operations was explained—explained by a deeper and a darker mystery. The horror of the night had been no dream but an almost incredible reality. He now saw before him an agent of the man in the cowl; he perceived that he was in some way entangled in an affair vastly more complex and sinister than a case of petty larceny.

"Has the golden scorpion anything to do with the matter?" he demanded abruptly.

And in the eyes of his beautiful captive he read the answer. She flinched again as she had done when he had taunted her with being a thief; but he pressed his advantage remorselessly.

"So you were concerned in the death of Sir Frank Narcombe!" he said.

"I was not!" she cried at him fiercely, and her widely opened eyes were magnificent. "Sir Frank Narcombe is——"

She faltered—and ceased speaking, biting her lip which had become tremulous again.

"Sir Frank Narcombe is?" prompted Stuart, feeling himself to stand upon the brink of a revelation.

"I know nothing of him—this Sir Frank Narcombe."

Stuart laughed unmirthfully.

"Am I, by any chance, in danger of sharing the fate of that distinguished surgeon?" he asked.

His question produced an unforeseen effect. Mlle. Dorian suddenly rested her jewelled hands upon his shoulders, and he found himself looking hungrily into those wonderful Eastern eyes.

"If I swear that I speak the truth, will you believe me?" she whispered, and her fingers closed convulsively upon his shoulders.

He was shaken. Her near presence was intoxicating. "Perhaps," he said unsteadily.

"Listen, then. *Now* you are in danger, yes. Before, you were not, but now you must be very careful. Oh! indeed, indeed, I tell you true! I tell you for your own sake. Do with me what you please. I do not care. It does not matter. You ask me why I come here. I tell you that also. I come for what is in the long envelope—look, I cannot hide it. It is on the fire!"

Stuart turned and glanced toward the grate. A faint wisp of brown smoke was arising from a long white envelope which lay there. Had the fire been actually burning, it must long ago have been destroyed. More than ever mystified, for the significance of the envelope was not evident to him, he ran to the grate and plucked the smouldering paper from the embers.

As he did so, the girl, with one quick glance in his direction, snatched her cloak, keys and bag and ran from the room. Stuart heard the door close, and racing back to the table he placed the slightly charred envelope there beside the fragment of gold and leapt to the door.

"Damn!" he said.

His escaped prisoner had turned the key on the outside. He was locked in his own study!

Momentarily nonplussed, he stood looking at the closed door. The sound of a restarted motor from outside the house spurred him to action. He switched off the lamps, crossed the darkened room and drew back the curtain, throwing open the French windows. Brilliant moonlight bathed the little lawn with its bordering of high privet hedges. Stuart ran out as the sound of the receding car reached his ears. By the time that he had reached the front of the house the street was vacant from end to end. He walked up

the steps to the front door, which he unfastened with his latch-key. As he entered the hall, Mrs. M'Gregor appeared from her room.

"I did no' hear ye go out with Miss Dorian," she said.

"That's quite possible, Mrs. M'Gregor, but she has gone, you see."

"Now tell me, Mr. Keppel, did ye or did ye no' hear the wail o' the pibroch the night?

"No—I am afraid I cannot say that I did, Mrs. M'Gregor," replied Stuart patiently. "I feel sure you must be very tired and you can justifiably turn in now. I am expecting no other visitor. Good-night."

Palpably dissatisfied and ill at ease, Mrs. M'Gregor turned away.

"Good-night, Mr. Keppel," she said.

Stuart, no longer able to control his impatience, hurried to the study door, unlocked it and entered. Turning on the light, he crossed and hastily drew the curtains over the window recess, but without troubling to close the window which he had opened. Then he returned to the writing-table and took up the sealed envelope whose presence in his bureau was clearly responsible for the singular visitation of the cowled man and for the coming of the lovely Mlle. Dorian.

The "pibroch of the M'Gregors": He remembered something—something which, unaccountably, he hitherto had failed to recall: that fearful wailing in the night—which had heralded the coming of the cowled man!—or had it been a *signal* of some kind?

He stared at the envelope blankly, then laid it down and stood looking for some time at the golden scorpion's tail. Finally, his hands resting upon the table, he found that almost unconsciously he had been listening—listening to the dim night sounds of London and to the vague stirrings within the house.

"*Now*, you are in danger. Before, you were not...."

Could he believe her? If in naught else, in this at least surely she had been sincere? Stuart started—then laughed grimly.

A clock on the mantel-piece had chimed the half-hour.

VI. THE ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER

Detective-Inspector Dunbar arrived at New Scotland Yard in a veritable fever of excitement. Jumping out of the cab he ran into the building and without troubling the man in charge of the lift went straight on upstairs to his room. He found it to be in darkness and switched on the green-shaded lamp which was suspended above the table. Its light revealed a bare apartment having distempered walls severely decorated by an etching of a former and unbeautiful Commissioner. The blinds were drawn. A plain, heavy deal table (bearing a blotting-pad, a pewter ink-pot, several pens and a telephone), together with three uncomfortable chairs, alone broke the expanse of highly polished floor. Dunbar glanced at the table and then stood undecided in the middle of the bare room, tapping his small, widely separated teeth with a pencil which he had absently drawn from his waistcoat pocket. He rang the bell.

A constable came in almost immediately and stood waiting just inside the door.

"When did Sergeant Sowerby leave?" asked Dunbar.

"About three hours ago, sir."

"What!" cried Dunbar. "Three hours ago! But I have been here myself within that time—in the Commissioner's office."

"Sergeant Sowerby left before then. I saw him go."

"But, my good fellow, he has been back again. He spoke to me on the telephone less than a quarter of an hour ago."

"Not from here, sir."

"But I say it *was* from here!" shouted Dunbar fiercely; "and I told him to wait for me."

"Very good, sir. Shall I make inquiries?"

"Yes. Wait a minute. Is the Commissioner here?"

"Yes, sir, I believe so. At least I have not seen him go."

"Find Sergeant Sowerby and tell him to wait here for me," snapped Dunbar.

He walked out into the bare corridor and along to the room of the Assistant Commissioner. Knocking upon the door, he opened it immediately, and entered an apartment which afforded a striking contrast to his own. For whereas the room of Inspector Dunbar was practically unfurnished, that of his superior was so filled with tables, cupboards, desks,

bureaux, files, telephones, bookshelves and stacks of documents that one only discovered the Assistant Commissioner sunk deep in a padded armchair and a cloud of tobacco smoke by dint of close scrutiny. The Assistant Commissioner was small, sallow and satanic. His black moustache was very black and his eyes were of so dark a brown as to appear black also. When he smiled he revealed a row of very large white teeth, and his smile was correctly Mephistophelean. He smoked a hundred and twenty Egyptian cigarettes per diem, and the first and second fingers of either hand were coffee-coloured.

"Good-evening, Inspector," he said courteously. "You come at an opportune moment." He lighted a fresh cigarette. "I was detained here unusually late to-night or this news would not have reached us till the morning." He laid his finger upon a yellow form. "There is an unpleasant development in 'The Scorpion' case."

"So I gather, sir. That is what brought me back to the Yard."

The Assistant Commissioner glanced up sharply.

"What brought you back to the Yard?" he asked.

"The news about Max."

The assistant Commissioner leaned back in his chair. "Might I ask, Inspector," he said, "what news you have learned and how you have learned it?"

Dunbar stared uncomprehendingly.

"Sowerby 'phoned me about half an hour ago, sir. Did he do so without your instructions?"

"Most decidedly. What was his message?"

"He told me," replied Dunbar, in ever-growing amazement, "that the body brought in by the River Police last night had been identified as that of Gaston Max."

The Assistant Commissioner handed a pencilled slip to Dunbar. It read as follows:—

"Gaston Max in London. Scorpion, Narcombe. No report since 30th ult. Fear trouble. Identity-disk G.M. 49685."

"But, sir," said Dunbar—"this is exactly what Sowerby told me!"

"Quite so. That is the really extraordinary feature of the affair. Because, you see, Inspector, I only finished decoding this message at the very moment that you knocked at my door!"

"But——"

"There is no room for a 'but,' Inspector. This confidential message from Paris reached me ten minutes ago. You know as well as I know that there is no possibility of leakage. No one has entered my room in the interval, yet you tell me that Sergeant Sowerby communicated this information to you, by telephone, half an hour ago."

Dunbar was tapping his teeth with the pencil. His amazement was too great for words.

"Had the message been a false one," continued the Commissioner, "the matter would have been resolved into a meaningless hoax, but the message having been what it was, we find ourselves face to face with no ordinary problem. Remember, Inspector, that voices on the telephone are deceptive. Sergeant Sowerby has marked vocal mannerisms——"

"Which would be fairly easy to imitate? Yes, sir—that's so."

"But it brings us no nearer to the real problems; viz., first, the sender of the message; and, second, his purpose."

There was a dull purring sound and the Assistant Commissioner raised the telephone.

"Yes. Who is it that wishes to speak to him? Dr. Keppel Stuart? Connect with my office."

He turned again to Dunbar.

"Dr. Stuart has a matter of the utmost urgency to communicate, Inspector. It was at the house of Dr. Stuart, I take it, that you received the unexplained message?"

"It was—yes."

"Did you submit to Dr. Stuart the broken gold ornament?"

"Yes. It's a scorpion's tail."

"Ah!" The Assistant Commissioner smiled satanically and lighted a fresh cigarette. "And is Dr. Stuart agreeable to placing his unusual knowledge at our disposal for the purposes of this case?"

"He is, sir."

The purring sound was repeated.

"You are through to Dr. Stuart," said the Assistant Commissioner.

"Hullo" cried Dunbar, taking up the receiver—"is that Dr. Stuart? Dunbar speaking."

He stood silent for a while, listening to the voice over the wires. Then: "You want me to come around now, doctor? Very well. I'll be with you in less than half an hour."

He put down the instrument.

"Something extraordinary seems to have taken place at Dr. Stuart's house a few minutes after I left, sir," he said. "I'm going back there, now, for particulars. It sounds as though the 'phone message might have been intended to get me away." He stared down at the pencilled slip which the Assistant Commissioner had handed him, but stared vacantly, and: "Do you mind if I call someone up, sir?" he asked. "It should be done at once."

"Call by all means, Inspector."

Dunbar again took up the telephone.

"Battersea 0996," he said, and stood waiting. Then:

"Is that Battersea 0996?" he asked. "Is Dr. Stuart there? He is speaking? Oh, this is Inspector Dunbar. You called me up here at the Yard a few moments ago, did you not? Correct, doctor; that's all I wanted to know. I am coming now."

"Good," said the Assistant Commissioner, nodding his approval. "You will have to check 'phone messages in that way until you have run your mimic to earth, Inspector. I don't believe for a moment that it was Sergeant Sowerby who rang you up at Dr. Stuart's."

"Neither do I," said Dunbar grimly. "But I begin to have a glimmer of a notion who it was. I'll be saying good-night, sir. Dr. Stuart seems to have something very important to tell me."

As a mere matter of form he waited for the report of the constable who had gone in quest of Sowerby, but it merely confirmed the fact that Sowerby had left Scotland Yard over three hours earlier. Dunbar summoned a taxicab and proceeded to the house of Dr. Stuart.

VII. CONTENTS OF THE SEALED ENVELOPE

Stuart personally admitted Dunbar, and once more the Inspector found himself in the armchair in the study. The fire was almost out and the room

seemed to be chilly. Stuart was labouring under the influence of suppressed excitement and was pacing restlessly up and down the floor.

"Inspector," he began, "I find it difficult to tell you the facts which have recently come to my knowledge bearing upon this most mysterious 'Scorpion' case. I clearly perceive, now, that without being aware of the fact I have nevertheless been concerned in the case for at least a week."

Dunbar stared surprisedly, but offered no comment.

"A fortnight ago," Stuart continued, "I found myself in the neighbourhood of the West India Docks. I had been spending the evening with a very old friend, chief officer of a liner in dock. I had intended to leave the ship at about ten o'clock and to walk to the railway station, but, as it fell out, the party did not break up until after midnight. Declining the offer of a berth on board, I came ashore determined to make my way home by tram and afoot. I should probably have done so and have been spared—much; but rain began to fall suddenly and I found myself, foolishly unprovided with a top-coat, in those grey East End streets without hope of getting a lift.

"It was just as I was crossing Limehouse Causeway that I observed, to my astonishment, the head-lamps of a cab or car shining out from a dark and forbidding thoroughfare which led down to the river. The sight was so utterly unexpected that I paused, looking through the rainy mist in the direction of the stationary vehicle. I was still unable to make out if it were a cab or a car, and accordingly I walked along to where it stood and found that it was a taxicab and apparently for hire.

"'Are you disengaged?' I said to the man. "'Well, sir, I suppose I am,' was his curious reply. 'Where do you want to go?'

"I gave him this address and he drove me home. On arriving, so grateful did I feel that I took pity upon the man, for it had settled down into a brute of a night, and asked him to come in and take a glass of grog. He was only too glad to do so. He turned out to be quite an intelligent sort of fellow, and we chatted together for ten minutes or so.

"I had forgotten all about him when, I believe on the following night, he reappeared in the character of a patient. He had a badly damaged skull, and I gathered that he had had an accident with his cab and had been pitched out into the road.

"When I had fixed him up, he asked me to do him a small favour. From inside his tunic he pulled out a long stiff envelope, bearing no address but the number 30 in big red letters. It was secured at both ends with black wax bearing the imprint of a curious and complicated seal.

"'A gentleman left this behind in the cab today, sir,' said the man —'perhaps the one who was with me when I had the spill, and I've got no means of tracing him; but he may be able to trace *me* if he happened to notice my number, or he may advertise. It evidently contains something valuable.'

"'Then why not take it to Scotland Yard?' I asked. 'Isn't that the proper course?'

"'It is,' he admitted; 'but here's the point: if the owner reclaims it from Scotland Yard he's less likely to dub up handsome than if he gets it direct from me!'

"I laughed at that, for the soundness of the argument was beyond dispute. 'But what on earth do you want to leave it with *me* for?' I asked."

"'Self-protection,' was the reply. 'They can't say I meant to pinch it! Whereas, directly there's any inquiry I can come and collect it and get the reward; and your word will back me up if any questions are asked; that's if you don't mind, sir.'

"I told him I didn't mind in the least, and accordingly I sealed the envelope in a yet larger one which I addressed to the Lost Property Office and put into a private drawer of my bureau. 'You will have no objection,' I said, 'to this being posted if it isn't reclaimed within a reasonable time?'

"He said that would be all right and departed—since which moment I have not set eyes upon him. I now come to the sequel, or what I have just recognized to be the sequel."

Stuart's agitation grew more marked and it was only by dint of a palpable effort that he forced himself to resume.

"On the evening of the following day a lady called professionally. She was young, pretty, and dressed with extraordinary elegance. My housekeeper admitted her, as I was out at the time but momentarily expected. She awaited my return here, in this room. She came again two days later. The name she gave was an odd one: Mademoiselle Dorian. There is her card,"—Stuart opened a drawer and laid a visiting-card before Dunbar—"no initials and no address. She travelled in a large and handsome

car. That is to say, according to my housekeeper's account it is a large and handsome car. I personally, have had but an imperfect glimpse of it. It does not await her in front of the house, for some reason, but just around the corner in the side turning. Beyond wondering why Mademoiselle Dorian had selected me as her medical advisor I had detected nothing suspicious in her behaviour up to the time of which I am about to speak.

"Last night there was a singular development, and to-night matters came to a head."

Thereupon Stuart related as briefly as possible the mysterious episode of the cowled man, and finally gave an account of the last visit of Mlle. Dorian. Inspector Dunbar did not interrupt him, but listened attentively to the singular story.

"And there," concluded Stuart, "on the blotting-pad, lies the sealed envelope!"

Dunbar took it up eagerly. A small hole had been burned in one end of the envelope and much of the surrounding paper was charred. The wax with which Stuart had sealed it had lain uppermost, and although it had been partly melted, the mark of his signet-ring was still discernible upon it. Dunbar stood staring at it.

"In the circumstances, Inspector, I think you would be justified in opening both envelopes," said Stuart.

"I am inclined to agree. But let me just be clear on one or two points." He took out the bulging note-book and also a fountain-pen with which he prepared to make entries. "About this cabman, now. You didn't by any chance note the number of his cab?"

"I did not."

"What build of man was he?"

"Over medium height and muscular. Somewhat inclined to flesh and past his youth, but active all the same."

"Dark or fair?"

"Dark and streaked with grey. I noted this particularly in dressing his skull. He wore his hair cropped close to the scalp. He had a short beard and moustache and heavily marked eyebrows. He seemed to be very short-sighted and kept his eyes so screwed up that it was impossible to detect their colour, by night at any rate."

"What sort of wound had he on his skull?"

"A short ugly gash. He had caught his head on the footboard in falling. I may add that on the occasion of his professional visit his breath smelled strongly of spirits, and I rather suspected that his accident might have been traceable to his condition."

"But he wasn't actually drunk?"

"By no means. He was perfectly sober, but he had recently been drinking —possibly because his fall had shaken him, of course."

"His hands?"

"Small and very muscular. Quite steady. Also very dirty."

"What part of the country should you say he hailed from?"

"London. He had a marked cockney accent."

"What make of cab was it?"

"I couldn't say."

"An old cab?"

"Yes. The fittings were dilapidated, I remember, and the cab had a very musty smell."

"Ah," said Dunbar, making several notes. "And now—the lady: about what would be her age?"

"Difficult to say, Inspector. She had Eastern blood and may have been much younger than she appeared to be. Judged from a European standpoint and from her appearance and manner of dress, she might be about twenty-three or twenty-four."

"Complexion?"

"Wonderful. Fresh as a flower."

"Eyes?"

"Dark. They looked black at night."

"Hair?"

"Brown and 'fuzzy' with copper tints."

"Tall?"

"No; slight but beautifully shaped."

"Now—from her accent what should you judge her nationality to be?"

Stuart paced up and down the room, his head lowered in reflection, then:

"She pronounced both English and French words with an intonation which suggested familiarity with Arabic."

"Arabic? That still leaves a fairly wide field."

"It does, Inspector, but I had no means of learning more. She had certainly lived for a long time somewhere in the Near East."

"Her jewellery?"

"Some of it was European and some of it Oriental, but not characteristic of any particular country of the Orient."

"Did she use perfume?"

"Yes, but it was scarcely discernible. Jasmine—probably the Eastern preparation."

"Her ailment was imaginary?"

"I fear so."

"H'm—and now you say that Mrs. M'Gregor saw the car?"

"Yes, but she has retired."

"Her evidence will do to-morrow. We come to the man in the hood. Can you give me any kind of a description of him?"

"He appeared to be tall, but a shadow is deceptive, and his extraordinary costume would produce that effect, too. I can tell you absolutely nothing further about him. Remember, I thought I was dreaming. I could not credit my senses."

Inspector Dunbar glanced over the notes which he had made, then returning the note-book and pen to his pocket, he took up the long smoke-discoloured envelope and with a paper-knife which lay upon the table slit one end open. Inserting two fingers, he drew out the second envelope which the first enclosed. It was an ordinary commercial envelope only notable by reason of the number, 30, appearing in large red figures upon it and because it was sealed with black wax bearing a weird-looking device:

Stuart bent over him intently as he slit this envelope in turn. Again, he inserted two fingers—and brought forth the sole contents... a plain piece of cardboard, roughly rectangular and obviously cut in haste from the lid of a common cardboard box!

VIII. THE ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER'S THEORY

On the following morning Inspector Dunbar, having questioned Mrs. M'Gregor respecting the car in which Mlle. Dorian had visited the house

and having elicited no other evidence than that it was "a fine luxurious concern," the Inspector and Dr. Stuart prepared to set out upon gruesome business. Mrs. M'Gregor was very favourably impressed with the Inspector. "A grand, pairsonable body," she confided to Stuart. "He'd look bonny in the kilt."

To an East-End mortuary the cab bore them, and they were led by a constable in attendance to a stone-paved, ill-lighted apartment in which a swathed form lay upon a long deal table. The spectacle presented, when the covering was removed, was one to have shocked less hardened nerves than those of Stuart and Dunbar; but the duties of a police officer, like those of a medical man, not infrequently necessitate such inspections. The two bent over the tragic flotsam of the Thames unmoved and critical.

"H'm," said Stuart—"he's about the build, certainly. Hair iron-grey and close cropped and he seems to have worn a beard. Now, let us see."

He bent, making a close inspection of the skull; then turned and shook his head.

"No, Inspector," he said definitely. "This is not the cabman. There is no wound corresponding to the one which I dressed."

"Right," answered Dunbar, covering up the ghastly face. "That's settled."

"You were wrong, Inspector. It was not Gaston Max who left the envelope with me."

"No," mused Dunbar, "so it seems."

"Your theory that Max, jealously working alone, had left particulars of his inquiries, and clues, in my hands, knowing that they would reach Scotland Yard in the event of his death, surely collapsed when the envelope proved to contain nothing but a bit of cardboard?"

"Yes—I suppose it did. But it sounded so much like Max's round-about methods. Anyway I wanted to make sure that the dead man from Hanover Hole and your mysterious cabman were not one and the same."

Stuart entertained a lively suspicion that Inspector Dunbar was keeping something up his sleeve, but with this very proper reticence he had no quarrel, and followed by the constable, who relocked the mortuary behind them, they came out into the yard where the cab waited which was to take them to Scotland Yard. Dunbar, standing with one foot upon the step of the cab, turned to the constable.

"Has anyone else viewed the body?" he asked.

"No sir."

"No one is to be allowed to do so—you understand?—*no one*, unless he has written permission from the Commissioner."

"Very good, sir."

Half an hour later they arrived at New Scotland Yard and went up to Dunbar's room. A thick-set, florid man of genial appearance, having a dark moustache, a breezy manner and a head of hair resembling a very hard-worked blacking-brush, awaited them. This was Detective-Sargeant Sowerby with whom Stuart was already acquainted.

"Good-morning, Sergeant Sowerby," he said.

"Good-morning, sir. I hear that someone was pulling your leg last night."

"What do you mean exactly, Sowerby?" inquired Dunbar, fixing his fierce eyes upon his subordinate.

Sergeant Sowerby exhibited confusion.

"I mean nothing offensive, Inspector. I was referring to the joker who gave so good an imitation of my voice that even *you* were deceived."

"Ah," replied Dunbar—"I see. Yes—he did it well. He spoke just like you. I could hardly make out a word he said."

With this Caledonian shaft and a side-glance at Stuart, Inspector Dunbar sat down at the table.

"Here's Dr. Stuart's description of the missing cabman," he continued, taking out his note-book. "Dr. Stuart has viewed the body and it is not the man. You had better take a proper copy of this."

"Then the cabman wasn't Max?" cried Sowerby eagerly. "I thought not."

"I believe you told me so before," said Dunbar sourly. "I also seem to recall that you thought a scorpion's tail was a Prickly Pear. However—here, on the page numbered twenty-six, is a description of the woman known as Mlle. Dorian. It should be a fairly easy matter to trace the car through the usual channels, and she ought to be easy to find, too."

He glanced at his watch. Stuart was standing by the lofty window looking out across the Embankment.

"Ten o'clock," said Dunbar. "The Commissioner will be expecting us."

"I am ready," responded Stuart.

Leaving Sergeant Sowerby seated at the table studying the note-book, Stuart and Dunbar proceeded to the smoke-laden room of the Assistant

Commissioner. The great man, suavely satanic, greeted Stuart with that polished courtesy for which he was notable.

"You have been of inestimable assistance to us in the past, Dr. Stuart," he said, "and I feel happy to know that we are to enjoy the aid of your special knowledge in the present case. Will you smoke one of my cigarettes? They are some which a friend is kind enough to supply to me direct from Cairo, and are really quite good."

"Thanks," replied Stuart. "May I ask in what direction my services are likely to prove available?"

The Commissioner lighted a fresh cigarette. Then from a heap of correspondence he selected a long report typed upon blue foolscap.

"I have here," he said, "confirmation of the telegraphic report received last night. The name of M. Gaston Max will no doubt be familiar to you?"

Stuart nodded.

"Well," continued the Commissioner, "it appears that he has been engaged in England for the past month endeavouring to trace the connection which he claims to exist between the sudden deaths of various notable people, recently—a list is appended—and some person or organisation represented by, or associated with, a scorpion. His personal theory not being available—poor fellow, you have heard of his tragic death—I have this morning consulted such particulars as I could obtain respecting these cases. If they were really cases of assassination, some obscure poison was the only mode of death that could possibly have been employed. Do you follow me?"

"Perfectly."

"Now, the death of Gaston Max under circumstances not yet explained, would seem to indicate that his theory was a sound one. In other words, I am disposed to believe that he himself represents the most recent outrage of what we will call 'The Scorpion.' Even at the time that the body of the man found by the River Police had not been identified, the presence upon his person of a fragment of gold strongly resembling the tail of a scorpion prompted me to instruct Inspector Dunbar to consult you. I had determined upon a certain course. The identification of the dead man with Gaston Max merely strengthens my determination and enhances the likelihood of my idea being a sound one."

He flicked the ash from his cigarette and resumed:

"Without mentioning names, the experts consulted in the other cases which—according to the late Gaston Max—were victims of 'The Scorpion,' do not seem to have justified their titles. I am arranging that you shall be present at the autopsy upon the body of Gaston Max. And now, permit me to ask you a question: are you acquainted with any poison which would produce the symptoms noted in the case of Sir Frank Narcombe, for instance?"

Stuart shook his head slowly.

"All that I know of the case," he said, "is that he was taken suddenly ill in the foyer of a West-End theatre, immediately removed to his house in Half Moon Street, and died shortly afterward. Can you give me copies of the specialists' reports and other particulars? I may then be able to form an opinion."

"I will get them for you," replied the Commissioner, the exact nature of whose theory was by no means evident to Stuart. He opened a drawer. "I have here," he continued, "the piece of cardboard and the envelope left with you by the missing cab-man. Do you think there is any possibility of invisible writing?"

"None," said Stuart confidently. "I have tested in three or four places as you will see by the spots, but my experiments will in no way interfere with those which no doubt your own people will want to make. I have also submitted both surfaces to a microscopic examination. I am prepared to state definitely that there is no writing upon the cardboard, and except for the number, 30, none upon the envelope."

"It is only reasonable to suppose," continued the Commissioner, "that the telephone message which led Inspector Dunbar to leave your house last night was originated by that unseen intelligence against which we find ourselves pitted. In the first place, no one in London, myself and, presumably, 'The Scorpion' excepted, knew at that time that M. Gaston Max was in England or that M. Gaston Max was dead. I say, presumably 'The Scorpion' because it is fair to assume that the person whom Max pursued was responsible for his death.

"Of course"—the Commissioner reached for the box of cigarettes—"were it not for the telephone message, we should be unjustified in assuming that Mlle. Dorian and this"—he laid his finger upon the piece of cardboard—"had any connection with the case of M. Max. But the message

was so obviously designed to facilitate the purloining of the sealed envelope and so obviously emanated from one already aware of the murder of M. Max, that the sender is identified at once with—'The Scorpion.'"

The Assistant Commissioner complacently lighted a fresh cigarette.

"Finally," he said, "the mode of death in the case of M. Max may not have been the same as in the other cases. Therefore, Dr. Stuart"—he paused impressively—"if you fail to detect anything suspicious at the post mortem examination I propose to apply to the Home Secretary for power to exhume the body of the late Sir Frank Narcombe!"

Deep in reflection, Stuart walked alone along the Embankment. The full facts contained in the report from Paris the Commissioner had not divulged, but Stuart concluded that this sudden activity was directly due, not to the death of M. Max, but to the fact that he (Max) had left behind him some more or less tangible clue. Stuart fully recognized that the Commissioner had accorded him an opportunity to establish his reputation—or to wreck it.

Yet, upon closer consideration, it became apparent that it was to Fate and not to the Commissioner that he was indebted. Strictly speaking, his association with the matter dated from the night of his meeting with the mysterious cabman in West India Dock road. Or had the curtain first been lifted upon this occult drama that evening, five years ago, as the setting sun reddened the waters of the Imperial Canal and a veiled figure passed him on the Wu-Men Bridge?

"Shut your eyes tightly, master—the Scorpion is coming!"

He seemed to hear the boy's words now, as he passed along the Embankment; he seemed to see again the tall figure. And suddenly he stopped, stood still and stared with unseeing eyes across the muddy waters of the Thames. He was thinking of the cowled man who had stood behind the curtains in his study—of that figure so wildly bizarre that even now he could scarcely believe that he had ever actually seen it. He walked on.

Automatically his reflections led him to Mlle. Dorian, and he remembered that even as he paced along there beside the river the wonderful mechanism of New Scotland Yard was in motion, its many tentacles seeking—seeking tirelessly—for the girl, whose dark eyes haunted his sleeping and waking hours. *He* was responsible, and if she were arrested *he* would be called upon to identify her. He condemned himself bitterly.

After all, what crime had she committed? She had tried to purloin a letter —which did not belong to Stuart in the first place. And she had failed. Now —the police were looking for her. His reflections took a new form.

What of Gaston Max, foremost criminologist in Europe, who now lay dead and mutilated in an East-End mortuary? The telephone message which had summoned Dunbar away had been too opportune to be regarded as a mere coincidence. Mlle. Dorian was, therefore, an accomplice of a murderer.

Stuart sighed. He would have given much—more than he was prepared to admit to himself—to have known her to be guiltless.

The identity of the missing cabman now engaged his mind. It was quite possible, of course, that the man had actually found the envelope in his cab a was in no other way concerned in the matter. But how had Mlle. Dorian, or the person instructing her, traced the envelope to his study? And why, if they could establish a claim to it, had they preferred to attempt to steal it? Finally, why all this disturbance about a blank piece of cardboard?

A mental picture of the envelope arose before him, the number, 30, written upon it and the two black seals securing the lapels. He paused again in his walk. His reflections had led him to a second definite point and he fumbled in his waistcoat pocket for a time, seeking a certain brass coin about the size of a halfpenny, having a square hole in the middle and peculiar characters engraved around the square, one on each of the four sides.

He failed to find the coin in his pocket, however, but he walked briskly up a side street until he came to the entrance to a tube station. Entering a public telephone call-box, he asked for the number, City 400. Being put through and having deposited the necessary fee in the box:

"Is that the Commissioner's Office, New Scotland Yard?" he asked. "Yes! My name is Dr. Keppel Stuart. If Inspector Dunbar is there, would you kindly allow me to speak to him."

There was a short interval, then:

"Hullo!" came—"is that Dr. Stuart?"

"Yes. That you, Inspector? I have just remembered something which I should have observed in the first place if I had been really wide-awake. The envelope—you know the one I mean?—the one bearing the number, 30, has

been sealed with a Chinese coin, known as *cash*. I have just recognized the fact and thought it wise to let you know at once."

"Are you sure?" asked Dunbar.

"Certain. If you care to call at my place later to-day I can show you some *cash*. Bring the envelope with you and you will see that the coins correspond to the impression in the wax. The inscriptions vary in different provinces, but the form of all *cash* is the same."

"Very good. Thanks for letting me know at once. It seems to establish a link with China, don't you think?"

"It does, but it merely adds to the mystery."

Coming out of the call-box, Stuart proceeded home, but made one or two professional visits before he actually returned to the house. He now remembered having left his particular *cash* piece (which he usually carried) in his dispensary, which satisfactorily accounted for his failure to find the coin in his waistcoat pocket. He had broken the cork of a flask, and in the absence of another of correct size had manufactured a temporary stopper with a small cork to the top of which he had fixed the Chinese coin with a drawing-pin. His purpose served he had left the extemporised stopper lying somewhere in the dispensary.

Stuart's dispensary was merely a curtained recess at one end of the waiting-room and shortly after entering the house he had occasion to visit it. Lying upon a shelf among flasks and bottles was the Chinese coin with the cork still attached. He took it up in order to study the inscription. Then:

"Have I cultivated somnambulism!" he muttered.

Fragments of black sealing-wax adhered to the coin!

Incredulous and half fearful he peered at it closely. He remembered that the impression upon the wax sealing the mysterious envelope had had a circular depression in the centre. It had been made by the head of the drawing-pin!

He found himself staring at the shelf immediately above that upon which the coin had lain. A stick of black sealing-wax used for sealing medicine was thrust in beside a bundle of long envelopes in which he was accustomed to post his Infirmary reports!

One hand raised to his head, Stuart stood endeavouring to marshal his ideas into some sane order. Then, knowing what he should find, he raised the green baize curtain hanging from the lower shelf, which concealed a

sort of cupboard containing miscellaneous stores and not a little rubbish, including a number of empty cardboard boxes.

A rectangular strip had been roughly cut from the lid of the topmost box!

The mysterious envelope and its contents, the wax and the seal—all had come from his own dispensary!

IX. THE CHINESE COIN

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X. "CLOSE YOUR SHUTTERS AT NIGHT"

Inspector Dunbar stood in the little dispensary tapping his teeth with the end of a fountain-pen.

"The last time he visited you, doctor—the time when he gave you the envelope—did the cabman wait here in the waiting-room?"

"He did—yes. He came after my ordinary consulting hours and I was at supper, I remember, as I am compelled to dine early."

"He would be in here alone?"

"Yes. No one else was in the room."

"Would he have had time to find the box, cut out the piece of cardboard from the lid, put it in the envelope and seal it?"

"Ample time. But what could be his object? And why mark the envelope 30?"

"It was in your consulting-room that he asked you to take charge of the envelope?"

"Yes."

"Might I take a peep at the consulting room?"

"Certainly, Inspector."

From the waiting-room they went up a short flight of stairs into the small apartment in which Stuart saw his patients. Dunbar looked slowly about him, standing in the middle of the room, then crossed and stared out of the window into the narrow lane below.

"Where were you when he gave you the envelope?" he snapped suddenly.

"At the table," replied Stuart with surprise.

"Was the table-lamp alight?"

"Yes. I always light it when seeing patients."

"Did you take the letter into the study to seal it in the other envelope?"

"I did, and he came along and witnessed me do it."

"Ah," said Dunbar, and scribbled busily in his note-book. "We are badly tied at Scotland Yard, doctor, and this case looks like being another for which somebody else will reap the credit. I am going to make a request that will surprise you."

He tore a leaf out of the book and folded it carefully.

"I am going to ask you to seal up something and lock it away! But I don't think you'll be troubled by cowled burglars or beautiful women because of it. On this piece of paper I have written—*a"*—he ticked off the points on his fingers: "what I believe to be the name of the man who cut out the cardboard and sealed it in an envelope; *b*: the name of the cabman; and, *c*: the name of the man who rang me up here last night and gave me information which had only just reached the Commissioner. I'll ask you to lock it away until it's wanted, doctor."

"Certainly, if you wish it," replied Stuart. "Come into the study and you shall see me do as you direct. I may add that the object to be served is not apparent to me."

Entering the study, he took an envelope, enclosed the piece of paper, sealed the lapel and locked the envelope in the same drawer of the bureau which once had contained that marked 30.

"Mlle. Dorian has a duplicate key to this drawer." he said. "Are you prepared to take the chance?"

"Quite," replied Dunbar, smiling; "although my information is worth more than that which she risked so much to steal."

"It's most astounding. At every step the darkness increases. Why should *anyone* have asked me to lock up a blank piece of cardboard?"

"Why, indeed," murmured Dunbar. "Well, I may as well get back. I am expecting a report from Sowerby. Look after yourself, sir. I'm inclined to think your pretty patient was talking square when she told you there might be danger."

Stuart met the glance of the tawny eyes.

"What d'you mean, Inspector? Why should *I* be in danger?"

"Because," replied Inspector Dunbar, "if 'The Scorpion' is a poisoner, as the chief seems to think, there's really only one man in England he has to fear, and that man is Dr. Keppel Stuart."

When the Inspector had taken his departure Stuart stood for a long time staring out of the study window at the little lawn with its bordering of high neatly-trimmed privet above which at intervals arose the mop crowns of dwarf acacias. A spell of warm weather seemed at last to have begun, and clouds of gnats floated over the grass, their minute wings glittering in the sunshine. Despite the nearness of teeming streets, this was a backwater of London's stream.

He sighed and returned to some work which the visit of the Scotland Yard man had interrupted.

Later in the afternoon he had occasion to visit the institution to which he had recently been appointed as medical officer, and in contemplation of the squalor through which his steps led him he sought forgetfulness of the Scorpion problem—and of the dark eyes of Mlle. Dorian. He was not entirely successful, and returning by a different route he lost himself in memories which were sweetly mournful.

A taxicab passed him, moving slowly very close to the pavement. He scarcely noted it until it had proceeded some distance ahead of him. Then its slow progress so near to the pavement at last attracted his attention, and he stared vacantly towards the closed vehicle.

Mlle. Dorian was leaning out of the window and looking back at him!

Stuart's heart leapt high. For an instant he paused, then began to walk rapidly after the retreating vehicle. Perceiving that she had attracted his attention, the girl extended a white-gloved hand from the window and dropped a note upon the edge of the pavement. Immediately she withdrew into the vehicle—which moved away at accelerated speed, swung around the next corner and was gone.

Stuart ran forward and picked up the note. Without pausing to read it, he pressed on to the corner. The cab was already two hundred yards away, and he recognized pursuit to be out of the question. The streets were almost deserted at the moment, and no one apparently had witnessed the episode. He unfolded the sheet of plain note-paper, faintly perfumed with jasmine, and read the following, written in an uneven feminine hand:

"Close your shutters at night. Do not think too bad of me."

XI. THE BLUE RAY

Dusk found Stuart in a singular frame of mind. He was torn between duty—or what he conceived to be his duty—to the community, and ... something else. A messenger from New Scotland Yard had brought him a bundle of documents relating to the case of Sir Frank Narcombe, and a smaller packet touching upon the sudden end of Henrik Ericksen, the Norwegian electrician, and the equally unexpected death of the Grand Duke Ivan. There were medical certificates, proceedings of coroners, reports of detectives, evidence of specialists and statements of friends, relatives and servants of the deceased. A proper examination of all the documents represented many hours of close study.

Stuart was flattered by the opinion held of his ability by the Assistant Commissioner, but dubious of his chance of detecting any flaw in the evidence which had escaped the scrutiny of so many highly trained observers.

He paced the study restlessly. Although more than six hours had elapsed, he had not communicated to Scotland Yard the fact of his having seen Mlle. Dorian that afternoon. A hundred times he had read the message, although he knew it by heart, knew the form of every letter, the odd crossing of the *t*'s and the splashy dotting of the *i*'s.

If only he could have taken counsel with someone—with someone not bound to act upon such information—it would have relieved his mental stress. His ideas were so chaotic that he felt himself to be incapable of approaching the task presented by the pile of papers lying upon his table.

The night was pleasantly warm and the sky cloudless. Often enough he found himself glancing toward the opened French windows, and once he had peered closely across into the belt of shadow below the hedge, thinking that he had detected something which moved there. Stepping to the window, the slinking shape had emerged into the moonlight—and had proclaimed itself to be that of a black cat!

Yet he had been sorely tempted to act upon the advice so strangely offered. He refrained from doing so, however, reflecting that to spend his evenings with closed and barred shutters now that a spell of hot weather seemed to be imminent would be insufferable. Up and down the room he paced tirelessly, always confronted by the eternal problem.

Forcing himself at last to begin work if only as a sedative, he filled and lighted his pipe, turned off the centre lamp and lighted the reading lamp upon his table. He sat down to consider the papers bearing upon the death of Eriksen. For half an hour he read on steadily and made a number of pencil notes. Then he desisted and sat staring straight before him.

What possible motive could there be in assassinating these people? The case of the Grand Duke might be susceptible of explanation, but those of Henrik Ericksen and Sir Frank Narcombe were not. Furthermore he could perceive no links connecting the three, and no reason why they should have engaged the attention of a common enemy. Such crimes would seem to be purposeless. Assuming that "The Scorpion" was an individual, that individual apparently was a dangerous homicidal maniac.

But, throughout the documents, he could discover no clue pointing to the existence of such an entity. "The Scorpion" might be an invention of the fertile brain of M. Gaston Max; for it had become more and more evident, as he had read, that the attempt to trace these deaths to an identical source had originated at the Service de Surete, and it was from Paris that the name "The Scorpion" had come. The fate of Max was significant, of course. The chances of his death proving to have been due to accident were almost negligible and the fact that a fragment of a golden scorpion had actually been found upon his body was certainly curious.

"Close your shutters at night...."

How the words haunted him and how hotly he despised himself for a growing apprehension which refused to be ignored. It was more mental than physical, this dread which grew with the approach of midnight, and it resembled that which had robbed him of individuality and all but stricken him inert when he had seen upon the moon-bright screen of the curtains the shadow of a cowled man.

Dark forces seemed to be stirring, and some unseen menace crept near to him out of the darkness.

The house was of early Victorian fashion and massive folding shutters were provided to close the French windows. He never used them, as a matter of fact, but now he tested the fastenings which kept them in place against the inner wall and even moved them in order to learn if they were still serviceable.

Of all the mysteries which baffled him, that of the piece of cardboard in the envelope sealed with a Chinese coin was the most irritating. It seemed like the purposeless trick of a child, yet it had led to the presence of the cowled man—and to the presence of Mlle. Dorian. Why?

He sat down at his table again.

"Damn the whole business!" he said. "It is sending me crazy."

Selecting from the heap of documents a large sheet of note-paper bearing a blue diagram of a human bust, marked with figures and marginal notes, he began to read the report to which it was appended—that of Dr. Halesowen. It stated that the late Sir Frank Narcombe had a "horizontal" heart, slightly misplaced and dilatated, with other details which really threw no light whatever upon the cause of his death.

"*I* have a horizontal heart," growled Stuart—"and considering my consumption of tobacco it is certainly dilatated. But I don't expect to drop dead in a theatre nevertheless."

He read on, striving to escape from that shadowy apprehension, but as he read he was listening to the night sounds of London, to the whirring of distant motors, the whistling of engines upon the railway and dim hooting of sirens from the Thames. A slight breeze had arisen and it rustled in the feathery foliage of the acacias and made a whispering sound as it stirred the leaves of the privet hedge.

The drone of an approaching car reached his ears. Pencil in hand, he sat listening. The sound grew louder, then ceased. Either the car had passed or had stopped somewhere near the house. Came a rap on the door.

"Yes," called Stuart and stood up, conscious of excitement.

Mrs. M'Gregor came in.

"There is nothing further you'll be wanting to-night?" she asked.

"No," said Stuart, strangely disappointed, but smiling at the old lady cheerfully. "I shall turn in very shortly."

"A keen east wind has arisen," she continued, severely eyeing the opened windows, "and even for a medical man you are strangely imprudent. Shall I shut the windows?"

"No, don't trouble, Mrs. M'Gregor. The room gets very stuffy with tobacco smoke, and really it is quite a warm night. I shall close them before I retire, of course."

"Ah well," sighed Mrs. M'Gregor, preparing to depart. "Good-night, Mr. Keppel."

"Good-night, Mrs. M'Gregor."

She retired, and Stuart sat staring out into the darkness. He was not prone to superstition, but it seemed like tempting providence to remain there with the windows open any longer. Yet paradoxically, he lacked the moral courage to close them—to admit to himself that he was afraid!

The telephone bell rang, and he started back in his chair as though to avoid a blow.

By doing so he avoided destruction.

At the very instant that the bell rang out sharply in the silence—so exact is the time-table of Kismet—a needle-like ray of blue light shot across the lawn from beyond and above the hedge and—but for that nervous start—must have struck fully upon the back of Stuart's skull. Instead, it shone past his head, which it missed only by inches, and he experienced a sensation as though some one had buffeted him upon the cheek furiously. He pitched out of his chair and on to the carpet.

The first object which the ray touched was the telephone; and next, beyond it, a medical dictionary; beyond that again, the grate, in which a fire was laid.

"My God!" groaned Stuart—"what is it!"

An intense crackling sound deafened him, and the air of the room seemed to have become hot as that of an oven. There came a series of dull reports—an uncanny wailing ... and the needle-ray vanished. A monstrous shadow, moon-cast, which had lain across the carpet of the lawn—the shadow of a cowled man—vanished also.

Clutching the side of his head, which throbbed and tingled as though from the blow of an open hand, Stuart struggled to his feet. There was smoke in the room, a smell of burning and of fusing metal. He glared at the table madly.

The mouthpiece of the telephone had vanished!

"My God!" he groaned again, and clutched at the back of the chair.

His dictionary was smouldering slowly. It had a neat round hole some three inches in diameter, bored completely through, cover to cover! The fire in the grate was flaring up the chimney!

He heard the purr of a motor in the lane beside the house. The room was laden with suffocating fumes. Stuart stood clutching the chair and striving to retain composure—sanity. The car moved out of the lane.

Someone was running towards the back gate of the house ... was scrambling over the hedge ... was racing across the lawn!

A man burst into the study. He was a man of somewhat heavy build, clean-shaven and inclined to pallor. The hirsute blue tinge about his lips and jaw lent added vigour to a flexible but masterful mouth. His dark hair was tinged with grey, his dark eyes were brilliant with excitement. He was very smartly dressed and wore light tan gloves. He reeled suddenly, clutching at a chair for support.

"Quick! quick!" he cried—"the telephone! ... Ah!"

Just inside the window he stood, swaying and breathing rapidly, his gaze upon the instrument.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he cried—"what has happened, then!"

Stuart stared at the new-comer dazedly.

"Hell has been in my room!" he replied. "That's all!"

"Ah!" said the stranger—"again he eludes me! The telephone was the only chance. *Pas d'blaque!* we are finished!"

He dropped into a chair, removed his light grey hat and began to dry his moist brow with a fine silk handkerchief. Stuart stared at him like a man who is stupefied. The room was still laden with strange fumes.

"*Blimey!*" remarked the new-comer, and his Whitechapel was as perfect as his Montmatre. He was looking at the decapitated telephone. "This is a knock-out!"

"Might I ask," said Stuart, endeavouring to collect his scattered senses, "where you came from?"

"From up a tree!" was the astonishing reply. "It was the only way to get over!"

"Up a tree!"

"Exactly. Yes, I was foolish. I am too heavy. But what could I do! We must begin all over again."

Stuart began to doubt his sanity. This was no ordinary man.

"Might I ask," he said, "who you are and what you are doing in my house?"

"Ah!" The stranger laughed merrily. "You wonder about me—I can see it. Permit me to present myself—Gaston Max, at your service!"

"Gaston Max!" Stuart glared at the speaker incredulously. "Gaston Max! Why, I conduct a *post mortem* examination upon Gaston Max tomorrow, in order to learn if he was poisoned!"

"Do not trouble, doctor. That poor fellow is not Gaston Max and he was not poisoned. You may accept my word for it. I had the misfortune to strangle him."

PART II

STATEMENT OF GASTON MAX

I. THE DANCER OF MONTMARTRE

I. ZARA EL-KHALA

The following statement which I, Gaston Max, am drawing up in duplicate for the guidance of whoever may inherit the task of tracing "The Scorpion"—a task which I have begun—will be lodged—one copy at the Service de Surete in Paris, and the other copy with the Commissioner of Police, New Scotland Yard. As I apprehend that I may be assassinated at any time, I propose to put upon record all that I have learned concerning the series of murders which I believe to be traceable to a certain person. In the event of my death, my French colleagues will open the sealed packet containing this statement and the English Assistant Commissioner of the Special Branch responsible for international affairs will receive instructions to open that which I shall have lodged at Scotland Yard.

This matter properly commenced, then, with the visit to Paris, incognito, of the Grand Duke Ivan, that famous soldier of whom so much was expected, and because I had made myself responsible for his safety during

the time that he remained in the French capital, I (also incognito be it understood) struck up a friendship with one Casimir, the Grand Duke's valet. Nothing is sacred to a valet, and from Casimir I counted upon learning the real reason which had led this nobleman to visit Paris at so troublous a time. Knowing the Grand Duke to be a man of gallantry, I anticipated finding a woman in the case—and I was not wrong.

Yes, there was a woman, and *nom d'nom!*she was beautiful. Now in Paris we have many beautiful women, and in times of international strife it is true that we have had to shoot some of them. For my own part I say with joy that I have never been instrumental in bringing a woman to such an end. Perhaps I am sentimental; it is a French weakness; but on those few occasions when I have found a guilty woman in my power—and she has been pretty—*morbleu!*—she has escaped! It may be that I have seen to it that she was kept out of further mischief, but nevertheless she has never met a firing-party because of me. Very well.

From the good fellow Casimir I learned that a certain dancer appearing at one of our Montmartre theatres had written to the Grand Duke craving the honour of his autograph—and enclosing her photograph.

Pf! it was enough. One week later the autograph arrived—attached to an invitation to dine with the Grand Duke at his hotel in Paris. Yes—he had come to Paris. I have said that he was susceptible and I have said that she was beautiful. I address myself to men of the world, and I shall not be in error if I assume that they will say, "A wealthy fool and a designing woman. It is an old story." Let us see.

The confidences of Casimir interested me in more ways than one. In the first place I had particular reasons for suspecting anyone who sought to obtain access to the Grand Duke. These were diplomatic. And in the second place I had suspicions of Zara el-Khala. These were personal.

Yes—so she called herself—Zara el-Khala, which in Arabic is "Flower of the Desert." She professed to be an Egyptian, and certainly she had the long, almond-shaped eyes of the East, but her white skin betrayed her, and I knew that whilst she might possess Eastern blood, she was more nearly allied to Europe than to Africa. It is my business to note unusual matters, you understand, and I noticed that this beautiful and accomplished woman of whom all Paris was beginning to speak rapturously remained for many weeks at a small Montmartre theatre. Her performance, which was

unusually decorous for the type of establishment at which she appeared, had not apparently led to an engagement elsewhere.

This aroused the suspicions to which I have referred. In the character of a vaudeville agent I called at the Montmartre theatre and was informed by the management that Zara-el-Khala received no visitors, professional or otherwise. A small but expensive car awaited her at the stage door. My suspicions increased. I went away, but returned on the following night, otherwise attired, and from a hiding-place which I had selected on the previous evening I watched the dancer depart.

She came out so enveloped in furs and veils as to be unrecognizable, and a Hindu wearing a chauffeur's uniform opened the door of the car for her, and then, having arranged the rugs to her satisfaction, mounted to the wheel and drove away.

I traced the car. It had been hired for the purpose of taking Zara el-Khala from her hotel—to the theatre and home nightly. I sent a man to call upon her at the hotel—in order to obtain press material, ostensibly. She declined to see him. I became really interested. I sent her a choice bouquet, having the card of a nobleman attached to it, together with a message of respectful admiration. It was returned. I prevailed upon one of the most handsome and gallant cavalry officers in Paris to endeavour to make her acquaintance. He was rebuffed.

Eh bien! I knew then that Mlle. Zara of the Desert was unusual.

You will at once perceive that when I heard from the worthy Casimir how this unapproachable lady had actually written to the Grand Duke Ivan and had gone so far as to send him her photograph, I became excited. It appeared to me that I found myself upon the brink of an important discovery. I set six of my first-class men at work: three being detailed to watch the hotel of the Grand Duke Ivan and three to watch Zara el-Khala. Two more were employed in watching the Hindu servant and one in watching my good friend Casimir. Thus, nine clever men and myself were immediately engaged upon the case.

Why do I speak of a "case" when thus far nothing of apparent importance had occurred? I will explain. Although the Grand Duke travelled incognito, his Government knew of the journey and wished to learn with what object it had been undertaken.

At the time that I made the acquaintance of Casimir the Grand Duke had been in Paris for three days, and he was—according to my informant—"like a raging lion." The charming dancer had vouchsafed no reply to his invitation and he had met with the same reception, on presenting himself in person, which had been accorded to myself and to those others who had sought to obtain an interview with Zara el-Khala!

My state of mystification grew more and more profound. I studied the reports of my nine assistants.

It appeared that the girl had been in Paris for a period of two months. She occupied a suite of rooms in which all her meals were served. Except the Hindu who drove the hired car, she had no servant. She never appeared in the public part of the hotel unless veiled, and then merely in order to pass out to the car or in from it on returning. She drove out every day. She had been followed, of course, but her proceedings were unexceptionable. Leaving the car at a point in the Bois De Boulogne, she would take a short walk, if the day was fine enough, never proceeding out of sight of the Hindu, who followed with the automobile, and would then drive back to her hotel. She never received visits and never met any one during these daily excursions.

I turned to the report dealing with the Hindu. He had hired a room high up under the roof of an apartment house where foreign waiters and others had their abodes. He bought and cooked his own food, which apparently consisted solely of rice, lentils and fruit. He went every morning to the garage and attended to the car, called for his mistress, and having returned remained until evening in his own apartment. At night, after returning from the theatre, he sometimes went out, and my agent had failed to keep track of him on every occasion that he had attempted pursuit. I detached the man who was watching Casimir and whose excellent reports revealed the fact that Casimir was an honest fellow—as valets go—and instructed him to assist in tracing the movements of the Hindu.

Two nights later they tracked him to a riverside cafe kept by a gigantic quadroon from Dominique and patronized by that type which forms a link between the lowest commercial and the criminal classes: itinerant vendors of Eastern rugs, street performers and Turkish cigarette makers.

At last I began to have hopes. The Grand Duke at this time was speaking of leaving Paris, but as he had found temporary consolation in the smiles of

a lady engaged at the "Folies" I did not anticipate that he would depart for several days at any rate. Also he was the kind of man who is stimulated by obstacles.

The Hindu remained for an hour in the cafe, smoking and drinking some kind of syrup, and one of my fellows watched him. Presently the proprietor called him into a little room behind the counter and closed the door. The Hindu and the quadroon remained there for a few minutes, then the Hindu came out and left the cafe, returning to his abode. There was a telephone in this inner room, and my agent was of opinion that the Indian had entered either to make or to receive a call. I caused the line to be tapped.

On the following night the Hindu came back to the cafe, followed by one of my men. I posted myself at a selected point and listened for any message that might pass over the line to or from the cafe. At about the same hour as before—according to the report—someone called up the establishment, asking for "Miguel." This was the quadroon, and I heard his thick voice replying. The other voice—which had first spoken—was curiously sibilant but very distinct. Yet it did not sound like the voice of a Frenchman or of any European. This was the conversation:

"Miguel."

"Miguel speaks."

"*Scorpion.* A message for Chunda Lal."

"Very good."

Almost holding my breath, so intense was my excitement, I waited whilst Miguel went to bring the Hindu. Suddenly a new voice spoke—that of the Hindu.

"Chunda Lal speaks," it said.

I clenched by teeth; I knew that I must not miss a syllable.

"Scorpion" replied ... in voluble *Hindustani*—a language of which I know less than a dozen words!

II. CONCERNING THE GRAND DUKE

Although I had met with an unforeseen check, I had nevertheless learned three things. I had learned that Miguel the quadroon was possibly in league

with the Hindu; that the Hindu was called Chunda Lal; and that Chunda Lal received messages, probably instructions, from a third party who announced his presence by the word "*Scorpion*."

One of my fellows, of course, had been in the cafe all the evening, and from him I obtained confirmation of the fact that it had been the Hindu who had been summoned to the telephone and whom I had heard speaking. Instant upon the man at the cafe replacing the telephone and disconnecting, I called up the exchange. They had been warned and were in readiness.

"From what subscriber did that call come?" I demanded.

Alas! another check awaited me. It had originated in a public call office, and "Scorpion" was untraceable by this means!

Despair is not permitted by the traditions of the Service de Surete. Therefore I returned to my flat and recorded the facts of the matter thus far established. I perceived that I had to deal, not with a designing woman, but with some shadowy being of whom she was an instrument. The anomaly of her life was in a measure explained. She sojourned in Paris for a purpose—a mysterious purpose which was concerned (I could not doubt it) with the Grand Duke Ivan. This was not an amorous but a political intrigue.

I communicated, at a late hour, with the senior of the three men watching the Grand Duke. The Grand Duke that evening had sent a handsome piece of jewellery purchased in Rue de la Paix to the dancer. It had been returned.

In the morning I met with the good Casimir at his favorite cafe. He had just discovered that Zara el-Khala drove daily to the Bois de Boulogne, alone, and that afternoon the Grand Duke had determined to accost her during her solitary walk. I prepared myself for this event. Arrayed in a workman's blouse and having a modest luncheon and a small bottle of wine in a basket, I concealed myself in that part of the Bois which was the favourite recreation ground of the dancer, and awaited her appearance.

The Grand Duke appeared first upon the scene, accompanied by Casimir. The latter pointed out to him a path through the trees along which Zara el-Khala habitually strolled and showed him the point at which she usually rejoined the Hindu who followed along the road with the car. They retired. I seated myself beneath a tree from whence I could watch the path and the road and began to partake of the repast which I had brought with me.

At about three o'clock the dancer's car appeared, and the girl, veiled as usual, stepped out, and having exchanged a few words with the Indian,

began to walk slowly towards me, sometimes pausing to watch a bird in the boughs above her and sometimes to examine some wild plant growing beside the way. I ate cheese from the point of a clasp-knife and drank wine out of the bottle.

Suddenly she saw me.

She had cast her veil aside in order to enjoy the cool and fragrant air, and as she stopped and regarded me doubtfully where I sat, I saw her beautiful face, undefiled, now, by make-up and unspoiled by the presence of garish Eastern ornaments. *Nom d'un nom!* but she was truly a lovely woman! My heart went out in sympathy to the poor Grand Duke. Had I received such a mark of favour from her as he had received, and had I then been scorned as now she scorned him, I should have been desperate indeed.

Coming around a bend in the path, then, she stood only a few paces away, looking at me. I touched the peak of my cap.

"Good-day, mademoiselle," I said. "The weather is very beautiful."

"Good-day," she replied.

I continued to eat cheese, and reassured she walked on past me. Twenty yards beyond, the Grand Duke was waiting. As I laid down my knife upon the paper which had been wrapped around the bread and cheese, and raised the bottle to my lips, the enamoured nobleman stepped out from the trees and bowed low before Zara el-Khala.

She started back from him—a movement of inimitable grace, like that of a startled gazelle. And even before I had time to get upon my feet she had raised a little silver whistle to her lips and blown a short shrill note.

The Grand Duke, endeavouring to seize her hand, was pouring out voluble expressions of adoration in execrable French, and Zara el-Khala was retreating step by step. She had quickly thrown the veil about her again. I heard the pad of swiftly running feet. If I was to intervene before the arrival of the Hindu, I must act rapidly. I raced along the path and thrust myself between the Grand Duke and the girl.

"Mademoiselle," I said, "is this gentleman annoying you?"

"How dare you, low pig!" cried the Grand Duke, and with a sweep of his powerful arm he hurled me aside.

"Thank you," replied Zara el-Khala with great composure. "But my servant is here."

As I turned, Chunda Lal hurled himself upon the Grand Duke from behind. I had never seen an expression in a man's eyes like that in the eyes of the Hindu at this moment. They blazed like the eyes of a tiger, and his teeth were bared in a savage grin which I cannot hope to describe. His lean body seemed to shoot through the air, and he descended upon his burly adversary as a jungle beast falls upon its prey. Those long brown fingers clasping his neck, the Grand Duke fell forward upon his face.

"Chunda Lal!" said the dancer.

Kneeling, his right knee thrust between the shoulder blades of the prostrate man, the Hindu looked up—and I read murder in those glaring eyes. That he was an accomplished wrestler—or perhaps a strangler—I divined from the helplessness of the Grand Duke, who lay inert, robbed of every power except that of his tongue. He was swearing savagely.

"Chunda Lal!" said Zara el-Khala again. The Hindu shifted his grip from the neck to the arms of the Grand Duke. He pinioned him as is done in *jiu-jitsu* and forced him to stand upright. It was a curious spectacle—the impotency of this burly nobleman in the hands of his slight adversary. As they swayed to their feet, I thought I saw the glint of metal in the right hand of the Indian, but I could not be sure, for my attention was diverted. At this moment Casimir appeared upon the scene, looking very frightened.

Suddenly releasing his hold altogether, the Hindu glaring into the empurpled face of the Grand Duke, shot out one arm and pointed with a quivering finger along the path.

"Go!" he said.

The Grand Duke clenched his fists, looked from face to face as if calculating his chances, then shrugged his shoulders, very deliberately wiped his neck and wrists, where the Indian had held him, with a large silk handkerchief and threw the handkerchief on the ground. I saw a speck of blood upon the silk. Without another glance he walked away, Casimir following sheepishly. It is needless, perhaps, to add that Casimir had not recognized me.

I turned to the dancer, touching the peak of my cap.

"Can I be of any assistance to mademoiselle?" I asked.

"Thank you—no," she replied.

She placed five francs in my hand and set off rapidly through the trees in the direction of the road, her bloodthirsty but faithful attendant at her heels!

I stood scratching my head and looking after her.

That afternoon I posted a man acquainted with Hindustani to tap any message which might be sent to or from the cafe used by Chunda Lal. I learned that the Grand Duke had taken a stage box at the Montmartre theatre at which the dancer was appearing, and I decided that I would be present also.

A great surprise was in store for me.

Zara el-Khala had at this time established a reputation which extended beyond those circles from which the regular patrons of this establishment were exclusively drawn and which had begun to penetrate to all parts of Paris. You will remember that it was the extraordinary circumstance of her remaining at this obscure place of entertainment so long which had first interested me in the lady. I had learned that she had rejected a number of professional offers, and, as I have already stated, I had assured myself of this unusual attitude by presenting the card of a well-known Paris agency—and being refused admittance.

Now, as I leaned upon the rail at the back of the auditorium and the time for the dancer's appearance grew near, I could not fail to observe that there was a sprinkling of evening-dress in the stalls and that the two boxes already occupied boasted the presence of parties of well-known men of fashion. Then the Grand Duke entered as a troupe of acrobats finished their performance. Zara el-Khala was next upon the programme. I glanced at the Grand Duke and thought that he looked pale and unwell.

The tableau curtain fell and the manager appeared behind the footlights. He, also, seemed to be much perturbed.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I greatly regret to announce that Mlle. Zara el-Kahla is indisposed and unable to appear. We have succeeded in obtaining the services——"

Of whom he had succeeded in obtaining the services I never heard, for the rougher section of the audience rose at him like a menacing wave! They had come to see the Egyptian dancer and they would have their money back! It was a swindle; they would smash the theatre!

If one had doubted the great and growing popularity of Zara el-Kahla, this demonstration must have proved convincing. Over the heads of the excited audience, I saw the Grand Duke rise as if to retire. The other box parties were also standing up and talking angrily.

"Why was it not announced outside the theatre?" someone shouted. "We did not know until twenty minutes ago!" cried the manager in accents of despair.

I hurried from the theatre and took a taxicab to the hotel of the dancer. Running into the hall, I thrust a card in the hand of a concierge who stood there.

"Announce to Mlle. Zara el-Khala that I must see her at once," I said.

The man smiled and returned the card to me.

"Mlle. Zara el-Khala left Paris at seven o'clock, monsieur!"

"What! I cried—left Paris!"

"But certainly. Her baskets were taken to the Gare du Nord an hour earlier by her servant and she went off by the seven-fifty rapid for Calais. The theatre people were here asking for her an hour ago."

I hurried to my office to obtain the latest reports of my men, I had lost touch with them, you understand, during the latter part of the afternoon and evening. I found there the utmost confusion. They had been seeking me all over Paris to inform me that Zara el-Khala had left. Two men had followed her and had telephoned from Calais for instructions. She had crossed by the night mail for Dover. It was already too late to instruct the English police.

For a few hours I had relaxed my usual vigilance—and this was the result. What could I do? Zara el-Khala had committed no crime, but her sudden flight—for it looked like flight you will agree—was highly suspicious. And as I sat there in my office filled with all sorts of misgivings, in ran one of the men engaged in watching the Grand Duke.

The Grand Duke had been seized with illness as he left his box in the Montmartre theatre and had died before his car could reach the hotel!

III. A STRANGE QUESTION

A conviction burst upon my mind that a frightful crime had been committed. By whom and for what purpose I knew not. I hastened to the hotel of the Grand Duke. Tremendous excitement prevailed there, of course. There is no more certain way for a great personage to court publicity than to travel incognito. Everywhere that "M. de Stahler" had appeared all Paris

had cried, "There goes the Grand Duke Ivan!" And now as I entered the hotel, press, police and public were demanding: "Is it true that the Grand Duke is dead?" Just emerging from the lift I saw Casimir. *In propria persona*—as M. Max—he failed to recognize me.

"My good man," I said—"are you a member of the suite of the late Grand Duke?"

"I am, or was, the valet of M. de Stahler, monsieur," he replied.

I showed him my card.

"To me 'M. de Stahler' is the Grand Duke Ivan. What other servants had he with him?" I asked, although I knew very well.

"None, monsieur."

"Where and when was he taken ill?"

"At the Theatre Coquerico. Montmartre, at about a quarter past ten o'clock to-night."

"Who was with him?"

"No one, monsieur. His Highness was alone in a box. I had instructions to call with the car at eleven o'clock."

"Well?"

"The theatre management telephoned at a quarter past ten to say that His Highness had been taken ill and that a physician had been sent for. I went in the car at once and found him lying in one of the dressing-rooms to which he had been carried. A medical man was in attendance. The Grand Duke was unconscious. We moved him to the car——"

"*We?*"

"The doctor, the theatre manager, and myself. The Grand Duke was then alive, the physician declared, although he seemed to me to be already dead. But just before we reached the hotel, the physician, who was watching His Highness anxiously, cried, 'Ah,*mon Dieu!* It is finished. What a catastrophe!'"

"He was dead?"

"He was dead, monsieur."

"Who has seen him?"

"They have telephoned for half the doctors in Paris, monsieur, but it is too late."

He was affected, the good Casimir. Tears welled up in his eyes. I mounted in the lift to the apartment in which the Grand Duke lay. Three

doctors were there, one of them being he of whom Casimir had spoken. Consternation was written on every face.

"It was his heart," I was assured by the doctor who had been summoned to the theatre. "We shall find that he suffered from heart trouble."

They were all agreed upon the point.

"He must have sustained a great emotional shock," said another.

"You are convinced that there was no foul play, gentlemen?" I asked.

They were quite unanimous on the point.

"Did the Grand Duke make any statement at the time of the seizure which would confirm the theory of a heart attack?"

No. He had fallen down unconscious outside the door of his box, and from this unconsciousness he had never recovered. (Depositions of witnesses, medical evidence and other documents are available for the guidance of whoever may care to see them, but, as is well known, the death of the Grand Duke was ascribed to natural causes and it seemed as though my trouble would after all prove to be in vain.) Let us see what happened.

Leaving the hotel, on the night of the Grand Duke's death, I joined the man who was watching the cafe telephone.

There had been a message during the course of the evening, but it had been for a Greek cigarette-maker and it referred to the theft of several bales of Turkish tobacco—useful information, of minor kind, but of little interest to me. I knew that it would be useless to question the man Miguel, although I strongly suspected him of being a member of "The Scorpion's" organization. Any patron of the establishment enjoyed the privilege of receiving private telephone calls at the cafe on payment of a small fee.

A man of less experience in obscure criminology might now have assumed that he had been misled by a series of striking coincidences. Remember, there was not a shadow of doubt in the minds of the medical experts that the Grand Duke had died from syncope. His own professional advisor had sent written testimony to show that there was hereditary heart trouble, although not of a character calculated to lead to a fatal termination except under extraordinary circumstances. His own Government, which had every reason to suspect that the Grand Duke's assassination might be attempted, was satisfied. *Eh bien!* I was not.

I cross-examined the manager of the Theatre Coquerico. He admitted that Mlle. Zara el-Khala had been a mystery throughout her engagement.

Neither he nor anyone else connected with the house had ever entered her dressing-room or held any conversation with her, whatever, except the stage-manager and the musical director. These had spoken to her about her music and about lighting and other stage effects. She spoke perfect French.

Such a state of affairs was almost incredible, but was explained by the fact that the dancer, at a most modest salary, had doubled the takings of the theatre in a few days and had attracted capacity business throughout the remainder of her engagement. She had written from Marseilles, enclosing press notices and other usual matter and had been booked direct for one week. She had remained for two months, and might have remained for ever, the poor manager assured me, at five times the salary!

A curious fact now came to light. In all her photographs Zara el-Khala appeared veiled, in the Eastern manner; that is to say, she wore a white silk *yashmak* which concealed all her face except her magnificent eyes! On the stage the veil was discarded; in the photographs it was always present.

And the famous picture which she had sent to the Grand Duke? He had destroyed it, in a fit of passion, on returning from the Bois de Boulogne after his encounter with Chunda Lal!

It is Fate after all—Kismet—and not the wit of man which leads to the apprehension of really great criminals—a tireless Fate which dogs their footsteps, a remorseless Fate from which they fly in vain. Long after the funeral of the Grand Duke, and at a time when I had almost forgotten Zara el-Khala, I found myself one evening at the opera with a distinguished French scientist and he chanced to refer to the premature death (which had occurred a few months earlier) of Henrik Ericksen, the Norwegian.

"A very great loss to the century, M. Max," he said. "Ericksen was as eminent in electrical science as the Grand Duke Ivan was eminent in the science of war. Both were stricken down in the prime of life—and under almost identical circumstances."

"That is true," I said thoughtfully.

"It would almost seem," he continued, "as if Nature had determined to foil any further attempts to rifle her secrets and Heaven to check mankind in the making of future wars. Only three months after the Grand Duke's death, the American admiral, Mackney, died at sea—you will remember? Now, following Ericksen, Van Rembold, undoubtedly the greatest mining engineer of the century and the only man who has ever produced radium in

workable quantities, is seized with illness at a friend's house and expires even before medical aid can be summoned."

"It is very strange.'

"It is uncanny."

"Were you personally acquainted with the late Van Rembold?" I asked.

"I knew him intimately—a man of unusual charm, M. Max; and I have particular reason to remember his death, for I actually met him and spoke to him less than an hour before he died. We only exchanged a few words—we met on the street; but I shall never forget the subject of our chat."

"How is that?" I asked.

"Well, I presume Van Rembold's question was prompted by his knowledge of the fact that I had studied such subjects at one time; but he asked me if I knew of any race or sect in Africa or Asia who worshipped scorpions."

"*Scorpions!*" I cried. "*Ah, mon Dieu!* monsieur say it again—*scorpions?*"

"But yes, certainly. Does it surprise you?"

"Did it not surprise *you*?"

"Undoubtedly. I could not imagine what had occurred to account for his asking so strange a question. I replied that I knew of no such sect, and Van Rembold immediately changed the subject, nor did he revert to it. So that I never learned why he had made that singular inquiry."

You can imagine that this conversation afforded me much food for reflection. Whilst I could think of no reason why anyone should plot to assassinate Grand Dukes, admirals and mining engineers, the circumstances of the several cases were undoubtedly similar in a number of respects. But it was the remarkable question asked by Van Rembold which particularly aroused my interest.

Of course it might prove to be nothing more than a coincidence, but when one comes to consider how rarely the word "scorpion" is used, outside those in which these insects abound, it appears to be something more. Van Rembold, then, had had some occasion to feel curious about the scorpions; the name "Scorpion" was associated with the Hindu follower of Zara el-Khala; and she was who had brought the Grand Duke to Paris, where he had died.

Oh! it was a very fragile thread, but by following such a thread as this we are sometimes led to the heart of a labyrinth.

Beyond wondering if some sinister chain bound together this series of apparently natural deaths I might have made no move in the matter, but something occurred which spurred me to action. Sir Frank Narcombe, the great English surgeon, collapsed in the foyer of a London theatre and died shortly afterwards. Here again I perceived a case of a notable man succumbing unexpectedly in a public place—a case parallel to that of the Grand Duke, of Ericksen, of Van Rembold! it seemed as though some strange epidemic had attacked men of science—yes! they were all men of science, even including the Grand Duke, who was said to be the most scientific soldier in Europe, and the admiral, who had perfected the science of submarine warfare.

"The Scorpion!" ... that name haunted me persistently. So much so that at last I determined to find out for myself if Sir Frank Narcombe had ever spoken about a scorpion or if there was any evidence to show that he had been interested in the subject.

I could not fail to remember, too, that Zara el-Khala had last been reported as crossing to England.

IV. THE FIGHT IN THE CAFE

New Scotland Yard had been advised that any reference to a scorpion, in whatever form it occurred, should be noted and followed up, but nothing had resulted and as a matter of fact I was not surprised in the least. All that I had learned—and this was little enough—I had learned more or less by accident. But I came to the conclusion that a visit to London might be advisable.

I had caused a watch to be kept upon the man Miguel, whose establishment seemed to be a recognized resort of shady characters. I had no absolute proof, remember, that he knew anything of the private affairs of the Hindu, and no further reference to a scorpion had been made by anyone using the cafe telephone. Nevertheless I determined to give him a courtesy call before leaving for London ... and to this determination I cannot doubt that once again I was led by providence.

Attired in a manner calculated to enable me to pass unnoticed among the patrons of the establishment, I entered the place and ordered cognac. Miguel having placed it before me, I lighted a cigarette and surveyed my surroundings.

Eight or nine men were in the cafe, and two women. Four of the men were playing cards at a corner table, and the others were distributed about the place, drinking and smoking. The women, who were flashily dressed but who belonged to that order of society which breeds the Apache, were deep in conversation with a handsome Algerian. I recognized only one face in the cafe—that of a dangerous character, Jean Sach, who had narrowly escaped the electric chair in the United States and who was well known to the Bureau. He was smiling at one of the two women—the woman to whom the Algerian seemed to be more particularly addressing himself.

Another there was in the cafe who interested me as a student of physiognomy—a dark, bearded man, one of the card-players. His face was disfigured by a purple scar extending from his brow to the left corner of his mouth, which it had drawn up into a permanent snarl, so that he resembled an enraged and dangerous wild animal. Mentally I classified this person as "Le Balafre."

I had just made up my mind to depart when the man Sach arose, crossed the cafe and seated himself insolently between the Algerian and the woman to whom the latter was talking. Turning his back upon the brown man, he addressed some remark to the woman, at the same time leering in her face.

Women of this class are difficult, you understand? Sach received from the lady a violent blow upon the face which rolled him on the floor! As he fell, the Algerian sprang up and drew a knife. Sach rolled away from him and also reached for the knife which he carried in a hip-pocket.

Before he could draw it, Miguel, the quadroon proprietor, threw himself upon him and tried to pitch him into the street. But Sach, although a small man, was both agile and ferocious. He twisted out of the grasp of the huge quadroon and turned, raising the knife. As he did so, the Algerian deftly kicked it from his grasp and left Sach to face Miguel unarmed. Screaming with rage, he sprang at Miguel's throat, and the tow fell writhing upon the floor.

There could only be one end to such a struggle, of course, as the Algerian recognized by replacing his knife in his pocket and resuming his seat.

Miguel obtained a firm hold upon Sacah and raised him bodily above his head, as one has seen a professional weight-lifter raise a heavy dumb-bell. Thus he carried him, kicking and foaming at the mouth with passion, to the open door. From the step he threw him into the middle of the street.

At this moment I observed something glittering upon the floor close to the chair occupied by the Algerian. Standing up—for I had determined to depart—I crossed in that direction, stooped and picked up this object which glittered. As my fingers touched it, so did my heart give a great leap.

The object was a *golden scorpion!*

Forgetful of my dangerous surroundings I stood looking at the golden ornament in my hand ... when suddenly and violently it was snatched from me! The Algerian, his brown face convulsed with rage, confronted me.

"Where did you find that charm?" he cried. "It belongs to me."

"Very well," I replied—"you have it."

He glared at me with a ferocity which the incident scarcely seemed to merit and exchanged a significant glance with someone who had approached and who now stood behind me. Turning, I met a second black gaze—that of the quadroon who having restored order had returned from the cafe door and now stood regarding me. "Did you find it on the floor?" asked Miguel suspiciously.

"I did."

He turned to the Algerian.

"It fell when you kicked the knife from the hand of that pig," he said. "You should be more careful."

Again they exchanged significant glances, but the Algerian resumed his seat and Miguel went behind the counter. I left the cafe conscious of the fact that black looks pursued me.

The night was very dark, and as I came out on to the pavement someone touched me on the arm. I turned in a flash.

"Walk on, friend," said the voice of Jean Sach. "What was it that you picked up from the floor?"

"A golden scorpion," I answered quickly.

"Ah!" he whispered—"I thought so! It is enough. They shall pay for what they have done to me—those two. Hurry, friend, as I do."

Before I could say another word or strive to detain him, he turned and ran off along a narrow courtway which at this point branched from the street.

I stood for a moment, nonplussed, staring after him. By good fortune I had learned more in ten minutes than by the exercise of all my ingenuity and the resources of the Service I could have learned in ten months! *Par al barbe du prophete* the Kismet which dogs the footsteps of malefactors assisted me!

Recollecting the advice of Jean Sach, I set off at a brisk pace along the street, which was dark and deserted and which passed through a district marked red on the Paris crimes-map. Arriving at the corner, above which projected a lamp, I paused and glanced back into the darkness. I could see no one, but I thought I could detect the sound of stealthy footsteps following me.

The suspicion was enough. I quickened my pace, anxious to reach the crowded boulevard upon which this second street opened. I reached it unmolested, but intending to throw any pursuer off the track, I dodged and doubled repeatedly on the way to my flat and arrived there about midnight, convinced that I had eluded pursuit—if indeed I had been pursued.

All my arrangements were made for leaving Paris, and now I telephoned to the assistant on duty in my office, instructing him to take certain steps in regard to the proprietor of the cafe and the Algerian and to find the hiding-place of the man Jean-Sach. I counted it more than ever important that I should go to London at once.

In this belief I was confirmed at the very moment that I boarded the Channel steamer at Boulogne: for as I stepped upon the deck I found myself face to face with a man who was leaning upon the rail and apparently watching the passengers coming on board. He was a man of heavy build, dark and bearded, and his face was strangely familiar.

Turning, as I lighted a cigarette, I glanced back at him in order to obtain a view of his profile. I knew him instantly—for now the scar was visible. It was "Le Balafre" who had been playing cards in Miguel's cafe on the previous night!

I have sometimes been criticised, especially by my English confreres, for my faith in disguise. I have been told that no disguise is impenetrable to the trained eye. I reply that there are many disguises but few trained eyes! To my faith in disguise I owed the knowledge that a golden scorpion was the token of some sort of gang, society, or criminal group, and to this same faith which an English inspector of police once assured me to be a misplaced one

I owed, on boarding the steamer, my escape from detection by this big bearded fellow who was possibly looking out for me!

Yet, I began to wonder if after all I had escaped the shadowy pursuer whose presence I had suspected in the dark street outside the cafe or if he had tracked me and learned my real identity. In any event, the roles were about to be reversed! "Le Balafre" at Folkestone took a seat in a third-class carriage of the London train. I took one in the next compartment.

Arrived at Charing Cross, he stood for a time in the booking-hall, glanced at his watch, and then took up the handbag which he carried and walked out into the station yard. I walked out also.

"Le Balafre" accosted a cabman; and as he did so I passed close behind him and overheard a part of the conversation.

"... Bow Road Station East! It's too far. What?"

I glanced back. The bearded man was holding up a note—a pound note apparently. I saw the cabman nod. Without an instant's delay I rushed up to another cabman who had just discharged a passenger.

"To Bow Road Station East!" I said to the man. "Double fare if you are quick!"

It would be a close race. But I counted on the aid of that Fate which dogs the steps of wrong-doers! My cab was off first and the driver had every reason for hurrying. From the moment that we turned out into the Strand until we arrived at our destination I saw no more of "Le Balafre." My extensive baggage I must hope to recover later.

At Bow Road Station I discovered a telephone box in a dark corner which commanded a view of the street. I entered this box and waited. It was important that I should remain invisible. Unless my bearded friend had been unusually fortunate he could not well have arrived before me.

As it chanced I had nearly six minutes to wait. Then, not ten yards away, I saw "Le Balafre" arrive and dismiss the cabman outside the station.

There was nothing furtive in his manner; he was evidently satisfied that no one pursued him; and he stood in the station entrance almost outside my box and lighted a cigar!

Placing his bag upon the floor, he lingered, looking to left and right, when suddenly a big closed car painted dull yellow drew up beside the pavement. It was driven by a brown-faced chauffeur whose nationality I found difficulty in placing, for he wore large goggles. But before I could

determine upon my plan of action, "Le Balafre" crossed the pavement and entered the car—and the car glided smoothly away, going East. A passing lorry obstructed my view and I even failed to obtain a glimpse of the number on the plate.

But I had seen something which had repaid me for my trouble. As the man of the scar had walked up to the car, had exhibited to the brown-skinned chauffeur some object which he held in the palm of his hand ... an object which glittered like gold!

II. "LE BALAFRE"

I. I BECOME CHARLES MALET

Behold me established in rooms in Battersea and living retired during the day while I permitted my beard to grow. I had recognized that my mystery of "The Scorpion" was the biggest case which had ever engaged the attention of the Service de Surete, and I was prepared, if necessary, to devote my whole time for twelve months to its solution. I had placed myself in touch with Paris, and had had certain papers and licenses forwarded to me. A daily bulletin reached me, and one of these bulletins was sensational.

The body of Jean Sach had been recovered from the Seine. The man had been stabbed to the heart. Surveillance of Miguel and his associates continued unceasingly, but I had directed that no raids or arrests were to be made without direct orders from me.

I was now possessed of a French motor license and also that of a Paris taxi-driver, together with all the other documents necessary to establish the identity of one Charles Malet. Everything was in order. I presented myself —now handsomely bearded—at New Scotland Yard and applied for a license. The "knowledge of London" and other tests I passed successfully and emerged a fully-fledged cabman!

Already I had opened negotiations for the purchase of a dilapidated but seviceable cab which belonged to a small proprietor who had obtained a car of more up-to-date pattern to replace this obsolete one. I completed these negotiations by paying down a certain sum and arranged to garage my cab in the disused stable of a house near my rooms in Battersea.

Thus I now found myself in a position to appear anywhere at any time without exciting suspicion, enabled swiftly to proceed from point to point and to pursue anyone either walking or driving whom it might please me to pursue. It was a *modus operandi* which had served me well in Paris and which had led to one of my biggest successes (the capture of the French desperado known as "Mr. Q.") in New York.

I had obtained, *via* Paris, particulars of the recent death of Sir Frank Narcombe, and the circumstances attendant upon his end were so similar to those which had characterized the fate of the Grand Duke, of Van Rembold and the others, that I could not for a moment believe them to be due to mere coincidence. Acting upon my advice Paris advised Scotland Yard to press for a *post mortem* examination of the body, but the influence of Sir Frank's family was exercised to prevent this being carried out—and exercised successfully.

Meanwhile, I hovered around the houses, flats, clubs and offices of everyone who had been associated with the late surgeon, noting to what addresses they directed me to drive and who lived at those address. In this way I obtained evidence sufficient to secure three judicial separations, but not a single clue leading to "The Scorpion"! No matter.

At every available opportunity I haunted the East-End streets, hoping for a glimpse of the big car and the brown-skinned chauffeur or of my scarred man from Paris. I frequented all sorts of public bars and eating-houses used by foreign and Asiatics. By day and by night I roamed about the dismal thoroughfares of that depressing district, usually with my flag down to imply that I was engaged.

Such diligence never goes long unrewarded. One evening, having discharged a passenger, a mercantile officer, at the East India Docks, as I was drifting, watchfully, back through Limehouse, I saw a large car pull up just ahead of me in the dark. A man got out and the car was driven off.

Two courses presented themselves. I was not sure that this was the car for which I sought, but it strangely resembled it. Should I follow the car or the

man? A rapid decision was called for. I followed the man.

That I had not been mistaken in the identity of the car shortly appeared. The man took out a cigar and standing on the corner opposite the Town Hall, lighted it. I was close to him at the time, and by the light of the match, which he sheltered with his hands, I saw the scarred and bearded face! *Triomphe!* it was he!

Having lighted his cigar, he crossed the road and entered the saloon of a neighbourhood public-house. Locking my cab I, also, entered that saloon. I ordered a glass of bitter beer and glanced around at the object of my interest. He had obtained a glass of brandy and was contorting his hideous face as he sipped the beverage. I laughed.

"Have they tried to poison you, mister!" I said.

"Ah,*pardieu!* poison—yes!" he replied.

"You want to have it out of a bottle," I continued confidentially —"Martell's Three Stars."

He stared at me uncomprehendingly.

"I don't know," he said haltingly. "I have very little English."

"Oh, that's it!" I cried, speaking French with a barbarous accent. "You only speak French?"

"Yes, yes," he replied eagerly. "It is so difficult to make oneself understood. This spirit is not cognac, it is some kind of petrol!"

Finishing my bitter, I ordered two glasses of good brandy and placed one before "Le Balafre."

"Try that," I said, continuing to speak in French, "You will find it is better."

He sipped from his glass and agreed that I was right. We chatted together for ten minutes and had another drink, after which my dangerous-looking acquaintance wished me good-night and went out. The car had come from the West, and I strongly suspected that my man either lived in the neighbourhood or had come there to keep an appointment. Leaving my cab outside the public-house, I followed him on foot, down Three Colt Street to Ropemaker Street, where he turned into a narrow alley leading to the riverside. It was straight and deserted, and I dared not follow further until he had reached the corner. I heard his footsteps pass right to the end. Then the sound died away. I ran to the corner. The back of a wharf building—a

high blank wall—faced a row of ramshackle tenements, some of them built of wood; but not a soul was in sight.

I reluctantly returned to the spot at which I had left the cab—and found a constable there who wanted to know what I meant by leaving a vehicle in the street unattended. I managed to enlist his sympathy by telling him that I had been in pursuit of a "fare" who had swindled me with a bad half-crown. The ruse succeeded.

"Which street did he go down, mate?" asked the constable.

I described the street and described the scarred man. The constable shook his head.

"Sounds like one o' them foreign sailormen," he said. "But I don't know what he can have gone down there for. It's nearly all Chinese, that part."

His words came as a revelation; they changed the whole complexion of the case. It dawned upon me even as he spoke the word "Chinese" that the golden scorpion which I had seen in the Paris cafe was of Chinese workmanship! I started my engine and drove slowly to that street in which I had lost the track of "Le Balafre." I turned the cab so that I should be ready to drive off at a moment's notice, and sat there wondering what my next move should be. How long I had been there I cannot say, when suddenly it began to rain in torrents.

What I might have done or what I had hoped to do is of no importance; for as I sat there staring out at the dismal rain-swept street, a man came along, saw the head-lamps of the cab and stopped, peering in my direction. Evidently perceiving that I drove a cab and not a private car, he came towards me.

"Are you disengaged?" he asked.

Whether it was that I sympathized with him—he had no topcoat or umbrella—or whether I was guided by Fate I know not, but as he spoke I determined to give up my dreary vigil for that night. *Pardieu!* but certainly it was Fate again!

"Well, I suppose I am, sir," I said, and asked him where he wanted to go.

He gave an address not five hundred yards from my own rooms! I thought this so curious that I hesitated no longer.

"Jump in," I said; and still seeking in my mind for a link between the scorpion case and China, I drove off, and in less than half an hour, for the streets were nearly empty, arrived at my destination.

The passenger, whose name was Dr. Keppel Stuart, very kindly suggested a glass of hot grog, and I did not refuse his proferred hospitality. When I came out of his house again, the rain had almost ceased, and just as I stooped to crank the car I thought I saw a shadowy figure moving near the end of a lane which led to the tradesmen's entrance of Dr. Stuart's house. A sudden suspicion laid hold upon me—a horrible doubt.

Having driven some twenty yards along the road, I leaned from my seat and looked back. A big man wearing a black waterproof overall was standing looking after me!

Remembering how cleverly I had been trailed from Miguel's cafe to my flat, in Paris (for I no longer doubted that someone had followed me on that occasion), I now perceived that I might again be the object of the same expert's attention. Stopping my engine half-way along the next road, I jumped out and ran back, hiding in the bushes which grew beside the gate of a large empty house. I had only a few seconds to wait.

A big closed car, running almost silently, passed before me ... and "Le Balafre" was leaning out of the window!

At last I saw my chance of finding the headquarters of "The Scorpion." Alas! The man of the scar was as swift to recognize that possibility as I. A moment after he had passed my stationary cab, and found it to be deserted, his big car was off like the wind, and even before I could step out from the bushes the roar of the powerful engine was growing dim in the distance!

I was detected. I had to deal with dangerously clever people.

II. BAITING THE TRAP

The following morning I spent at home, in my modest rooms, reviewing my position and endeavouring to adjust my plans in accordance with the latest development. "The Scorpion" had scored a point. What had aroused the suspicions "Le Balafre," I knew not; but I was inclined to think that he had been looking from some window or peep-hole in the narrow street with the wooden houses when I had, injudiciously, followed him there.

On the other hand, the leakage might be in Paris—or in my correspondence system. The man of the scar might have been looking for

me as I was looking for him. That he was looking for someone on the cross-channel boat I had not doubted.

He was aware, then that Charles Malet, cabman, was watching him. But was he aware that Charles Malet was Gaston Max? And did he know where I lived? Also—did he perchance think that my meeting with Dr. Stuart in Limehouse had been prearranged? Clearly he had seen Dr. Stuart enter my cab, for he had pursued us to Battersea.

This course of reflection presently led me to a plan. It was a dangerous plan, but I doubted if I should ever find myself in greater danger than I was already. *Nom d'un nom!* I had not forgotten the poor Jean Sach!

That night, well knowing that I carried my life in my hands, I drove again to Limehouse Town Hall, and again leaving my cab outside went into the bar where I had previously met "Le Balafre." If I had doubted that my movements were watched I must now have had such doubts dispelled; for two minutes later the man with the scar came in and greeted me affably!

I had learned something else. He did not know that I had recognized him as the person who had tracked me to Dr. Stuart's house!

He invited me to drink with him, and I did so. As we raised our glasses I made a move. Looking all about me suspiciously:

"Am I right in supposing that you have business in this part of London?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied "My affairs bring me here sometimes."

"You are well acquainted with the neighbourhood?"

"Fairly well. But actually of course I am a stranger to London."

I tapped him confidentially upon the breast.

"Take my advice, as a friend," I said, "and visit these parts as rarely as possible."

"Why do you say that?"

"It is dangerous. From the friendly manner in which you entered into conversation with me, I perceived that you were of a genial and unsuspicious nature. Very well. I warn you. Last night I was followed from a certain street not far from here to the house of a medical man who is a specialist in certain kinds of criminology, you understand."

He stared at me very hard, his teeth bared by that fearful snarl. "You are a strange cabman."

"Perhaps I am. No matter. Take my advice. I have things written here"—I tapped the breast of my tunic—"which will astonish all the world shortly. I tell you, my friend, my fortune is made."

I finished my drink and ordered another for myself and one for my acquaintance. He was watching me doubtfully. Taking up my replenished glass, I emptied it at a draught and ordered a third. I leaned over towards the scarred man, resting my hand heavily upon his shoulder.

"Five thousand pounds," I whispered thickly, "has been offered for the information which I have here in my pocket. It is not yet complete, you understand, and because they may murder me before I obtain the rest of the facts, do you know what I am going to do with this?"

Again I tapped my tunic pocket. "Le Balafre" frowned perplexedly.

"I don't even know what you are talking about, my friend," he replied.

"*I* know what I am talking about," I assured him, speaking more and more huskily. "Listen, then: I am going to take all my notes to my friend, the doctor, and leave them with him, sealed—sealed, you follow me? If I do not come back for them, In a week, shall we say?—he sends them to the police. *I* do not profit, you think? No.*morbleu!* but there are some who hang!"

Emptying my third glass, I ordered a fourth and one for my companion. He checked me.

"No more for me, thank you," he said. "I have—business to attend to. I will wish you good-night."

"Good-night!" I cried boisterously—"good-night, friend! take heed of my good advice!"

As he went out, the barman brought me my fourth glass of cognac, staring at me doubtfully. Our conversation had been conducted in French, but the tone of my voice had attracted attention.

"Had about enough, ain't you, mate?" he said. "Your ugly pal jibbed!"

"Quite enough!" I replied, in English now of course. "But I've had a stroke of luck to-night and I feel happy. Have one with me. This is a final."

On going out into the street I looked cautiously about me, for I did not expect to reach the house of Dr. Stuart unmolested. I credited "Le Balafre" with sufficient acumen to distrust the genuineness of my intoxication, even if he was unaware of my real identity. I never make the mistake of underestimating an opponent's wit, and whilst acting on the assumption that

the scarred man knew me to be forcing his hand, I recognized that whether he believed me to be drunk or sober, Gaston Max or another, his line of conduct must be the same. He must take it for granted that I actually designed to lodge my notes with Dr. Stuart and endeavour to prevent me doing so.

I could detect no evidence of surveillance whatever and cranking the engine I mounted and drove off. More than once, as I passed along Commercial Road, I stopped and looked back. But so far as I could make out no one was following me. The greater part of my route lay along populous thoroughfares, and of this I was not sorry; but I did not relish the prospect of Thames Street, along which presently my course led me.

Leaving the city behind me, I turned into that thoroughfare, which at night is almost quite deserted, and there I pulled up. *Pardieu!* I was disappointed! It seemed as though my scheme had miscarried. It could not understand why I had been permitted to go unmolested, and I intended to walk back to the corner for a final survey before continuing my journey. This survey was never made.

As I stopped the cab and prepared to descend, a faint—a very faint—sound almost in my ear, set me keenly on the alert. Just in the nick of time I ducked ... as the blade of a long knife flashed past my head, ripping its way through my cloth cap!

Yes! That movement had saved my life, for otherwise the knife must have entered my shoulder—and pierced to my heart!

Someone was hidden in the cab!

He had quietly opened one of the front windows and had awaited a suitable opportunity to stab me. Now, recognizing failure, he leapt out on the near side as I lurched and stumbled from my seat, and ran off like the wind. I never so much as glimpsed him.

"*Mon Dieu!*" I muttered, raising my hand to my head, from which blood was trickling down my face, "the plan succeeds!"

I bound a handkerchief as tightly as possible around the wound in my scalp and put my cap on to keep the bandage in place. The wound was only a superficial one, and except for the bleeding I suffered no inconvenience from it. But I had now a legitimate reason for visiting Dr. Stuart, and as I drove on towards Battersea I was modifying my original plan in accordance with the unforeseen conditions.

It was long past Dr. Stuart's hours of consultation when I arrived at his house, and the servant showed me into a waiting-room, informing me that the doctor would join me in a few minutes. Directly she had gone out I took from the pocket of my tunic the sealed envelope which I had intended to lodge with the doctor. Pah! it was stained with blood which had trickled down from the wound in my scalp!

Actually, you will say, there was no reason why I should place a letter in the hand of Dr. Stuart; my purpose would equally well be served by *pretending* that I had done so. Ah, but I knew that I had to deal with clever people—with artists in crime—and it behooved me to be an artist also. I had good reason to know that their system of espionage was efficient; and the slipshod way is ever the wrong way.

The unpleasantly sticky letter I returned to my pocket, looking around me for some means of making up any kind of packet which could do duty as a substitute. Beyond a certain draped over a recess at one end of the waiting-room I saw a row of boxes, a box of lint and other medical paraphernalia. It was the doctor's dispensary. Perhaps I might find there an envelope.

I crossed the room and looked. Immediately around the corner, on a level with my eyes, was a packet of foolscap envelopes and a stick of black sealing-wax! *Bien!* all that I now required was a stout sheet of paper to enclose in one of those envelopes. But not a scrap of paper could I find, except the blood-stained letter in my pocket—towards which I had formed a strong antipathy. I had not even a newspaper in my possession. I thought of folding three or four envelopes, but there were only six in all, and the absence of so many might be noted.

Drawing aside a baize curtain which hung from the bottom shelf, I discovered a number of old card-board boxes. It was sufficient. With a pair of surgical scissors I cut a piece from the lid of one and thrust it into an envelope, gumming down the lapel. At a little gas jet intended for the purpose I closed both ends with wax and—singular coincidence!—finding a Chinese coin fastened to a cork lying on the shelf, my sense of humour prompted me to use it as a seal! Finally, to add to the verisimilitude of the affair I borrowed a pen which rested in a bottle of red ink and wrote upon the envelope the number: 30, that day being the thirtieth day of the month.

It was well that the artist within me had dictated this careful elaboration, as became evident a few minutes later when the doctor appeared at the head

of a short flight of stairs and requested me to step up to his consulting-room. It was a small room, so that the window, over which a linen blind was drawn, occupied nearly the whole of one wall. As Dr. Stuart, having examined the cut on my scalp, descended to the dispensary for lint, the habits of a lifetime asserted themselves.

I quickly switched off the light and peeped out of the window around the edge of the blind, which I drew slightly aside. In the shadow of the wall upon the opposite side of the narrow lane a man was standing! I turned on the light again. The watcher should not be disappointed!

My skull being dressed, I broached the subject of the letter, which I said I had found in my cab after the accident which had caused the injury.

"Someone left this behind to-day, sir," I said; "perhaps the gentleman who was with me when I had the accident; and I've got no means of tracing him. He may be able to trace *me*, though, or he may advertise. It evidently contains something valuable. I wonder if you would do me a small favour? Would you mind taking charge of it for a week or so, until it is claimed?"

He asked me why I did not take it to Scotland Yard.

"Because," said I, "if the owner claims it from Scotland Yard he is less likely to be generous than if he gets it direct from me!"

"But what is the point," asked Dr. Stuart, "in leaving it here?"

I explained that if *I* kept the letter I might be suspected of an intention of stealing it, whereas directly there was any inquiry, he could certify that I had left it in his charge. He seemed to be satisfied and asked me to come into his study for a moment. The man in the lane was probably satisfied, too. I had stood three paces from the table-lamp all the time, waving the letter about as I talked, and casting a bold shadow on the linen blind!

The first thing that struck me as I entered the doctor's study was that the French windows, which opened on a sheltered lawn, were open. I acted accordingly.

"You see," said Dr. Stuart, "I am enclosing your letter in this big envelope which I am sealing."

"Yes, sir," I replied, standing at some distance from him, so that he had to speak loudly. "And would you mind addressing it to the Lost Property Office."

"Not at all," said he, and did as I suggested. "If not reclaimed within a reasonable time, it will be sent to Scotland Yard."

I edged nearer to the open window.

"If it is not reclaimed," I said loudly, "it goes to Scotland Yard—yes."

"Meanwhile," concluded the doctor, "I am locking it in this private drawer in my bureau."

"It is locked in your bureau. Very good."

III. DISAPPEARANCE OF CHARLES MALET

Knowing, and I knew it well, that people of "The Scorpion" were watching, I do not pretend that I felt at my ease as I drove around to the empty house in which I garaged my cab. My inquiry had entered upon another stage, and Charles Malet was about to disappear from the case. I was well aware that if he failed in his vigilance for a single moment he might well disappear from the world!

The path which led to the stables was overgrown with weeds and flanked by ragged bushes; weeds and grass sprouted between the stones paving the little yard, also, although they were withered to a great extent by the petrol recently spilled there. Having run the cab into the yard, I alighted and looked around the deserted grounds, mysterious in the moonlight. Company would have been welcome, but excepting a constable who had stopped and chatted with me on one or two evenings I always had the stables to myself at night.

I determined to run the cab into the stable and lock it up without delay, for it was palpably dangerous in the circumstances to remain longer than necessary in that lonely spot. Hurriedly I began to put out the lamps. I unlocked the stable doors and stood looking all about me again. I was dreading the ordeal of driving the cab those last ten yards into the garage, for whilst I had my back to the wilderness of bushes it would be an easy matter for anyone in hiding there to come up behind me.

Nevertheless, it had to be done. Seating myself at the wheel I drove into the narrow building, stopped the engine and peered cautiously around toward the bright square formed by the open doors. Nothing was to be seen. No shadow moved.

A magazine pistol held in my hand, I crept, step by step, along the wall until I stood just within the opening. There I stopped.

I could hear a sound of quick breathing! There was someone waiting outside!

Dropping quietly down upon the pavement, I slowly protruded my head around the angle of the brick wall at a point not four inches above the ground. I knew that whoever waited would have his eyes fixed upon the doorway at the level of a man's head.

Close to the wall, a pistol in his left hand and an upraised stand-bag in his right, stood "Le Balafre!" His eyes gleamed savagely in the light of the moon and his teeth were bared in that fearful animal snarl. But he had not seen me.

Inch by inch I thrust my pistol forward, the barrel raised sharply. I could not be sure of my aim, of course, nor had I time to judge it carefully.

I fired.

The bullet was meant for his right wrist, but it struck him in the fleshy part of his arm. Uttering a ferocious cry he leapt back, dropped his pistol—and perceiving me as I sprang to my feet, lashed at my head with the sand-bag. I raised my left arm to guard my skull and sustained the full force of the blow upon it.

I staggered back against the wall, and my own pistol was knocked from my grasp. My left arm was temporarily useless and the man of the scar was deprived of the use of his right. *Pardieu!* I had the better chance!

He hurled himself upon me.

Instantly he recovered the advantage, for he grasped me by the throat with his left hand—and, *nom d'un nom!* what a grip he had! Flat against the wall he held me, and began, his teeth bared in that fearful grin, to crush the life from me.

To such an attack there was only one counter. I kicked him savagely—and that death-grip relaxed. I writhed, twisted—and was free! As I regained my freedom I struck up at him, and by great good fortune caught him upon the point of the jaw. He staggered. I struck him over the heart, and he fell I pounced upon him, exulting, for he had sought my life and I knew no pity.

Yet I had not thought so strong a man would choke so easily, and for some moments I stood looking down at him, believing that he sought to trick me. But it was not so. His affair was finished.

I listened. The situation in which I found myself was full of difficulty. An owl screeched somewhere in the trees, but nothing else stirred. The sound of the shot had not attracted attention, apparently. I stooped and examined the garments of the man who lay at my feet.

He carried a travel coupon to Paris bearing that day's date, together with some other papers, but, although I searched all his pockets, I could find nothing of real interest, until in an inside pocket of his coat I felt some hard, irregularly shaped object. I withdrew it, and in the moonlight it lay glittering in my palm ... a *golden scorpion!*

It had apparently been broken in the struggle. The tail was missing, nor could I find it: but I must confess that I did not prolong the search.

Some chance effect produced by the shadow of the moonlight, and the presence of that recently purchased ticket, gave me the idea upon which without delay I proceeded to act. Satisfying myself that there was no mark upon any of his garments by which the man could be identified, I unlocked from my wrist an identification disk which I habitually wore there, and locked it upon the wrist of the man with the scar!

Clearly, I argued, he had been detailed to dispatch me and then to leave at once for France. I would make it appear that he had succeeded.

Behold me, ten minutes later, driving slowly along a part of the Thames Embankment which I chanced to remember, a gruesome passenger riding behind me in the cab. I was reflecting as I kept a sharp look-out for a spot which I had noted one day during my travels, how easily one could commit murder in London, when a constable ran out and intercepted me!

Mon Deiu! how my heart leapt!

"I'll trouble you for your name and number, my lad," he said.

"What for?" I asked, and remembering a rare fragment of idiom: "What's up with you?" I added.

"Your lamp's out!" he cried, "that's what's up with me!"

"Oh," said I, climbing from my seat—"very well. I'm sorry. I didn't know. But here is my license."

I handed him the little booklet and began to light my lamps, cursing myself for a dreadful artist because I had forgotten to do so.

"All right," he replied, and handed it back to me. "But how the devil you've managed to get *all* your lamps out, I can't imagine!"

"This is my first job since dusk," I explained hurrying around to the tail-light. "And *he* don't say much!" remarked the constable.

I replaced my matches in my pocket and returned to the front of the cab, making a gesture as of one raising a glass to his lips and jerking my thumb across my shoulder in the direction of my unseen fare.

"Oh, that's it!" said the constable, and moved off.

Never in my whole career have I been so glad to see the back of any man!

I drove on slowly. The point for which I was making was only some three hundred yards further along, but I had noted that the constable had walked off in the opposite direction. Therefore, arriving at my destination—a vacant wharf open to the road—I pulled up and listened.

Only the wash of the tide upon the piles of the wharf was audible, for the night was now far advanced.

I opened the door of the cab and dragged out "Le Balafre." Right and left I peered, truly like a stage villain, and then hauled my unpleasant burden along the irregularly paved path and on to the little wharf. Out in mid-stream a Thames Police patrol was passing, and I stood for a moment until the creak of the oars grew dim.

Then: there was a dull splash far below ... and silence again.

Gaston Max had been consigned to a watery grave!

Returning again to the garage, I wondered very much who he had been, this one, "Le Balafre." Could it be that he was "The Scorpion"? I could not tell, but I had hopes very shortly of finding out. I had settled up my affairs with my landlady and had removed from my apartments all papers and other effects. In the garage I had placed a good suit of clothes and other necessities, and by telephone I had secured a room at a West-End hotel.

The cab returned to the stable, I locked the door, and by the light of one of the lamps, shaved off my beard and moustache. My uniform and cap I hung up on the hook where I usually left them after working hours, and changed into the suit which I had placed there in readiness. I next destroyed all evidences of identity and left the place in a neat condition. I extinguished the lamp, went out and locked the door behind me, and carrying a travelling-grip and a cane I set off for my new hotel.

Charles Malet had disappeared!

IV. I MEET AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE

On the corner opposite Dr. Stuart's establishment stood a house which was "to be let or sold." From the estate-agent whose name appeared upon the notice-board I obtained the keys—and had a duplicate made of that which opened the front door. It was a simple matter, and the locksmith returned both keys to me within an hour. I informed the agent that the house would not suit me.

Nevertheless, having bolted the door, in order that prospective purchasers might not surprise me, I "camped out" in an upper room all day, watching from behind the screen of trees all who came to the house of Dr. Stuart. Dusk found me still at my post, armed with a pair of good binoculars. Every patient who presented himself I scrutinized carefully, and finding as the darkness grew that it became increasingly difficult to discern the features of visitors, I descended to the front garden and resumed my watch from the lower branches of a tree which stood some twenty feet from the roadway.

At selected intervals I crept from my post and surveyed the lane upon which the window of the consulting-room opened and also the path leading to the tradesmen's entrance, from which one might look across the lawn and in at the open study windows. It was during one of these tours of inspection and whilst I was actually peering through a gap in the hedge, that I heard the telephone bell. Dr. Stuart was in the study and I heard him speaking.

I gathered that his services were required immediately at some institution in the neighbourhood. I saw him take his hat, stick and bag from the sofa and go out of the room. Then I returned to the front garden of my vacant house.

No one appeared for some time. A policeman walked slowly up the road, and flashed his lantern in at the gate of the house I had commandeered. His footsteps died away. Then, faintly, I heard the hum of a powerful motor. I held my breath. The approaching car turned into the road at a point above me to the right, came nearer ... and stopped before Dr. Stuart's door.

I focussed my binoculars upon the chauffeur.

It was the brown-skinned man! *Nom d'un nom!* a *woman* was descending form the car. She was enveloped in furs and I could not see her face. She

walked up the steps to the door and was admitted.

The chauffeur backed the car into the lane beside the house.

My heart beating rapidly with excitement, I crept out by the further gate of the drive, crossed the road at a point fifty yards above the house and walking very quietly came back to the tradesmen's entrance. Into its enveloping darkness I glided and on until I could peep across the lawn.

The elegant visitor, as I hoped, had been shown, not into the ordinary waiting-room but into the doctor's study. She was seated with her back to the window, talking to a grey-haired old lady—probably the doctor's housekeeper. Impatiently I waited for this old lady to depart, and the moment that she did so, the visitor stood up, turned and ... it was *Zara el-Khala!*

It was only with difficulty that I restrained the cry of triumph which arose to my lips. On the instant that the study door closed, Zara el-Khala began to try a number of keys which she took from her handbag upon the various drawers of the bureau!

"So!" I said—"they are uncertain of the drawer!"

Suddenly she desisted, looking nervously at the open windows; then, crossing the room, she drew the curtains. I crept out into the road again and by the same roundabout route came back to the empty house. Feeling my way in the darkness of the shrubbery, I found the motor bicycle which I had hidden there and I wheeled it down to the further gate of the drive and waited.

I could see the doctor's door, and I saw him returning along the road. As he appeared, from somewhere—-I could not determine from where—came a strange and uncanny wailing sound, a sound that chilled me like an evil omen.

Even as it died away, and before Dr. Stuart had reached his door I knew what it portended—that horrible wail. Some one hidden I knew not where, had warned Zara el-Khala that the doctor returned! But stay! Perhaps that some one was the dark-skinned chauffeur!

How I congratulated myself upon the precautions which I had taken to escape observation. Evidently the watcher had placed himself somewhere where he could command a view of the front door and the road.

Five minutes later the girl came out, the old housekeeper accompanying her to the door, the car emerged from the lane, Zara el-Khala entered it and

was driven away. I could see no one seated beside the chauffeur. I started my "Indian" and leapt in pursuit.

As I had anticipated, the route was Eastward, and I found myself traversing familiar ground. From the south-west to the east of London whirled the big car of mystery—and I was ever close behind it. Sometimes, in the crowded streets, I lost sight of my quarry for a time, but always I caught up again, and at last I found myself whirling along Commercial Road and not fifty yards behind the car.

Just by the canal bridge a drunken sailor lurched out in front of my wheel, and only by twisting perilously right into a turning called, I believe, Salmon Lane, did I avoid running him down.

Sacre nom! how I cursed him! The lane was too narrow for me to turn and I was compelled to dismount and to wheel my "Indian" back to the highroad. The yellow car had vanished, of course, but I took it for granted that it had followed the main road. At a dangerous speed, pursued by execrations from the sailor and all his friends, I set off east once more turning to the right down West India Dock Road.

Arriving at the dock, and seeing nothing ahead of me but desolation and ships' masts, I knew that that inebriated pig had spoiled everything! I could have sat down upon the dirty pavement and wept, so mortified was I! For if Zara el-Khala had secured the envelope I had missed my only chance.

However, *pardieu!* I have said that despair is not permitted by the Bureau. I rode home to my hotel, deep in reflection. Whether the girl had the envelope or not, at least she had escaped detection by the doctor; therefore if she had failed she would try again. I could sleep in peace until the morrow.

Of the following day, which I spent as I had spent the preceding one, I have nothing to record. At about the same time in the evening the yellow car again rolled into view, and on this occasion I devoted all my attention to the dark-skinned chauffeur, upon whom I directed my glasses.

As the girl alighted and spoke to him for a moment, he raised the goggles which habitually he wore and I saw his face. A theory which I had formed on the previous night proved correct. The chauffeur was the Hindu, Chunda Lal! As Zara el-Khala walked up the steps he backed the car into the narrow lane and I watched him constantly. Yet, watch as closely as I might, I could not see where he concealed himself in order to command a view of the road.

On this occasion, as I know, Dr. Stuart was at home. Nevertheless, the girl stayed for close upon half an hour, and I began to wonder if some new move had been planned. Suddenly the door opened and she came out.

I crept through the bushes to my bicycle and wheeled it on to the drive. I saw the car start; but Madame Fortune being in playful mood, my own engine refused to start at all, and when ten minutes later I at last aroused a spark of life in the torpid machine I knew that pursuit would be futile.

Since this record is intended for the guidance of those who take up the quest of "The Scorpion" either in co-operation with myself or, in the event of my failure, alone, it would be profitless for me to record my disasters. Very well, I had one success. One night I pursued the yellow car from Dr. Stuart's house to the end of Limehouse Causeway without once losing sight of it.

A string of lorries form the docks, drawn by a traction engine, checked me at the corner for a time, although the yellow car passed. But I raced furiously on and by great good luck overtook it near the Dock Station. From thence onward pursuing a strangely tortuous route, I kept it in sight to Canning Town, when it turned into a public garage. I followed—to purchase petrol.

Chunda Lal was talking to the man in charge; he had not yet left his seat. But the car was empty!

At first I was stupid with astonishment. *Par la barbe du prophete!* I was astounded. Then I saw that I had really made a great discovery. The street into which I had injudiciously followed "Le Balafre" lay between Limehouse Causeway and Ropemaker Street, and it was at no great distance from this point that I had lost sight of the yellow car. In that street, which according to my friend the policeman was "nearly all Chinese," Zara el-Khala had descended; in that street was "The Scorpion's" lair!

V. CONCLUSION OF STATEMENT

I come now to the conclusion of this statement and to the strange occurrence which led to my proclaiming myself. The fear of imminent assassination which first had prompted me to record what I knew of "The

Scorpion" had left me since I had ceased to be Charles Malet. And that the disappearance of "Le Balafre" had been accepted by his unknown chief as evidence of his success in removing *me*, I did not doubt. Therefore I breathed more freely ... and more freely still when my body was recovered!

Yes, my body was recovered from Hanover Hole; I read of it—a very short paragraph, but it is the short paragraphs that matter—in my morning paper. I knew then that I should very shortly be dead indeed—officially dead. I had counted on this happening before, you understand, for I more than ever suspected that "The Scorpion" knew me to be in England and I feared that he would "lie low" as the English say. However, since a fortunate thing happens better late than never, I say in this paragraph two things: (1) that the enemy would cease to count upon Gaston Max; (2) that the Scotland Yard Commissioner would be authorised to open Part First of this Statement which had been lodged at his office two days after I landed in England—the portion dealing with my inquiries in Paris and with my tracking of "Le Balafre" to Bow Road Station and observing that he showed a golden scorpion to the chauffeur of the yellow car.

This would happen because Paris would wire that the identification disk found on the dead man was that of Gaston Max. Why would Paris do so? Because my reports had been discounted since I had ceased to be Charles Malet and Paris would be seeking evidence of my whereabouts. My reports had discontinued because I had learned that I had to do with a criminal organization of whose ramifications I knew nothing. Therefore I took no more chances. I died.

I return to the night when Inspector Dunbar, the grim Dunbar of Scotland Yard, came to Dr. Stuart's house. His appearance there puzzled me. I could not fail to recognize him, for as dusk had fully come I had descended from my top window and was posted among the bushes of the empty house from whence I commanded a perfect view of the doctor's door. The night was unusually chilly—there had been some rain—and when I crept around to the lane bordering the lawn, hoping to see or hear something of what was taking place in the study, I found that the windows were closed and the blinds drawn.

Luck seemed to have turned against me; for that night, at dusk, when I had gone to a local garage where I kept my motor bicycle, I had discovered the back tire to be perfectly flat and had been forced to contain my soul in

patience whilst the man repaired a serious puncture. The result was of course that for more than half an hour I had not had Dr. Stuart's house under observation. And a hundred and one things can happen in half an hour.

Had Dr. Stuart sent for the Inspector? If so, I feared that the envelope was missing, or at any rate that he had detected Zara el-Khala in the act of stealing it and had determined to place the matter in the hands of the police. It was a maddening reflection. Again—I shrewdly suspected that I was not the only watcher of Dr. Stuart's house. The frequency with which the big yellow car drew up at the door a few moments after the doctor had gone out could not be due to accident. Yet I had been unable to detect the presence of this other watcher, nor had I any idea of the spot where the car remained hidden—if my theory was a correct one. Nevertheless I did not expect to see it come along whilst the Inspector remained at the house—always supposing that Zara el-Khala had not yet succeeded. I wheeled out the "Indian" and rode to a certain tobacconist's shop at which I had sometimes purchased cigarettes.

He had a telephone in a room at the rear which customers were allowed to use on payment of a fee, and a public call-box would not serve my purpose, since the operator usually announces to a subscriber the fact that a call emanated from such an office. The shop was closed, but I rang the bell at the side door and obtained permission to use the telephone upon pleading urgency. I had assiduously cultivated a natural gift for mimicry, having found it of inestimable service in the practice of my profession. It served me now. I had worked in the past with Inspector Dunbar and his subordinate Sergeant Sowerby, and I determined to trust to my memory of the latter's mode of speech.

I rang up Dr. Stuart and asked for the Inspector, saying Sergeant Sowerby spoke from Scotland Yard. "Hullo!" he cried, "is that you, Sowerby?"

"Yes," I replied in Sowerby's voice. "I thought I should find you there. About the body of Max.."

"Eh!" said Dunbar—"what's that? Max?"

I knew immediately that Paris had not yet wired, therefore I told him that Paris *had* done so, and that the disk numbered 49685 was that of Gaston Max. He was inexpressibly shocked, deploring the rashness of Max in working alone.

"Come to Scotland Yard," I said, anxious to get him away from the house.

He said he would be with me in a few minutes, and I was racking my brains for some means of learning what business had taken him to Dr. Stuart when he gave me the desired information spontaneously.

"Sowerby, listen," said he: "It's 'The Scorpion' case right enough! That bit of gold found on the dead man is not a cactus stem; it's a scorpion's tail!"

So! they had found what I had failed to find! It must have been attached, I concluded, to some inner part of "Le Balafre's" clothing. There had been no mention of Zara el-Khala; therefore, as I rode back to my post I permitted myself to assume that she would come again, since presumably she had thus far failed. I was right.

Morbleu! quick as I was the car was there before me! But I had not overlooked this possibility and I had dismounted at a good distance from the house and had left the "Indian" in someone's front garden. As I had turned out of the main road I had seen Dr. Stuart and Inspector Dunbar approaching a rank upon which two or three cabs usually stood.

I watched *la Bell* Zara enter the house, a beautiful woman most elegantly attired, and then, even before Chunda Lal had backed the car into the lane I was off ... to the spot at which I had abandoned my motor bicycle. In little more than half an hour I had traversed London, and was standing in the shadow of that high, blank wall to which I have referred as facing a row of wooden houses in a certain street adjoining Limehouse Causeway.

You perceive my plan? I was practically sure of the street; all I had to learn was which house sheltered "The Scorpion"!

I had already suspected that this night was to be for me an unlucky night. *Nom d'un p'tit bon-homme!* it was so. Until an hour before dawn I crouched under that wall and saw no living thing except a very old Chinaman who came out of one of the houses and walked slowly away. The other houses appeared to be empty. No vehicle of any kind passed that way all night.

Turning over in my mind the details of this most perplexing case, it became evident to me that the advantages of working alone were now outweighed by the disadvantages. The affair had reached a stage at which ordinary police methods should be put into operation. I had collected some of the threads; the next thing was for Scotland Yard to weave these together whilst I sought for more.

I determined to remain dead. It would afford me greater freedom of action. The disappearance of "Le Balafre" which must by this time have been noted by his associates, might possibly lead to a suspicion that the dead man was *not* Gaston Max; but providing no member of "The Scorpion" group obtained access to the body I failed to see how this suspicion could be confirmed. I reviewed my position.

The sealed letter had achieved its purpose in part. Although I had failed to locate the house from which these people operated, I could draw a circle on the map within which I knew it to be; and I had learned that Zara el-Khala and the Hindu were in London. What it all meant—to what end "The Scorpion" was working I did not know. But having learned so much, be sure I did not despair of learning more.

It was now imperative that I should find out exactly what had occurred at Dr. Stuart's house. Accordingly I determined to call upon the Inspector at Scotland Yard. I presented myself towards evening of the day following my vigil in Limehouse, sending up the card of a Bureau confrere, for I did not intend to let it be generally known that I was alive.

Presently I was shown up to that bare and shining room which I remembered having visited in the past. I stood just within the doorway, smiling. Inspector Dunbar rose, as the constable went out, and stood looking across at me.

I had counted on striking him dumb with astonishment. He was Scottishly unmoved.

"Well," he said, coming forward with outstretched hand, "I'm glad to see you. I knew you would have come to us sooner or later!"

I felt that my eyes sparkled. There was no resentment within my heart. I rejoiced.

"Look," he continued, taking a slip of paper from his note-book. "This is a copy of a note I left with Dr. Stuart some time ago. Read it."

I did so, and this is what I read:

"*A:* the name of the man who cut out the lid of the cardboard box and sealed it in the envelope—Gaston Max!

"*B:* the name of the missing cabman—Gaston Max!

"*C:* the name of the man who rang me up at Dr. Stuart's and told me that Gaston Max was dead—Gaston Max!"

I returned the slip to Inspector Dunbar. I bowed.

"It is a pleasure and a privilege to work with you, Inspector," I said ....

This statement is nearly concluded. The whole of the evening I spent in the room of the Assistant Commissioner discussing the matters herein set forth and comparing notes with Inspector Dunbar. One important thing I learned: that I had abandoned my nightly watches too early. For one morning just before dawn someone who was *not* Zara had paid a visit to the house of Dr. Stuart! I determined to call upon the doctor.

As it chanced I was delayed and did not actually arrive until so late an hour that I had almost decided not to present myself ... when a big yellow car flashed past the taxicab in which I was driving!

Nom d'un nom! I could not mistake it! This was within a few hundred yards of the house of Dr. Stuart, you understand, and I instantly dismissed my cabman and proceeded to advance cautiously on foot. I could no longer hear the engine of the car which had passed ahead of me, but then I knew that it could run almost noiselessly. As I crept along in that friendly shadow cast by a high hedge which had served me so well before, I saw the yellow car. It was standing on the opposite side of the road. I reached the tradesman's entrance.

From my left, in the direction of the back lawn of the house, came a sudden singular crackling noise and I discerned a flash of blue flame resembling faint "summer lightning." A series of muffled explosions followed ... and in the darkness I tripped over something which lay along the ground at my feet—a length of cable it seemed to be.

Stumbling, I uttered a slight exclamation ... and instantly received a blow on the head that knocked me flat upon the ground! Everything was swimming around me, but I realized that someone—Chunda Lal probably—had been hiding in the very passage which I had entered! I heard again that uncanny wailing, close beside me.

Vaguely I discerned an incredible figure—like that of a tall cowled monk, towering over me. I struggled to retain consciousness—there was a rush of feet ... the throb of a motor. It stimulated me—that sound! I must get to the telephone and cause the yellow car to be intercepted.

I staggered to my feet and groped my way along the hedge to where I had observed a tree by means of which one might climb over. I was dizzy as a drunken man; but I half climbed and half fell on to the lawn. The windows were open. I rushed into the study of Dr. Stuart.

Pah! it was full of fumes. I looked around me. *Mon Dieu!* I staggered. For I knew that in this fume-laden room a thing more horrible and more strange than any within my experience had taken place that night.

PART III

AT THE HOUSE OF AH-FANG-FU

I. THE BRAIN-THIEVES

The Assistant Commissioner lighted a cigarette. "It would appear, then," he said, "that whilst some minor difficulties have been smoothed away, we remain face to face with the major problem: who is 'The Scorpion' and to what end are his activities directed?"

Gaston Max shrugged his shoulders and smiled at Dr. Stuart.

"Let us see," he suggested, "what we really know about this 'Scorpion'. Let us make a brief survey of our position in the matter. Let us take first what we have learned of him—if it is a 'him' with whom we have to deal—from the strange experiences of Dr. Stuart. Without attaching too much importance to that episode five years ago on the Wu-Men Bridge; perhaps he is not. We will talk about this one again presently.

"We come to the arrival on the scene of Zara el-Khala, also called Mlle. Dorian. She comes because of what *I* have told to the scarred man from Paris, she comes to obtain that dangerous information which is to be sent to Scotland Yard, she comes, in a word, from 'The Scorpion.' We have two links binding the poor one 'Le Balafre' to 'The Scorpion': (1) his intimacy with Miguel and those others with whom 'Scorpion' communicated by telephone; (2) his possession of the golden ornament which lies there upon the table and which I took from his pocket. What can we gather from the statement made to Dr. Stuart by Mlle. Dorian? Let us study this point for a moment.

"In the first place we can only accept her words with a certain skepticism. Her story may be nothing but a fabrication. However, it is interesting because she claims to be the unwilling servant of a dreaded master. She lays stress upon the fact that she is an Oriental and does not enjoy the same freedom as a European woman. This is possible, up to a point. On the other hand she seems to enjoy not only freedom but every luxury. Therefore it may equally well be a lie. Some slight colour is lent to her story by the extraordinary mode of life which she followed in Paris. In the midst of Bohemianism she remained secluded as an odalisque in some harem garden of Stambul, whether by her own will or by will of another we do not know. One little point her existence seems to strengthen: that we are dealing with Easterns; for Zara el-Khala is partly of Eastern blood and her follower Chunda Lal is a Hindu. *Eh bien.*

"Consider the cowled man whose shadow Dr. Stuart has seen on two occasions: once behind the curtain of his window and once cast by the moonlight across the lawn of his house. The man himself he has never seen. Now this hooded man cannot have been 'Le Balafre', for 'Le Balafre' was already dead at the time of his first appearance. He may be 'The Scorpion'!"

Max paused impressively, looking around at those in the Commissioner's room.

"For a moment I return to the man of the Wu Men Bridge. The man of the Wu-Men Bridge was veiled and this one is hooded! The man of the Wu-Men Bridge was known as 'The Scorpion,' and this one also is associated with a scorpion. We will return yet again to this point in a moment.

"Is there something else which we may learn from the experiences of Dr. Stuart? Yes! We learn that 'The Scorpion' suddenly decides that Dr. Stuart is dangerous, either because of his special knowledge (which would be interesting) or because the 'Scorpion' believes that he has become acquainted with the contents of the sealed envelope—which is not so interesting although equally dangerous for Dr. Stuart. 'The Scorpion' acts. He pays a second visit, again accompanied by Chunda Lal, who seems to be a kind of watch-dog who not only guards the person of Zara el-Kahla but who also howls when danger threatens the cowled man!

"And what is the weapon which the cowled man (who may be 'The Scorpion') uses to remove Dr. Stuart? It is a frightful weapon, my friends; it is a novel and deadly weapon. It is a weapon of which science knows

nothing—a blue ray of the colour produced by a Mercury Vapour Lamp, according to Dr. Stuart who has seen it, and producing an odour like that of a blast furnace according to myself, who smelled it! Or this odour might have been caused by the fusing of the telephone; for the blue ray destroys such fragile things as telephones as easily as it destroys wood and paper! There is even a large round hole burned through the clay at the back of the study grate and through the brick wall behind it! Very well. 'The Scorpion' is a scientist and he is also the greatest menace to the world which the world has ever been called upon to deal with. You agree with me?"

Inspector Dunbar heaved a great sigh, Stuart silently accepted a cigarette from the Assistant Commissioner's box and the Assistant Commissioner spoke, slowly.

"I entirely agree with you, M. Max. Respecting this ray, as well as some one or two other *minutiae*, I have made a short note which we will discuss when you have completed your admirably lucid survey of the case."

"These are the things, then, which we learn from the terrible experiences of Dr. Stuart. Placing these experiences side by side with my own in Paris and in London—which we have already discussed in detail—we find that we have to deal with an organisation—the object of which is unknown—comprising among its members both Europeans ('Le Balafre' was a Frenchman, I believe), cross-breeds such as Miguel and Zara el-Khala" (Stuart winced), "one Algerian and a Hindu. It is then an organisation having ramifications throughout Europe, the East and, *mon Dieu!* where not? To continue. This little image"—he took up from the Commissioner's table the golden scorpion, and the broken fragment of tail—"is now definitely recognized by Dr. Stuart—who is familiar with the work of Oriental goldsmiths—to be of *Chinese* craftsmanship!"

"It may possibly be Tibetan," interrupted Stuart; "but it comes to the same thing."

"Very well," continued Max. "It is Chinese. We hope, very shortly, to identify a house situated somewhere within this red ink circle"—he placed his finger on a map of London which lay open on the table—"and which I know to be used as a meeting-place by members of this mysterious group. That circle, my friends, surrounds what is now known as 'Chinatown'! For the third time I return to the man of the Wu-Men Bridge; for the man of the Wu-Men Bridge was, apparently, a *Chinaman!* Do I make myself clear?"

"Remarkably so," declared the Assistant Commissioner, taking a fresh cigarette. "Pray continue, M. Max."

"I will do so. One of my most important investigations, in which I had the honour and the pleasure to be associated with Inspector Dunbar, led to the discovery of a dangerous group controlled by a certain 'Mr. King'——"

"Ah!" cried Dunbar, his tawny eyes sparkling with excitement, "I was waiting for that!"

"I knew you would be waiting for it, Inspector. Your powers of deductive reasoning more and more are earning my respect. You recall that singular case? The elaborate network extending from London to Buenos Ayres, from Peking to Petrograd? Ah! a wonderful system. It was an opium syndicate, you understand,"—turning again to the Assistant Commissioner.

"I recall the case," replied the Commissioner, "although I did not hold my present appointment at the time. I believe there were unsatisfactory features?"

"There were," agreed Max. "We never solved the mystery of the identity of 'Mr. King,' and although we succeeded in destroying the enterprise I have since thought that we acted with undue precipitation."

"Yes," said Dunbar rapidly; "but there was that poor girl to be rescued, you will remember? We couldn't waste time."

"I agree entirely, Inspector. Our hands were forced. Yet, I repeat, I have since thought that we acted with undue precipitation. I will tell you why. Do you recall the loss—not explained to this day—of the plans of the Haley torpedo?"

"Perfectly," replied the Commissioner; and Dunbar also nodded affirmatively.

"Very well. A similar national loss was sustained about the same time by my own Government. I am not at liberty to divulge its exact nature, as in the latter case the loss never became known to the public. But the only member of the French Chamber who had seen this document to which I refer was a certain 'M. Blank,' shall we say? I believe also that I am correct in stating that the late Sir Brian Malpas was a member of the British Cabinet at the time that the Haley plans were lost?"

"That is correct," said the Assistant Commissioner, "but surely the honour of the late Sir Brian was above suspicion?"

"Quite," agreed Max; "so also was that of 'M. Blank.' But my point is this: Both 'M. Blank' and the late Sir Brian were clients of the opium syndicate!"

Dunbar nodded again eagerly.

"Hard work I had to hush it up," he said. "It would have finished his political career."

The Assistant Commissioner looked politely puzzled.

"It was generally supposed that Sir Brian Malpas was addicted to drugs," he remarked; "and I am not surprised to learn that he patronised this syndicate to which you refer. But——" he paused, smiling satanically. "Ah!" he added—"I see! I see!"

"You perceive the drift of my argument?" cried Max. "You grasp what I mean when I say that we were too hasty? This syndicate existed for a more terrible purpose than the promulgating of a Chinese vice; it had in its clutches men entrusted with national secrets, men of genius but slaves of a horrible drug. Under the influence of that drug, my friends, how many of those secrets may they not have divulged?"

His words were received in hushed silence.

"What became of those stolen plans?" he continued, speaking now in a very low voice. "In the stress of recent years has the Haley torpedo made its appearance so that we might learn to which Government the plans had been taken? No! the same mystery surrounds the fate of the information filched from the drugged brain of 'M. Blank.' In a word"—he raised a finger dramatically—"someone is hoarding up those instruments of destruction! Who is it that collects such things and for what purpose does he collect them?"

Following another tense moment of silence:

"Let us have your own theory, M. Max," said the Assistant Commissioner.

Gaston Max shrugged his shoulders.

"It is not worthy of the name of a theory," he replied, "the surmise which I have made. But recently I found myself considering the fact that 'The Scorpion' might just conceivably be a Chinaman. Now, 'Mr. King,' we believe was a Chinaman, and 'Mr. King,' as I am now convinced, operated not for a personal but for a deeper, political purpose. He stole the brains of

genius and *accumulated* that genius. Is it not possible that these contrary operations may be part of a common plan?"

II. THE RED CIRCLE

"You are not by any chance," suggested Stuart, smiling slightly, "hinting at that defunct bogey, the 'Yellow Peril'?"

"Ah!" cried Max, "but certainly I am not! Do not misunderstand me. This group with which we are dealing is shown to be not of a national but of an international character. The same applied to the organisation of 'Mr. King.' But a Chinaman directed the one, and I begin to suspect that a Chinaman directs the other. No, I speak of no ridiculous 'Yellow Peril,' my friends. John Chinaman, as I have known him, is the whitest man breathing; but can you not imagine"—he dropped his voice again in that impressive way which was yet so truly Gallic—"can you not imagine a kind of Oriental society which like a great, a formidable serpent, lies hidden somewhere below that deceptive jungle of the East? These are troubled times. It is a wise state to-day that knows its own leaders. Can you not imagine a dreadful sudden menace, not of men and guns but of *brains* and *capital*?"

"You mean," said Dunbar slowly, "that 'The Scorpion' may be getting people out of the way who might interfere with this rising or invasion or whatever it is?"

"Just as 'Mr. King' accumulated material for it," interjected the Assistant Commissioner. "It is a bold conception, M. Max, and it raises the case out of the ordinary category and invests it with enormous international importance."

All were silent for a time, Stuart, Dunbar and the Commissioner watching the famous Frenchman as he sat there, arrayed in the latest fashion of Saville Row, yet Gallic to his finger-tips and in every gesture. It was almost impossible at times to credit the fact that a Parisian was speaking, for the English of Gaston Max was flawless except that he spoke with a faint American accent. Then, suddenly, a gesture, an expletive, would betray the Frenchman.

But such betrayals never escaped him when, in one of his inimitable disguises, he penetrated to the purlieu of Whitechapel, to the dens of Limehouse. Then he was the perfect Hooligan, as, mingling with the dangerous thieves of Paris, he was the perfect Apache. It was an innate gift of mimicry which had made him the greatest investigator of his day. He could have studied Chinese social life for six months and thereupon have become a mandarin whom his own servants would never have suspected to be a "foreign barbarian." It was pure genius, as opposed to the brilliant efficiency of Dunbar.

But in the heart of the latter, as he studied Gaston Max and realized the gulf that separated them, there was nothing but generous admiration of a master; yet Dunbar was no novice, for by a process of fine deductive reasoning he had come to the conclusion, as has appeared, that Gaston Max had been masquerading as a cabman and that the sealed letter left with Dr. Stuart had been left as a lure. By one of those tricks of fate which sometimes perfect the plans of men but more often destroy them, the body of "Le Balafre" had been so disfigured during the time that it had been buffeted about in the Thames that it was utterly unrecognizable and indescribable. But even the disk had not deceived Dunbar. He had seen in it another ruse of his brilliant confrere, and his orders to the keeper of the mortuary to admit no one without a written permit had been dictated by the conviction that Max wished the body to be mistaken for his own. In Inspector Dunbar, Gaston Max immediately had recognized an able colleague as Mrs. M'Gregor had recognized "a grand figure of a man."

The Assistant Commissioner broke the silence.

"There have been other cases," he said reflectively, "now that one considers the matter, which seemed to point to the existence of such a group or society as you indicate, M. Max, notably one with which, if I remember rightly, Inspector"—turning his dark eyes towards Dunbar—"Inspector Weymouth, late of this Branch, was associated?"

"Quite right, sir. It was his big case, and it got him a fine billet as Superintendent in Cairo if you remember?"

"Yes," mused the Assistant Commissioner—"he transferred to Egypt—a very good appointment, as you say. That, again, was before my term of office, but there were a number of very ghastly crimes connected with the

case and it was more or less definitely established, I believe, that some extensive secret society did actually exist throughout the

East, governed, I fancy, by a Chinaman."

"And from China," added Dunbar.

"Yes, yes, from China as you say, Inspector." He turned to Gaston Max. "Can it really be, M. Max, that we have to deal with an upcrop of some deeply-seated evil which resides in the Far East? Are all these cases, not the work of individual criminal but manifestations of a more sinister, a darker force?"

Gaston Max met his glance and Max's mouth grew very grim.

"I honestly believe so." he answered. "I have believed it for nearly two years—ever since the Grand Duke died. And now, you said, I remember, that you had made a note the nature of which you would communicate."

"Yes," replied the Assistant Commissioner—"a small point, but one which may be worthy of attention. This ray, Dr. Stuart, which played such havoc in your study—do you know of anything approaching to it in more recent scientific devices?"

"Well," said Stuart, "it my be no more than a development of one of several systems, notably of that of the late Henrik Ericksen upon which he was at work at the time of his death."

"Exactly." The Assistant Commissioner smiled in his most Mephistophelean manner. "Of the late Henrik Ericksen, as you say."

He said no more for a moment and sat smoking and looking from face to face. Then:

"That is the subject of my note, gentlemen," he added. "The other *minutiae* are of no immediate importance."

"*Non d'un p'tit bonhomme!*" whispered Gaston Max. "I see! You think that Ericksen had completed his experiments before he died, but that he never lived to give them to the world?"

The Assistant Commissioner waved one hand in the air so that he discoloration of the first and second fingers was very noticeable.

"It is for you to ascertain these points, M. Max," he said—"I only suggest. But I begin to share your belief that a series of daring and unusual assassinations has been taking place under the eyes of the police authorities of Europe. It can only be poison—an unknown poison, perhaps. We shall be empowered to exhume the body of the late Sir Frank Narcombe in a few

days' time, I hope. His case puzzles me hopelessly. What obstacle did a surgeon offer to this hypothetical Eastern movement? On the other hand, what can have been filched from him before his death? The death of an inventor, a statesman, a soldier, can be variously explained by your 'Yellow' hypothesis, M. Max, but what of the death of a surgeon?"

Gaston Max shrugged, and his mobile mouth softened in a quaint smile.

"We have learned a little," he said, "and guessed a lot. Let us hope to guess more—and learn everything!"

"May I suggest," added Dunbar, "that we hear Sowerby's report, sir?"

"Certainly," agreed the Assistant Commissioner—"call Sergeant Sowerby."

A moment later Sergeant Sowerby entered, his face very red and his hair bristling more persistently than usual.

"Anything to report, Sowerby?" asked Dunbar.

"Yes, Inspector," replied Sowerby, in his Police Court manner;—he faced the Assistant Commissioner, "with your permission, sir."

He took out a note-book which appeared to be the twin of Dunbar's and consulted it, assuming an expression of profound reflection.

"In the first place, sir," he began, never raising his eyes from the page, "I have traced the cab sold on the hire-purchase system to a certain Charles *Mallett...*"

"Ha, ha!" laughed Max breezily—"he calls me a hammer! It is not Mallett, Sergeant Sowerby—you have got too many *l's* in that name; it is Malet and is called like one from the Malay States!"

"Oh," commented Sowerby, glancing up—"indeed. Very good, sir. The owner claims the balance of purchase money!"

Every one laughed at that, even the satanic Assistant Commissioner.

"Pay your debts, M. Max," he said. "You will bring the Service de Surete into bad repute! Carry on, Sergeant."

"This cab," continued Sowerby, when Dunbar interrupted him.

"Cut out the part about the cab, Sowerby," he said. "We've found that out from M. Max. Have you anything to report about the yellow car?"

"Yes," replied Sowerby, unperturbed, and turning over to the next page. "It was hired form Messrs. Wickers' garage, at Canning Town, by the week. The lady who hired it was a Miss Dorian, a French lady. She gave no

reference, except that of the Savoy Hotel, where she was stopping. She paid a big deposit and had her own chauffeur, a colored man of some kind.

"Is it still in use by her?" snapped Dunbar eagerly.

"No, Inspector. She claimed her deposit this morning and said she was leaving London."

"The cheque?" cried Dunbar.

"Was cashed half an hour later."

"At what bank?"

"London County & Birmingham, Canning Town. Her own account at a Strand bank was closed yesterday. The details all concern milliners, jewellers, hotels and so forth. There's nothing there. I've been to the Savoy, of course."

"Yes!"

"A lady named Dorian has had rooms there for six weeks, has dined there on several occasions, but was more often away than in the hotel."

"Visitors?"

"Never had any."

"She used to dine alone, then?"

"Always."

"In the public dining-room?"

"No. In her own room."

"*Morbleu!*" muttered Max. "It is she beyond doubt. I recognize her sociable habits!"

"Has she left now?" asked Dunbar.

"She left a week ago."

Sowerby closed his note-book and returned it to his pocket.

"Is that all you have to report, Sergeant?" asked the Assistant Commissioner.

"That's all, sir."

"Very good."

Sergeant Sowerby retired.

"Now, sir," said Dunbar, "I've got Inspector Kelly here. He looks after the Chinese quarter. Shall I call him?"

"Yes, Inspector."

Presently there entered a burly Irishman, bluff and good-humoured, a very typical example of the intelligent superior police officer, looking

keenly around him.

"Ah, Inspector," the Assistant Commissioner greeted him—"we want your assistance in a little matter concerning the Chinese residential quarter. You know this district?"

"Certainly, sir. I know it very well."

"On this map"—the Assistant Commissioner laid a discoloured forefinger upon the map of London—"you will perceive that we have drawn a circle."

Inspector Kelly bent over the table.

"Yes, sir."

"Within that circle, which is no larger in circumference that a shilling as you observe, lies a house used by a certain group of people. It has been suggested to me that these people may be Chinese or associates of Chinese."

"Well, sir," said Inspector Kelly, smiling broadly, "considering the patch inside the circle I think it more than likely! Seventy-five or it may be eighty per cent of the rooms and cellars and attics in those three streets are occupied by Chinese."

"For your guidance, Inspector, we believe these people to be a dangerous gang of international criminals. Do you know of any particular house, or houses, likely to be used as a meeting-place by such a gang?"

Inspector Kelly scratched his close-cropped head.

"A woman was murdered just there, sir," he said, taking up a pen from the table and touching a point near the corner of Three Colt Street, "about a twelve-month ago. We traced the man—a Chinese sailor—to a house lying just about here." Again he touched the map. "It's a sort of little junk-shop with a ramshackle house attached, all cellars and rabbit-hutches, as you might say, overhanging a disused cutting which is filled at high tide. Opium is to be had there and card-playing goes on, and I won't swear that you couldn't get liquor. But it's well conducted as such dives go."

"Why is it not closed?" inquired the Assistant Commissioner, seizing an opportunity to air his departmental ignorance.

"Well, sir," replied Inspector Kelly, his eyes twinkling—"if we shut up all these places we should never know where to look for some of our regular customers! As I mentioned, we found the wanted Chinaman, three parts drunk, in one of the rooms."

"It's a sort of lodging-house, then?"

"Exactly. There's a moderately big room just behind the shop, principally used by opium-smokers, and a whole nest of smaller rooms above and below. Mind you, sir, I don't say this is the place you're looking for, but it's the most likely inside your circle."

"Who is the proprietor?"

"A retired Chinese sailor called Ah-Fang-Fu, but better known as 'Pidgin.' His establishment is called locally 'The Pidgin House.'"

"Ah." The Commissioner lighted a cigarette. "And you know of no other house which might be selected for such a purpose as I have mentioned?"

"I can't say I do, sir. I know pretty well all the business affairs of that neighbourhood, and none of the houses inside your circle have changed hands during the past twelve months. Between ourselves, sir, nearly all the property in the district belongs to Ah-Fang-Fu, and anything that goes on in Chinatown *he* knows about!"

"Ah, I see. Then in any event he is the man we want to watch?"

"Well, sir, you ought to keep an eye on his visitors, I should say."

"I am obliged to you, Inspector," said the courteous Assistant Commissioner, "for your very exact information. If necessary I shall communicate with you again. Good-day."

"Good-day, sir," replied the Inspector. "Good-day, gentlemen."

He went out.

Gaston Max, who had diplomatically remained in the background throughout this interview, now spoke.

"Pardieu! but I have been thinking," he said. "Although 'The Scorpion,' as I hope, believes that that troublesome Charles Malet is dead, he may also wonder if Scotland Yard has secured from Dr. Stuart's fire any fragments of the information sealed in the envelope! What does it mean, this releasing of the yellow car, closing of the bank account and departure from the Savoy?"

"It means flight!" cried Dunbar, jumping violently to his feet. "By gad, sir!" he turned to the Assistant Commissioner—"the birds may have flown already!"

The Assistant Commissioner leaned back in his chair.

"I have sufficient confidence in M. Max," he said, "to believe that, having taken the responsibility of permitting this dangerous group to learn that they were under surveillance, he has good reason to suppose that they have not slipped through our fingers."

Gaston Max bowed.

"It is true," he replied, and from his pocket he took a slip of flimsy paper. "This code message reached me as I was about to leave my hotel. The quadroon, Miguel, left Paris last night and arrived in London this morning ——"

"He was followed?" cried Dunbar.

"But certainly. He was followed to Limehouse, and he was definitely seen to enter the establishment described to us by Inspector Kelly!"

"Gad!" said Dunbar—"then *someone* is still there?"

"Someone, as you say, is still there," replied Max. "But everything points to the imminent departure of this someone. Will you see to it, Inspector, that not a rat—*pardieu* not a little mouse—is allowed to slip out of our red circle to-day. For to-night we shall pay a friendly visit to the house of Ah-Fang-Fu, and I should wish all the company to be present."

III. MISKA'S STORY

Stuart returned to his house in a troubled frame of mind. He had refrained so long from betraying the circumstances of his last meeting with Mlle. Dorian to the police authorities that this meeting now constituted a sort of guilty secret, a link binding him to the beautiful accomplice of "The Scorpion"—to the dark-eyed servant of the uncanny cowled thing which had sought his life by strange means. He hugged this secret to his breast, and the pain of it afforded him a kind of savage joy.

In his study he found a Post Office workman engaged in fitting a new telephone. As Stuart entered the man turned.

"Good-afternoon, sir," he said, taking up the destroyed instrument from the litter of flux, pincers and screw drivers lying upon the table. "If it's not a rude question, how on earth did *this* happen?"

Stuart laughed uneasily.

"It got mixed up with an experiment which I was conducting," he replied evasively.

The man inspected the headless trunk of the instrument.

"It seems to be fused, as though the top of it had been in a blast furnace," he continued. "Experiments of that sort are a bit dangerous outside a proper laboratory, I should think."

"They are," agreed Stuart. "But I have no facilities here, you see, and I was—er—compelled to attempt the experiment. I don't intend to repeat it."

"That's lucky," murmured the man, dropping the instrument into a carpet-bag. "If you do, it will cost you a tidy penny for telephones!"

Walking out towards the dispensary, Stuart met Mrs. M'Gregor.

"A Post Office messenger brought this letter for you, Mr. Keppel, just the now," she said, handing Stuart a sealed envelope.

He took the envelope from her hand, and turned quickly away. He felt that he had changed colour. For it was addressed in the handwriting of ... Mlle. Dorian!

"Thank you, Mrs. M'Gregor," he said and turned into the dining-room.

Mrs. M'Gregor proceeded about her household duties, and as her footsteps receded, Stuart feverishly tore open the envelope. That elusive scent of jasmine crept to his nostrils. In the envelope was a sheet of thick note-paper (having the top cut off evidently in order to remove the printed address), upon which the following singular message was written:

"Before I go away there is something I want to say to you. You do not trust me. It is not wonderful that you do not. But I swear that I only want to save you from a *great* danger. If you will promise not to tell the police anything of it, I will meet you at six o'clock by the Book Stall at Victoria Station—on the Brighton side. If you agree you will wear something white in your button-hole. If not you cannot find me there. Nobody ever sees me again."

There was no signature, but no signature was necessary.

Stuart laid the letter on the table, and began to pace up and down the room. His heart was beating ridiculously. His self-contempt was profound. But he could not mistake his sentiments.

His duty was plain enough. But he had failed in it once, and even as he strode up and down the room, already he knew that he must fail again. He knew that, rightly or wrongly, he was incapable of placing this note in the hands of the police ... and he knew that he should be at Victoria Station at six o'clock.

He would never have believed himself capable of becoming accessory to a series of crimes—for this was what his conduct amounted to; he had thought that sentiment no longer held any meaning for him. Yet the only excuse which he could find wherewith to solace himself was that this girl had endeavoured to save him from assassination. Weighed against the undoubted fact that she was a member of a dangerous criminal group what was it worth? If the supposition of Gaston Max was correct, "The Scorpion" had at least six successful murders to his credit, in addition to the attempt upon his (Stuart's) life and that of "Le Balafre", upon the life of Gaston Max.

It was an accomplice of this nameless horror called "The Scorpion" with whom at six o'clock he had a tryst, whom he was protecting from justice, by the suppression of whose messages to himself he was adding difficulties to the already difficult task of the authorities!

Up and down he paced, restlessly, every now and again glancing at a clock upon the mantelpiece. His behavior he told himself was contemptible.

Yet, at a quarter to six, he went out—and seeing a little cluster of daisies growing amongst the grass bordering the path, he plucked one and set it in his button-hole!

A few minutes before the hour he entered the station and glanced sharply around at the many groups scattered about in the neighbourhood of the bookstall. There was no sign of Mlle. Dorian. He walked around the booking office without seeing her and glanced into the waiting-room. Then, looking up at the station clock, he saw that the hour had come, and as he stood there staring upward he felt a timid touch upon his shoulder.

He turned—and she was standing by his side!

She was Parisian from head to foot, simply but perfectly gowned. A veil hung from her hat and half concealed her face, but could not hide her wonderful eyes nor disguise the delightful curves of her red lips. Stuart automatically raised his hat, and even as he did so wondered what she should have said and done had she suddenly found Gaston Max standing at his elbow! He laughed shortly.

"You are angry with me," said Mlle. Dorian, and Stuart thought that her quaint accent was adorable. "Or are you angry with yourself for seeing me?"

"I am angry with myself," he replied, "for being so weak."

"Is it so weak," she said, rather tremulously, "not to judge a woman by what she seems to be and not to condemn her before you hear what she has to say? If that is weak, I am glad; I think it is how a man should be."

Her voice and her eyes completed the spell, and Stuart resigned himself without another struggle to this insane infatuation.

"We cannot very well talk here," he said. "Suppose we go into the hotel and have late tea, Mlle. Dorian."

"Yes. Very well. But please do not call me that. It is not my name."

Stuart was on the point of saying, "Zara el-Khala then," but checked himself in the nick of time. He might hold communication with the enemy, but at least he would give away no information.

"I am called Miska," she added. "Will you please call me Miska?"

"Of course, if you wish," said Stuart, looking down at her as she walked by his side and wondering what he would do when he had to stand up in Court, look at Miska in the felon's dock and speak words which would help to condemn her—perhaps to death, at least to penal servitude! He shuddered.

"Have I said something that displeases you?" she asked, resting a white-gloved hand on his arm. "I am sorry."

"No, no," he assured her. "But I was thinking—I cannot help thinking ..."

"How wicked I am?" she whispered.

"How lovely you are!" he said hotly, "and how maddening it is to remember that you are an accomplice of criminals!"

"Oh," she said, and removed her hand, but not before he had felt how it trembled. They were about to enter the tea-room when she added: "Please don't say that until I have told you why I do what I do."

Obeying a sudden impulse, he took her hand and drew it close under his arm.

"No," he said; "I won't. I was a brute, Miska. Miska means 'musk', surely?"

"Yes." She glanced up at him timidly. "Do you think it a pretty name?"

"Very," he said, laughing.

Underlying the Western veneer was the fascinating naivete of the Eastern woman, and Miska had all the suave grace, too, which belongs to the women of the Orient, so that many admiring glances followed her charming figure as she crossed the room to a vacant table.

"Now," said Stuart, when he had given an order to the waiter, "what do you want to tell me? Whatever it may be, I am all anxiety to hear it. I promise that I will only act upon anything you may tell me in the event of my life, or that of another, being palpably endangered by my silence."

"Very well. I want to tell you," replied Miska, "why I stay with Fo-Hi."

"Who is Fo-Hi?"

"I do not know!"

"What!" said Stuart. "I am afraid I don't understand you."

"If I speak in French will you be able to follow what I say?"

"Certainly. Are you more at ease with French?"

"Yes," replied Miska, beginning to speak in the latter language. "My mother was French, you see, and although I can speak in English fairly well I cannot yet *think* in English. Do you understand?

"Perfectly. So perhaps you will now explain to whom you refer when you speak of Fo-Hi."

Miska glanced apprehensively around her, bending further forward over the table.

"Let me tell you from the beginning," she said in a low voice, "and then you will understand. It must not take me long. You see me as I am to-day because of a dreadful misfortune that befell me when I was fifteen years old."

"My father was *Wali* of Aleppo, and my mother, his third wife, was a Frenchwoman, a member of a theatrical company which had come to Cairo, where he had first seen her. She must have loved him, for she gave up the world, embraced Islam and entered his *harem* in the great house on the outskirts of Aleppo. Perhaps it was because he, too, was half French, that they were mutually attracted. My father's mother was a Frenchwoman also, you understand.

"Until I was fifteen years of age, I never left the *harem,* but my mother taught me French and also a little English; and she prevailed upon my father not to give me in marriage so early as is usual in the East. She taught me to understand the ways of European women, and we used to have Paris journals and many books come to us regularly. Then an awful pestilence visited Aleppo. People were dying in the mosques and in the streets, and my father decided to send my mother and myself and some others of the *harem* to his brother's house in Damaskus.

"Perhaps you will think that such things do not happen in these days, and particularly to members of the household of a chief magistrate, but I can only tell you what is true. On the second night of our journey a band of Arabs swept down upon the caravan, overpowered the guards, killing them all, and carried of everything of value which we had. Me, also, they carried off—me and one other, a little Syrian girl, my cousin. Oh!" she shuddered violently—"even now I can sometimes hear the shrieks of my mother ... and I can hear, also, the way they suddenly ceased, those cries ..."

Stuart looked up with a start to find a Swiss waiter placing tea upon the table. He felt like rubbing his eyes. He had been dragged rudely back from the Syrian desert to the prosaic realities of a London hotel.

"Perhaps," continued Miska, "you will think that we were ill-treated, but it was not so. No one molested us. We were given every comfort which desert life can provide, servant to wait upon us and plenty of good food. After several weeks' journeying we came to a large city, having many minarets and domes glimmering in the moonlight; for we entered at night. Indeed, we always travelled at night. At the time I had no idea of the name of this city but I learned afterwards that it was Mecca.

"As we proceeded through the streets, the Assyrian girl and I peeped out through the little windows of the *shibriyeh*—which is a kind of tent on the back of a camel—in which we travelled, hoping to see some familiar face or someone to whom we could appeal. But there seemed to be scarcely anyone visible in the streets, although lights shone out from many windows, and the few men we saw seemed to be anxious to avoid us. In fact, several ran down side turnings as the camels approached.

"We stopped before the gate of a large house which was presently opened, and the camels entered the courtyard. We descended, and I saw that a number of small apartments surrounded the courtyard in the manner of a *caravanserai.* Then, suddenly, I saw something else, and I knew why we had been treated with such consideration on the journey; I knew into what hand I had fallen—I knew that I was in the house of a *slave-dealer!*"

"Good heavens!" muttered Stuart—"this is almost incredible."

"I knew you would doubt what I had to tell you," declared Miska plaintively; "but I solemnly swear what I tell you is the truth. Yes, I was in the house of a slave-dealer, and on the very next day, because I was proficient in languages, in music and in dancing, and also because—

according to their Eastern ideas—I was pretty, the dealer, Mohammed Abd-el-Bali ... offered me for sale."

She stopped, lowering her eyes and flushing hotly, then continued with hesitancy.

"In a small room which I can never forget I was offered the only indignity which I had been called upon to suffer since my abduction. I was *exhibited* to prospective purchasers."

"As she spoke the words, Miska's eyes flashed passionately and her hand, which lay on the table, trembled. Stuart silently reached across and rested his own upon it.

"There were all kinds of girls," Miska continued, "black and brown and white, in the adjoining rooms, and some of them were singing and some dancing, whilst others wept. Four different visitors inspected me critically, two of them being agents for royal *harems* and the other two—how shall I say it?—wealthy connoisseurs. But the price asked by Mohammed Abd-el-Bali was beyond the purses of all except one of the agents. He had indeed settled the bargain, when the singing and dancing and shouting—every sound it seemed—ceased about me ... and into the little room in which I crouched amongst perfumed cushions at the feet of the two men, walked Fo-Hi."

IV. MISKA'S STORY *(concluded)*

"Of course, I did not know that this was his name at the time; I only knew that a tall Chinaman had entered the room—and that his face was entirely covered by a green veil."

Stuart started, but did not interrupt Miska's story.

"This veil gave him in some way a frightfully malign and repellent appearance. As he stood in the doorway looking down I seemed to *feel* his gaze passing over me like a flame, although of course I could not see his eyes. For a moment he stood there looking at me; and much as his presence had affected me, its affect upon the slave-dealer and my purchaser was extraordinary. They seemed to be stricken dumb. Suddenly the Chinaman spoke, in perfect Arabic. 'Her price?' he said.

"Mohammed Abd-el-Bali, standing trembling before him, replied:

"'Miska is already sold, lord, but——"

"'Her price?' repeated the Chinaman, in the same hard metallic voice and without the slightest change of intonation.

"The *harem* agent who had bought me now said, his voice shaking so that the words were barely audible:

"'I give her up, Mohammed—I give her up. Who am I to dispute with the Mandarin Fo-Hi;' and performing an abject obeisance he backed out of the room.

"At the same moment, Mohammed, whose knees were trembling so that they seemed no longer capable of supporting him, addressed the Chinaman.

"'Accept the maiden as an unworthy gift,' he began—

"'Her price?' repeated Fo-Hi.

"Mohammed, whose teeth had begun to chatter, asked him twice as much as he had agreed to accept from the other, Fo-Hi clapped his hands, and a fierce-eyed Hindu entered the room.

"Fo-Hi addressed him in a language which I did not understand, although I have since learned that it was Hindustani, and the Indian from a purse which he carried counted out the amount demanded by the dealer and placed the money upon a little inlaid table which stood in the room. Fo-Hi gave him some brief order, turned and walked out of the room. I did not see him again for four years—that is until my nineteenth birthday.

"I know that you are wondering about many things and I will try to make some of them clear to you. You are wondering, no doubt, how such a trade as I have described is carried on in the East to-day almost under the eyes of European Governments. Now I shall surprise you. When I was taken from the house of the slave-dealer, in charge of Chunda Lal—for this was the name of the Hindu—do you know where I was carried to? I will tell you: to *Cairo!"*

"Cairo!" cried Stuart—then, perceiving that he had attracted attention by speaking so loudly, he lowered his voice. "Do you mean to tell me that you were taken as a *slave* to Cairo?"

Miska smiled—and her smile was the taunting smile of the East, which is at once a caress and an invitation.

"You think, no doubt, that there are no slaves in Cairo!" she said. "So do most people, and so did I—once. I learned better. There are palaces in

Cairo, I assure you, in which there are many slaves. I myself lived in such a palace for four years, and I was not the only slave there. What do British residents and French residents know of the inner domestic life of their Oriental neighbours? Are they ever admitted to the *harem?* And the slaves —are they ever admitted outside the walls of the palace? Sometimes, yes, but never alone!

"By slow stages, following the ancient caravan routes, and accompanied by an extensive retinue of servants in charge of Chunda Lal, we came to Cairo; and one night, approaching the city from the north-east and entering by the Bab en-Nasr, I was taken to the old palace which was to be my prison for four years. How I passed those four years has no bearing upon the matters which I have to tell you, but I lived the useless, luxurious life of some Arabian princess, my lightest wish anticipated and gratified; nothing was denied me, except freedom.

"Then, one day—it was actually my nineteenth birthday—Chunda Lal presented himself and told me that I was to have an interview with Fo-Hi. Hearing these words, I nearly swooned, for a hundred times during the years of my strange luxurious captivity I had awakened trembling in the night, thinking that the figure of the awful veiled Chinaman had entered the room.

"You must understand that having spent my childhood in a *harem,* the mode of life which I was compelled to follow in Cairo was not so insufferable as it must have been for a European woman. Neither was my captivity made unduly irksome. I often drove through the European quarters, always accompanied by Chunda Lal, and closely veiled, and I regularly went shopping in the bazaars—but never alone. The death of my mother—and later that of my father, of which Chunda Lal had told me—were griefs that time had dulled. But the horror of Fo-Hi was one which lived with me, day and night.

"To a wing of the palace kept closely locked, and which I had never seen opened, I was conducted by Chunda Lal. There, in a room of a kind with which was part library and part *mandarah,* part museum and part laboratory, I found the veiled man seated at a great littered table. As I stood trembling before him he raised a long yellow hand and waved to Chunda Lal to depart. When he obeyed and I heard the door close I could scarcely repress a shriek of terror.

"For what seemed an interminable time he sat watching me. I dared not look at him, but again I felt his gaze passing over me like a flame. Then he began to speak, in French, which he spoke without a trace of accent.

"He told me briefly that my life of idleness had ended and that a new life of activity in many parts of the world was about to commence. His manner was quite unemotional, neither harsh nor kindly, his metallic voice conveyed no more than the bare meaning of the words which he uttered. When, finally, he ceased speaking, he struck a gong which hung from a corner of the huge table, and Chunda Lal entered.

"Fo-Hi addressed a brief order to him in Hindustani—and a few moments later a second Chinaman walked slowly into the room."

Miska paused, as if to collect her ideas, but continued almost immediately.

"He wore a plain yellow robe and had a little black cap on his head. His face, his wonderful evil face I can never forget, and his eyes—I fear you will think I exaggerate—but his eyes were green as emeralds! He fixed them upon me.

"'This,' said Fo-Hi, 'is Miska.'

"The other Chinaman continued to regard me with those dreadful eyes; then:

"'You have chosen well.' he said, turned and slowly went out again.

"I thank God that I have never seen him since, for his dreadful face haunted my dreams for long afterwards. But I have learned of him, and I know that next to Fo-Hi he is the most dangerous being in the known world. He has invented horrible things—poisons and instruments, which I cannot describe because I have never seen them; but I have seen ... some of their effects."

She paused, overcome with the horror of her memories.

"What is the name of this other man?" asked Stuart eagerly. Miska glanced at him rapidly.

"Oh, do not ask me questions, please!" she pleaded. "I will tell you all I can, all I dare; what I do not tell you I cannot tell you—and this is one of the things I dare not tell. He is a Chinese scientist and, I have heard, the greatest genius in the whole world, but I can say no more—yet."

"Is he still alive—this man?"

"I do not know that. If he is alive, he is in China—at some secret palace in the province of Ho-Nan, which is the headquarters of what is called the 'Sublime Order.' I have never been there, but there are Europeans there, as well as Orientals."

"What! in the company of these fiends!"

"It is useless to ask me—oh! indeed, I would tell you if I could, but I cannot! Let me go on from the time when I saw Fo-Hi in Cairo. He told me that I was a member of an organization dating back to remote antiquity which was destined to rule all the races of mankind—the Celestial age he called their coming triumph. Something which they had lacked in order to achieve success had been supplied by the dreadful man who had entered the room and expressed his approval of me.

"For many years they had been at work in Europe, secretly, as well as in the East. I understood that they had acquired a quantity of valuable information of some kind by means of a system of opium-houses situated in the principal capitals of the world and directed by Fo-Hi and a number of Chinese assistants. Fo-Hi had remained in China most of the time, but had paid occasional visits to Europe. The other man—the monster with the black skull cap—had been responsible for the conduct of the European enterprises."

"Throughout this interview," interrupted Stuart, forgetful of the fact that Miska had warned him of the futility of asking questions, "and during others which you must have had with Fo-Hi, did you never obtain a glimpse of his face?"

"Never! No one has ever seen his face! I know that his eyes are a brilliant and unnatural yellow colour, but otherwise I should not know him if I saw him unveiled, to-morrow. Except," she added, "by a sense of loathing which his presence inspires in me. But I must hurry. If you interrupt me, I shall not have time.

"From that day in Cairo—oh! how can I tell you! I began the life of an adventuress! I do not deny it. I came here to confess it to you. I went to New York, to London, to Paris, to Petrograd; I went all over the world. I had beautiful dresses, jewels, admiration—all that women live for! And in the midst of it all mine was the life of the cloister; no nun could be more secluded!

"I see the question in your eyes—why did I do it? Why did I lure men into the clutches of Fo-Hi? For this is what I did; and when I have failed, I have been punished."

Stuart shrank from her.

"You confess," he said hoarsely, "that you knowing lured men to *death?"*

"Ah, no!" she whispered, looking about her fearfully—"never! never! I swear it—never!"

"Then"—he stared at her blankly—"I do not understand you!"

"I dare not make it clearer—now: I dare not—dare not! But *believe* me! Oh, please, please," she pleaded, her soft voice dropping to a whisper —"believe me! If you know what I risked to tell you so much, you would be more merciful. A horror which cannot be described"—again she shuddered—"will fall upon me if *he* ever suspects! You think me young and full of life, with all the world before me. You do not know. I am, literally, *already dead!* Oh! I have followed a strange career. I have danced in a Paris theatre and I have sold flowers in Rome; I have had my box at the Opera and I have filled opium pipes in a den at San Francisco! But never, never have I lured a man to his death. And through it all, from first to last, no man has so much as kissed my finger-tips!

"At a word, at a sign, I have been compelled to go from Monte Carlo to Buenos Ayres; at another sign from there to Tokio! Chunda Lal has guarded me as only the women of the East are guarded. Yet, in his fierce way, he has always tried to befriend me, he has always been faithful. But ah! I shrink from him many times, in horror, because I know *what* he is! But I may not tell you. Look! Chunda Lal has never been out of sound of this whistle"—she drew a little silver whistle from her dress—"for a moment since that day when he came into the house of the slave-dealer in Mecca, except——"

And now, suddenly, a wave of glorious colour flooded her beautiful face and swiftly she lowered her eyes, replacing the little whistle. Stuart's rebellious heart leapt madly, for whatever he might think of her almost incredible story, that sweet blush was no subterfuge, no product of acting.

"You almost drive me mad," he said in low voice, resembling the tones of repressed savagery. "You tell me so much, but withhold so much that I am more bewildered than ever. I can understand your helplessness in an Eastern household, but why should you obey the behests of this veiled monster in London, in New York, in Paris?"

She did not raise her eyes.

"I dare not tell you. But I dare not disobey him."

"Who is he!"

"No one knows, because no one has ever seen his face! Ah! you are laughing! But I swear before heaven I speak the truth! Indoors he wears a Chinese dress and a green veil. In passing from place to place, which he always does at night, he is attired in a kind of cowl which only exposes his eyes——"

"But how *can* such a fantastic being travel?"

"By road, on land, and in a steam yacht, at sea. Why should *you* doubt my honesty?" She suddenly raises her glance to Stuart's face and he saw that she had grown pale. "I have risked what I cannot tell you, and more than once—for you! I tried to call you on the telephone on the night that he set out from the house near Hampton Court to kill you, but I could get no reply, and——"

"Stop!" said Stuart, almost too exited to note at the time that she had betrayed a secret. "It was *you* who rang up that night?

"Yes. Why did you not answer?"

"Never mind. Your call saved my life. I shall not forget." He looked into her eyes. "But can you not tell me what it all means? What or whom is 'The Scorpion'?"

She flinched.

"The Scorpion is—a passport. See." From a little pocket in the coat of her costume she drew out a golden scorpion! "I have one." She replaced it hurriedly. "I dare not, dare not tell you more. But this much I had to tell you, because ... I shall never see you again!"

"What!"

"A French detective, a very clever man, learned a lot about 'The Scorpion' and he followed one of the members to England. This man killed him. Oh, I know I belong to a horrible organization!" she cried bitterly. "But I tell you I am helpless and *I* have never aided in such a thing. You should know that! But all he found out he left with you—and I do not know if I succeeded in destroying it. I do not ask you. I do not care. But I leave England to-night. Good-bye."

She suddenly stood up. Stuart rose also. He was about to speak when Miska's expression changed. A look of terror crept over her face, and hastily

lowering her veil she walked rapidly away from the table and out of the room!

Many curious glances followed the elegant figure to the door. Then those glances were directed upon Stuart.

Flushing with embarrassment, he quickly settled the bill and hurried out of the hotel. Gaining the street, he looked eagerly right and left.

But Miska had disappeared!

V. THE HEART OF CHUNDA LAL

Dusk had drawn a grey mantle over the East-End streets when Miska, discharging the cab in which she had come from Victoria, hurried furtively along a narrow alley tending Thamesward. Unconsciously she crossed a certain line—a line invisible except upon a map of London which lay upon the table of the Assistant Commissioner in New Scotland Yard—the line forming the "red circle" of M. Gaston Max. And, crossing this line, she became the focus upon which four pairs of watchful eyes were directed.

Arriving at the door of a mean house some little distance removed from that of Ah-Fang-Fu, Miska entered, for the door was open, and disappeared from the view of the four detectives who were watching the street. Her heart was beating rapidly. For she had thought, as she had stood up to leave the restaurant, that the fierce eyes of Chunda Lal had looked in through the glass panel of one of the doors.

This gloomy house seemed to swallow her up, and the men who watched wondered more and more what had become of the elegant figure, grotesque in such a setting, which had vanished into the narrow doorway—and which did not reappear. Even Inspector Kelly, who knew so much about Chinatown, did not know that the cellars of the three houses left and right of Ah-Fang-Fu's were connected by a series of doors planned and masked with Chinese cunning.

Half an hour after Miska had disappeared into the little house near the corner, the hidden door in the damp cellar below "The Pidgin House" opened and a bent old woman, a ragged, grey-haired and dirty figure, walked slowly up the rickety wooden stair and entered a bare room behind

and below the shop and to the immediate left of the den of the opium-smoker. This room, which was windowless, was lighted by a tin paraffin lamp hung upon a nail in the dirty plaster wall. The floor presented a litter of straw, paper and broken packing-cases. Two steps led up to a second door, a square heavy door of great strength. The old woman, by means of a key which she carried, was about to open this door when it was opened from the other side.

Lowering his head as he came through, Chunda Lal descended. He wore European clothes and a white turban. Save for his ardent eyes and the handsome fanatical face of the man, he might have passed for a lascar. He turned and half closed the door. The woman shrank from him, but extending a lean brown hand he gripped her arm. His eyes glittered feverishly.

"So!" he said, "we are all leaving England? Five of the Chinese sail with the P. and O. boat to-night. Ali Khan goes to-morrow, and Rama Dass, with Miguel, and the *Andaman*. I meet them at Singapore. But you?"

The woman raised her finger to her lips, glancing fearfully towards the open door. But the Hindu, drawing her nearer, repeated with subdued fierceness:

"I ask it again—but *you*?"

"I do not know," muttered the woman, keeping her head lowered and moving in the direction of the steps.

But Chunda Lal intercepted her.

"Stop!" he said—"not yet are you going. There is something I have to speak to you."

"Ssh!" she whispered, half turning and pointing up toward the door.

"Those!" said the Hindu contemptuously—"the poor slaves of the black smoke! Ah! they are floating in their dream paradise; they have no ears to hear, no eyes to see!" He grasped her wrist again. "They contest for shadow smiles and dream kisses, but Chunda Lal have eyes to see and ears to hear. He dream, too but of lips more sweet than honey, of a voice like the Song of the Daood! *Inshalla!"*

Suddenly he clutched the grey hair of the bent old woman and with one angry jerk snatched it from her head—for it was a cunning wig. Disordered, hair gleaming like bronze waves in the dim lamplight was revealed and the great dark eyes of Miska looked out from the artificially haggard face—eyes wide open and fearful.

"Bend not that beautiful body so," whispered Chunda Lal, "that is straight and supple as the willow branch. O, Miska"—his voice trembled emotionally and he that had been but a moment since so fierce stood abashed before her—"for you I become as the meanest and the lowest; for you I die!"

Miska started back from him as a muffled outcry sounded in the room beyond the half-open door. Chunda Las started also, but almost immediately smiled—and his smile was tender as a woman's.

"It is the voice of the black smoke that speaks, Miska. We are alone. Those are dead men speaking from their tombs."

"Ah-Fang-Fu is in the shop," whispered Miska.

"And there he remain."

"But what of ... *him!"*

Miska pointed toward the eastern wall of the room in which they stood.

Chunda Lal clenched his hands convulsively and turned his eyes in the same direction.

"It is of *him*," he replied in a voice of suppressed vehemence, "it is of *him* I would speak." He bent close to Miska's ear. "In the creek, below the house, is lying the motor-boat. I go to-day to bring it down for him. He goes to-night to the other house up the river. To-morrow I am gone. Only you remaining."

"Yes, yes. He also leaves England to-morrow."

"And you?"

"I go with him," she whispered.

Chunda Lal glanced apprehensively toward the door. Then:

"Do not go with him!" he said, and sought to draw Miska into his arms. "O, light of my eyes, do not go with him!"

Miska repulsed him, but not harshly.

"No, no, it is no good, Chunda Lal. I cannot hear you."

"You think"—the Hindu's voice was hoarse with emotion—"that *he* will trace you—and kill you?"

"Trace me!" exclaimed Miska with sudden scorn. "Is it necessary for him to trace me? Am I not already dead except for *him!* Would I be his servant, his lure, his slave for one little hour, for one short minute, if my life was my own!"

Beads of perspiration gleamed upon the brown forehead of the Hindu, and his eyes turned from the door to the eastern wall and back again to Miska. He was torn by conflicting desires, but suddenly came resolution.

"Listen, then." His voice was barely audible. "If I tell you that your life *is* your own—if I reveal to you a secret which I learned in the house of Abdul Rozan in Cairo——"

Miska watched him with eyes in which a new, a wild expression was dawning.

"If I tell you that life and not death awaits you, will you come away to-night, and we sail for India to-morrow! Ah! I have money! Perhaps I am rich as well as—someone; perhaps I can buy you the robes of a princess"—he drew her swiftly to him—"and cover those white arms with jewels."

Miska shrank from him.

"All this means nothing," she said. "How can the secret of Abdul Rozan help me to live! And you—you will be dead before I die!—yes! One little hour after *he* finds out that I go!"

"Listen again," hissed Chunda Lal intensely. "Promise me, and I will open for you a gate of life. For you, Miska, I will do it, and we shall be free. *He* will never find out. He shall not be living to find out!"

"No, no, Chunda Lal," she moaned. "You have been my only friend, and I have tried to forget ..."

"I will forswear Kali forever," he said fervently, "and shed no blood for all my life! I will live for you alone and be your slave."

"It is no good. I cannot, Chunda Lal, I cannot."

"Miska!" he pleaded tenderly.

"No, no," she repeated, her voice quivering—"I cannot ... Oh! do not ask it; I cannot!"

She picked up the hideous wig, moving towards the door. Chunda Lal watched her, clenching his hands; and his eyes, which had been so tender, grew fierce.

"Ah!" he cried—"and it may be I know a reason!"

She stopped, glancing back at him.

"It may be," he continued, and his repressed violence was terrible, "it may be that I, whose heart is never sleeping, have seen and heard! One night"—he crept towards her—"one night when I cry the warning that the

Doctor Sahib returns to his house, you do not come! He goes in at the house and you remain. But at last you come, and I see in your eyes——"

"Oh!" breathed Miska, watching him fearfully.

"Do I not see it in your eyes now! Never before have I thought so until you go to that house, never before have you escaped from my care as here in London. Twice again I have doubted, and because there was other work to do I have been helpless to find out. *To-night*"—he stood before her, glaring madly into her face—"I think so again—that you have gone to him...."

"Oh, Chunda Lal!" cried Miska piteously and extended her hands towards him. "No, no—do not say it!"

"So!" he whispered—"I understand! You risk so much for him—for me you risk nothing! If he—the Doctor Sahib—say to you: 'Come with me, Miska——'"

"No, no! Can I never have one friend in all the world! I hear you call, Chunda Lal, but I am burning the envelope and—Doctor Stuart—finds me. I am trapped. You know it is so.

"I know you say so. And because he—Fo-Hi—is not sure and because of the piece of the scorpion which you find there, we go to that house—*he* and I—and we fail in what we go for." Chunda Lal's hand dropped limply to his sides. "Ah! I cannot understand, Miska. If we are not sure then, are we sure *now?* It may be"—he bent towards her—"we are trapped!"

"Oh, what do you mean?"

"We do not know how much they read of what he had written. Why do we wait?"

"He has some plan, Chunda Lal," replied Miska wearily. "Does he ever fail?"

Her words rekindled the Hindu's ardour; his eyes lighted up anew.

"I tell you his plan," he whispered tensely. "Oh! you shall hear me! He watch you grow from a little lovely child, as he watch his death-spiders and his grey scorpions grow! He tend you and care for you and make you perfect, and he plan for you as he plan for this other creatures. Then, he see what I see, that you are not only his servant but also a woman and that you have a woman's heart. He learn—who think he knows all—that he, too, is not yet a spirit but only a man, and have a man's heart, a man's blood, a man's longings! It is because of the Doctor Sahib that he learn it——"

He grasped Miska again, but she struggled to elude him. "Oh, let me go!" she pleaded. "It is madness you speak!"

"It is madness, yes—for *you!* Always I have watched, always I have waited; and I also have seen you bloom like a rose in the desert. To-night I am here—watching ... and *he* knows it! Tomorrow I am gone! Do you stay, for—*him?*

"Oh," she whispered fearfully, "it cannot be."

"You say true when you say I have been your only friend, Miska. To-morrow *he* plan that you have no friend."

He released her, and slowly, from the sleeve of his coat, slipped into view the curved blade of a native knife.

"Ali Khan Bhai Salam!" he muttered—by which formula he proclaimed himself a *Thug!*

Rolling his eyes in the direction of the eastern wall, he concealed the knife.

"Chunda Lal!" Miska spoke wildly. "I am frightened! Please let me go, and tomorrow——"

"To-morrow!" Chunda Lal raised his eyes, which were alight with the awful light of fanaticism. "For me there may be no tomorrow! *Jey Bhowani! Yah Allah!"*

"Oh, *he* may hear you!" whispered Miska pitifully. "Please go now. I shall know that you are near me, if——"

"And then?"

"I will ask your aid."

Her voice was very low.

"And if it is written that I succeed?"

Miska averted her head.

"Oh, Chunda Lal ... I cannot."

She hid her face in her hands.

Chunda Lal stood watching her for a moment in silence, then he turned toward the cellar door, and then again to Miska. Suddenly he dropped upon one knee before her, took her hand and kissed it, gently.

"I am your slave," he said, his voice shaken with emotion. "For myself I ask nothing—only your pity."

He rose, opened the door by which Miska had entered the room and went down into the cellars. She watched him silently, half fearfully, yet her eyes

were filled with compassionate tears. Then, readjusting the hideous grey wig, she went up the steps and passed through the doorway into the den of the opium smokers.

VI. THE MAN WITH THE SCAR

Stuart read through a paper, consisting of six closely written pages, then he pinned the sheets together, folded them and placed them in one of those long envelopes associated in his memory with the opening phase of "The Scorpion" mystery. Smiling grimly, he descended to his dispensary and returned with the Chinese coin attached to the cork. With this he sealed the envelope.

He had volunteered that night for onerous service, and his offer had been accepted. Gaston Max's knowledge of Eastern languages was slight, whilst Stuart's was sound and extensive, and the Frenchman had cordially welcomed the doctor's proposal that he should accompany him to the house of Ah-Fang-Fu. Reviewing the facts gleaned from Miska during the earlier part of the evening, Stuart perceived that, apart from the additional light which they shed upon her own relations with the group, they could be of slight assistance to the immediate success of the inquiry—unless the raid failed. Therefore he had determined upon the course which now he was adopting.

As he completed the sealing of the envelope and laid it down upon the table, he heard a cab drawn up in front of the house, and presently Mrs. M'Gregor knocked and entered the study.

"Inspector Dunbar to see you, Mr. Keppel," she said—"and he has with him an awful-looking body, all cuts and bandages. A patient, no doubt."

Stuart stood up, wondering what this could mean.

"Will you please show them up, Mrs. M'Gregor," he replied.

A few moments later Dunbar entered, accompanied by a bearded man whose head was bandaged so as to partly cover one eye and who had an evil-looking scar running from his cheekbone, apparently—or at any rate from the edge of the bandage—to the corner of his mouth, so that the lip was drawn up in a fierce and permanent snarl.

At this person Stuart stared blankly, until Dunbar began to laugh.

"It's a wonderful make-up, isn't it?" he said. "I used to say that disguises were out of date, but M. Max has taught me I was wrong."

"Max!" cried Stuart.

"At your service," replied the apparition, "but for this evening only I am 'Le Belafre.' Yes, *pardieu!* I am a real dead man!"

The airy indifference which he proclaimed himself to represent one whose awful body had but that day been removed from a mortuary, and one whom in his own words he had "had the misfortune to strangle," was rather ghastly and at the same time admirable. For "Le Balafre" had deliberately tried to murder him, and false sentiment should form no part of the complement of a criminal investigator.

"It is a daring idea," said Stuart, "and relies for its success upon the chance that 'The Scorpion' remains ignorant of the fate of his agent and continues to believe that the body found off Hanover Hole was yours."

"The admirable precautions of my clever colleague," replied Max, laying his hand upon Dunbar's shoulder, "in closing the mortuary and publishing particulars of the identification disk, made it perfectly safe. 'Le Balafre' has been in hiding. He emerges!"

Stuart had secret reasons for knowing that Max's logic was not at fault, and this brought him to the matter of the sealed paper. He took up the envelope.

"I have here," he said slowly, "a statement. Examine the seal."

He held it out, and Max and Dunbar looked at it. The latter laughed shortly.

"Oh, it is a real statement," continued Stuart, "the nature of which I am not at liberty to divulge. But as to-night we take risks, I propose to leave it in your charge, Inspector."

He handed the envelope to Dunbar, whose face was blank with astonishment.

"In the event of failure to-night," added Stuart, "or catastrophe, I authorise you to read this statement—and act upon it. If, however, I escape safely, I ask you to return it to me, unread."

"Eh bien," said Max, and fixed that eye the whole of which was visible upon Stuart. "Perhaps I understand, and certainly"—he removed his hand

from Dunbar's shoulder and rested it upon that of Stuart—"but certainly, my friend, I sympathise!"

Stuart started guiltily, but Max immediately turned aside and began to speak about their plans.

"In a bag which Inspector Dunbar has thoughtfully left in the cab," he said——

Dunbar hastily retired and Max laughed.

"In that bag," he continued, "is a suit of clothes such as habitues of 'The Pidgin House' rejoice to wear. I, who have studied disguise almost as deeply as the great Willy Clarkson, will transform you into a perfect ruffian. It is important, you understand, that someone should be inside the house of Ah-Fang-Fu, as otherwise by means of some secret exit the man we seek may escape. I believe that he contemplates departing at any moment, and I believe that the visit of Miguel means that what I may term the masters of the minor lodges are coming to London for parting instructions—or, of course Miguel may have come about the disappearance of 'Le Balafre.'"

"Suppose you meet Miguel!"

"My dear friend, I must trust to the Kismet who pursues evil-doers! The only reason which has led me to adopt this daring disguise is a simple one. Although I believe 'The Pidgin House' to be open to ordinary opium-smokers, it may not be open on 'lodge nights.' Do you follow me? Very well. I have the golden scorpion—which I suppose to be a sort of passport."

Stuart wondered more and more at the reasoning powers of this remarkable man, which could lead him to such an accurate conclusion.

"The existence of such a passport," continued Max, "would seem to point to the fact that all the members of this organisation are not known personally to one another. At the same time those invited or expected at present *may* be known to Ah-Fang-Fu or to whoever acts as concierge. You see? Expected or otherwise, I assume that 'Le Balafre' would be admitted—and at night I shall pass very well for 'Le Balafre'—somewhat damaged as a result of my encounter with the late Charles Malet, but still recognisable!"

"And I?"

"You will be 'franked' in. The word of 'Le Balafre' should be sufficient for that! Of course I may be conducted immediately into the presence of the Chief—'The Scorpion'—and he may prove to be none other than Miguel, for instance—or my Algerian acquaintance—or may even be a 'she'—the

fascinating Zara el-Khala! We do not know. But I *think*—oh, decidedly I think—that the cowled one is a male creature, and his habits and habitat suggests to me that he is a Chinaman."

"And in that event how shall you act?"

"At once! I shall hold him, if I can, or shoot him if I cannot hold him! Both of us will blow police-whistles with which we shall be provided and Inspectors Dunbar and Kelly will raid the premises. But I am hoping for an interval. I do not like these inartistic scrimmages! The fact that these people foregather at an opium-house suggests to me that a certain procedure may be followed which I observed during the course of the celebrated 'Mr. Q' case in New York. 'Mr. Q.' also had an audience-chamber adjoining and opium den, and his visitors went there ostensibly to smoke opium. The opium-den was a sort of anteroom."

"Weymouth's big Chinese case had similar features," said Inspector Dunbar, who re-entered at that moment carrying a leathern grip. "If you are kept waiting and you keep your ears open, doctor, that's when your knowledge of the lingo will come in useful. We might rope in the whole gang and find we hadn't a scrap of evidence against them, for except the attempt on yourself, Dr. Stuart, there's nothing so far that I can see to connect 'The Scorpion' with Sir Frank Newcombe!"

"It is such a bungle that I fear!" cried Max. "Ah! how this looped-up lip annoys me!" He adjusted the bandage carefully.

"We've got the place comfortably surrounded," continued Dunbar, "and whoever may be inside is booked! A lady, answering to the description of Mlle. Dorian, went in this evening, so Sowerby reports."

Stuart felt that he was changing colour, and he stooped hastily to inspect the contents of the bag which Dunbar had opened.

"Eh bien!" said Gaston Max. "We shall not go empty-handed, then. And now to transfigure you, my friend!"

VII. IN THE OPIUM DEN

Interrupting a spell of warm, fine weather the night had set in wet and stormy. The squalid streets through which Stuart and Gaston Max made

their way looked more than normally deserted and uninviting. The wind moaned and the rain accompanied with a dreary tattoo. Sometimes a siren wailed out upon the river.

"We are nearly there," said Max. *"Pardieu!* they are well concealed, those fellows. I have not seen so much as an eyebrow."

"It would be encouraging to get a glimpse of some one!" replied Stuart.

"Ah, but bad—inartistic. It is the next door, I think ... yes. I hope they have no special way of knocking."

Upon the door of a dark and apparently deserted shop he rapped.

Both had anticipated an interval of waiting, and both were astonished when the door opened almost at once, revealing a blackly cavernous interior.

"Go off! Too late! Shuttee shop!" chattered a voice out of the darkness.

Max thrust his way resolutely in, followed by Stuart. "Shut the door, Ah-Fang-Fu!" he said curtly, speaking with a laboured French accent. *"Scorpion!"*

The door was closed by the invisible Chinaman, there was a sound of soft movements and a hurricane-lantern suddenly made its appearance. Its light revealed the interior of a nondescript untidy little shop and revealed the presence of an old and very wrinkled Chinaman who held the lantern. He wore a blue smock and a bowler hat and his face possessed the absolute impassivity of an image. As he leaned over the counter, scrutinising his visitors, Max thrust forward the golden scorpion held in the palm of his hand.

"Hoi, hoi" chattered the Chinaman. "Fo-Hi fellers, eh? You hab got plenty much late. Other fellers Fo-Hi pidgin plenty much sooner. You one time catchee allee same bhobbery, b'long number one joss-pidgin man!"

Being covertly nudged by Max:

"Cut the palaver, Pidgin," growled Stuart.

"Allee lightee," chattered Ah-Fang-Fu, for evidently this was he. "You play one piecee pipee till Fo-Hi got." Raising the lantern, he led the way through a door at the back of the shop. Descending four wooden steps, Stuart and Max found themselves in the opium-den.

"Full up. No loom," said the Chinaman.

It was a low-ceilinged apartment, the beams of the roof sloping slightly upward from west to east. The centre part of the wall at the back was

covered with matting hung from the rough cornice supporting the beams. To the right of the matting was the door communicating with the shop, and to the left were bunks. Other bunks lined the southerly wall, except where, set in the thickness of the bare brick and plaster, a second strong door was partly hidden by a pile of empty packing-cases and an untidy litter of straw and matting.

Along the northern wall were more bunks, and an open wooden stair, with a handrail, ascended to a small landing or platform before a third door high up in the wall. A few mats were strewn about the floor. The place was dimly lighted by a red-shaded lamp swung from the centre of the ceiling and near the foot of the stairs another lamp (of the common tin variety) stood upon a box near which was a broken cane chair. Opium-pipes, tins, and a pack of cards were on this box.

All the bunks appeared to be occupied. Most of the occupants were lying motionless, but one or two were noisily sucking at the opium-pipes. These had not yet attained to the opium-smokers Nirvana. So much did Gaston Max, a trained observer, gather in one swift glance. Then Ah-Fang-Fu, leaving the lantern in the shop, descended the four steps and crossing the room began to arrange two mats with round head-cushions near to the empty packing-cases. Stuart and Max remained by the door.

"You see," whispered Max, "he has taken you on trust! And he did not appear to recognise me. It is as I thought. The place is 'open to the public' as usual, and Ah-Fang-Fu does a roaring trade, one would judge. For the benefit of patrons not affiliated to the order we have to pretend to smoke."

"Yes," replied Stuart with repressed excitement—"until someone called Fo-Hi is at home, or visible; the word 'got' may mean either of those things."

"Fo-Hi," whispered Max, "is 'The Scorpion!'

"I believe you are right," said Stuart—who had good reason to know it. "My God! what a foul den! The reek is suffocating. Look at that yellow lifeless face yonder, and see that other fellow whose hand hangs limply down upon the floor. Those bunks might be occupied by corpses for all the evidence of life that some of them show."

"Morbleu! do not raise your voice; for some of them are occupied by 'Scorpions.' You noted the words of Ah-Fang? *Ssh!"*

The old Chinaman returned with his curious shuffling walk, raising his hand to beckon to them.

"Number one piece bunk, lo!" he chattered.

"Good enough," growled Stuart.

The two crossed and reclined upon the uncleanly mats.

"Make special loom," explained Ah-Fang-Fu. "Velly special chop!"

He passed from bunk to bunk, and presently came to a comatose Chinaman from whose limp hand, which hung down upon the floor, the pipe had dropped. This pipe Ah-Fang-Fu took from the smoker's fingers and returning to the box upon which the tin lamp was standing began calmly to load it.

"Good heavens!" muttered Stuart—"he is short of pipes! Pah! how the place reeks!"

Ah-Fang-Fu busied himself with a tin of opium, the pipe which he had taken from the sleeper, and another pipe—apparently the last of his stock—which lay near the lamp. Igniting the two, he crossed and handed them to Stuart and Max.

"Velly soon-lo!" he said and made a curious sign, touching his brow, his lips and his breast in a manner resembling that of a Moslem.

Max repeated the gesture and then lay back upon his elbow, raising the mouthpiece of the little pipe to his lips—but carefully avoiding contact.

Ah-Fang-Fu shuffled back to the broken cane chair, from which he had evidently arisen to admit his late visitors.

Inarticulate sounds proceeded from the bunks, breaking the sinister silence which now descended upon the den. Ah-Fang-Fu began to play Patience, constantly muttering to himself. The occasional wash of tidal water became audible, and once there came a scampering and squealing of rates from beneath the floor.

"Do you notice the sound of lapping water" whispered Stuart. "The place is evidently built upon a foundation of piles and the cellars must actually be submerged at high-tide."

"Pardieu! it is a death trap. What is this!"

A loud knocking sounded upon the street door. Ah-Fang-Fu rose and shuffled up the steps into the shop. He could be heard unbarring the outer door. Then:

"Too late! shuttee shop, shuttee shop!" sounded.

"I don't want nothin' out of your blasted shop, Pidgin!" roared a loud and thick voice. "I'm old Bill Bean, I am, and I want a pipe, I do!"

"Hullo, Bill!" replied the invisible 'Pidgin.' "Allee samee dlunk again!"

A red-bearded ship's fireman, wearing sea-boots, a rough blue suit similar to that which Stuart wore, a muffler and a peaked cap, lurched into view at the head of the steps.

"Blimey!" he roared, over his shoulder. "Drunk! *Me* drunk! An' all the pubs in these parts sell barley-water coloured brown! Blimey! Chuck it, Pidgin!"

Ah-Fang-Fu reappeared behind him. "Catchee dlunk ev'ly time for comee here," he chattered.

"'Taint 'umanly possible," declared the new arrival, staggering down the steps, "fer a 'ealthy sailorman to git drunk on coloured water just 'cause the publican calls it beer! I ain't drunk; I'm only miserable. Gimmee a pipe, Pidgin."

Ah-Fang-Fu barred the door and ascended.

"Comee here," he muttered, "my placee, all full up and no other placee b'long open."

Bill Bean slapped him boisterously on the back.

"Cut the palaver, Pidgin, and gimme a pipe. Piecee pipe, Pidgin!"

He lurched across the floor, nearly falling over Stuart's legs, took up a mat and a cushion, lurched into the further corner and cast himself down.

"Ain't I one o' yer oldest customers, Pidgin?" he inquired. "One o' yer oldest, I am."

"Blight side twelve-time," muttered the Chinaman. "Getchee me in tlouble, Bill. Number one police chop."

"Not the first time it wouldn't be!" retorted the fireman. "Not the first time as you've been in trouble, Pidgin. An' unless they 'ung yer—which it ain't 'umanly possible to 'ang a Chink—it wouldn't be the last—an' not by a damn long way ...*an'* not by a damn long way!"

Ah-Fang-Fu, shrugging resignedly, shuffled from bunk to bunk in quest of a disused pipe, found one, and returning to the extemporised table, began to load it, muttering to himself.

"Don't like to 'ear about your wicked past, do you?" continued Bill. "Wicked old yellow-faced 'eathen! Remember the 'dive' in 'Frisco, Pidgin?

Wot a rough 'ouse! Remember when I come in—full up I was: me back teeth well under water—an' you tried to Shanghai me?"

"You cutee palaber. All damn lie," muttered the Chinaman.

"Ho! a lie is it?" roared the other. "Wot about me wakin' up all of a tremble aboard o' the old *Nancy Lee*—aboard of a blasted wind-jammer! Me—a fireman! Wot about it? Wasn't that Shanghaiin'? Blighter! *An'* not a 'oat' in me pocket—not a 'bean'! Broke to the wide an' aboard of a old wind-jammer wot was a coffin-ship—a coffin-ship she was; an' 'er old man was the devil's father-in-law. Ho! lies! I *don't* think!"

"You cutee palaber!" chattered Ah-Fang-Fu, busy with the pipe. "You likee too much chin-chin. You make nice piece bhobbery."

"Not a 'bean'," continued Bill reminiscently—"not a 'oat.'" He sat up violently. "Even me pipe an' baccy was gone!" he shouted. "You'd even pinched me pipe an' baccy! You'd pinch the whiskers off a blind man, *you* would, Pidgin! 'And over the dope. Thank Gawd somebody's still the right stuff!"

Suddenly, from a bunk on the left of Gaston Max came a faint cry.

"Ah! He has bitten me!"

"'Ullo!" said Bill—"wotcher bin given' *'im,* Pidgin? *Chandu* or hydrerphobia?"

Ah-Fang-Fu crossed and handed him the pipe.

"One piecee pipee. No more hab."

Bill grasped the pipe eagerly and raised it to his lips. Ah-Fang-Fu returned unmoved to his Patience and silence reclaimed the den, only broken by the inarticulate murmuring and the lapping of the tide.

"A genuine customer!" whispered Max.

"Ah!" came again, more faintly—"he ... has ... bitten ... me."

"Blimey!" said Bill in a drowsy voice—"'eave the chair at 'im, Pidgin."

Stuart was about to speak when Gaston Max furtively grasped his arm. "Ssh!" he whispered. "Do not move, but look ... at the top of the stair!"

Stuart turned his eyes. On the platform at the head of the stairs a Hindu was standing!

"Chunda Lal!" whispered Max. "Prepare for—anything!"

"Chunda Lal descended slowly. Ah-Fang-Fu continued to play Patience. The Hindu stood behind him and began to speak in a voice of subdued fervour and with soft Hindu modulations.

"Why do you allow them, strangers, coming here to-night!"

Ah-Fang-Fu continued complacently to arrange the cards.

"S'pose hab gotchee pidgin allee samee Chunda Lal hab got? Fo-Hi no catchee buy bled and cheese for Ah-Fang-Fu. He"—nodding casually in the direction of Bill Bean—"plitty soon all blissful."

"Be very careful, Ah-Fang-Fu," said Chunda Lal tensely. He lowered his voice. "Do you forget so soon what happen last week?"

"No sabby."

"Some one comes here—we do not know how close he comes; perhaps he comes in—and he is of the *police."*

Ah-Fang-Fu shuffled uneasily in his chair.

"No police chop for Pidgin!" he muttered. "Same feller tumble in liver?"

"He is killed—yes; but suppose they find the writing he has made! Suppose he has written that it is *here* people meet together?"

"Makee chit tell my name? Muchee hard luck! Number one police chop."

"You say Fo-Hi not buying you bread and cheese. Perhaps it is Fo-Hi that save you from hanging!"

Ah-Fang-Fu hugged himself.

"Yak pozee!" (Very good) he muttered.

Chunda Lal raised his finger.

"Be very careful, Ah-Fang-Fu!"

"Allee time velly careful."

"But admit no more of them to come in, these strangers."

"Tchee, tchee! Velly ploper. Sometime big feller come in if Pidgin palaber or not. Pidgin never lude to big feller."

"Your life may depend on it," said Chunda Lal impressively. "How many are here?"

Ah-Fang-Fu turned at last from his cards, pointing in three directions, and, finally, at Gaston Max.

"Four?" said the Hindu—"how can it be?"

He peered from bunk to bunk, muttering something—a name apparently—after scrutinizing each. When his gaze rested upon Max he started, stared hard, and meeting the gaze of the one visible eye, made the strange sign.

Max repeated it; and Chunda Lal turned again to the Chinaman. "Because of that drunken pig," he said, pointing at Bill Bean—"we must wait. See to it that he is the last."

He walked slowly up the stairs, opened the door at the top and disappeared.

VIII. THE GREEN-EYED JOSS

Sinister silence reclaimed the house of Ah-Fang-Fu. And Ah-Fang-Fu resumed his solitary game.

"He recognised 'Le Belafre'" whispered Max—"and was surprised to see him! So there are three of the gang here! Did you particularly observe in which bunks they lay, doctor. *Ssh!"*

A voice from a bunk had commenced to sing monotonously.

"Peyala peah," it sang, weird above the murmured accompaniment of the other dreaming smokers and the *wash-wash* of the tide—*"To myn-na-peah-Phir Kysee ko kyah ..."*

"He is speaking from an opium-trance," said Stuart softly. "A native song: 'If a cup of wine is drunk, and I have drunk it, what of that?'"

"Mon Dieu! it is uncanny!" whispered Max. *"Brr!* do you hear those rats? I am wondering in what order we shall be admitted to the 'Scorpion's' presence, or if we shall see him together."

"He may come in here."

"All the better."

"Gimme 'nother pipe, Pidgin," drawled a very drowsy voice from Bill Bean's corner.

Ah-Fang-Fu left his eternal arranging and rearranging of the cards and crossed the room. He took the opium-pipe from the fireman's limp fingers and returning to the box, refilled and lighted it. Max and Stuart watched him in silence until he had handed the second pipe to the man and returned to his chair.

"We must be very careful," said Stuart. "We do not know which are real smokers and which are not."

Again there was a weird interruption. A Chinaman lying in one of the bunks began to chant in a monotonous far-away voice:

"Chong-liou-chouay
Om mani padme hum."

"The Buddhist formula," whispered Stuart. *"He* is a real smoker. Heavens! the reek is choking me!"

The chant was repeated, the words dying away into a long murmur. Ah-Fang-Fu continued to shuffle the cards. And presently Bill Bean's second pipe dropped from his fingers. His husky voice spoke almost inaudibly.

"I'm ... old ... Bill ... Bean ... I ..."

A deep-noted siren hooted dimly.

"A steamer making for dock," whispered Max. *"Brr!* it is a nightmare, this! I think in a minute something will happen. *Ssh!"*

Ah-Fang-Fu glanced slowly around. Then he stood up, raised the lamp from the table and made a tour of the bunks, shining the light in upon the faces of the occupants. Max watched him closely, hoping to learn in which bunks the members of 'The Scorpion's' group lay. But he was disappointed. Ah-Fang-Fu examined *all* the bunks and even shone the light down upon Stuart and Max. He muttered to himself constantly, but seemed to address no one.

Replacing the lamp on the box, he whistled softly; and:——

"Look!" breathed Max. "The stair again!"

Stuart cautiously turned his eyes toward the open stair.

On the platform above stood a bent old hag whose witch-eyes were searching the place keenly! With a curiously lithe step, for all her age, she descended, and standing behind Ah-Fang-Fu tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to the outer door. He stood up and shuffled across, went up the four steps and unbarred the door.

"Tchee, tchee," he chattered. "Pidgin make a look-out."

He went out and closed the door.

"Something happens!" whispered Max.

A gong sounded.

"Ah!"

The old woman approached the matting curtain hung over a portion of the wall, raised it slightly in the centre—where it opened—and disappeared beyond.

"You see!" said Stuart excitedly.

"Yes! it is the audience-chamber of 'The Scorpion'!"

The ancient hag came out again, crossed to a bunk and touched its occupant, a Chinaman, with her hand. He immediately shot up and followed

her. The two disappeared beyond the curtain.

"What shall we do," said Stuart, "if *you* are summoned?"

"I shall throw open those curtains the moment I reach them, and present my pistol at the head of whoever is on the other side. You—*ssh!"*

The old woman reappeared, looked slowly around and then held the curtains slightly apart to allow of the Chinaman's coming out. He saluted her by touching his head, lips and breast with his right hand, then passed up to the door communicating with the shop, which he opened, and went out.

His voice came, muffled:

"Fo-Hi!"

"Fo-Hi," returned the high voice of Ah-Fang-Fu.

The outer door was opened and shut. The old woman went up and barred the inner door, then returned and stood by the matting curtain. The sound of the water below alone broke the silence. It was the hour of high tide.

"There goes the first fish into Dunbar's net!" whispered Max.

The gong sounded again.

Thereupon the old woman crossed to another bunk and conducted a brown-skinned Eastern into the hidden room. Immediately they had disappeared:

"As I pull the curtains aside," continued Max rapidly, "blow the whistle and run across and unbar the door...."

So engrossed was he in giving these directions, and so engrossed was Stuart in listening to them, that neither detected a faint creak which proceeded from almost immediately behind them. This sound was occasioned by the slow and cautious opening of that sunken, heavy door near to which they lay—the door which communicated with the labyrinth of cellars. Inch by inch from the opening protruded the head of Ah-Fang-Fu!

"If the Chinaman offers any resistance," Max went on, speaking very rapidly—*"morbleu!* you have the means to deal with him! In a word, admit the police. *Sh!* what is that!"

A moaning voice from one of the bunks came.

"Cheal kegur-men, mas ka dheer!"

"A native adage," whispered Stuart. "He is dreaming. 'There is always meat in a kite's nest.'"

"Eh bien! very true—and I think the kite is at home!"

The head of Ah-Fang-Fu vanished. A moment later the curtains opened again slightly and the old woman came out, ushering the brown man. He saluted her and unbarred the door, going out.

"Fo-Hi," came dimly.

There was no definite answer—only the sound of a muttered colloquy; and suddenly the brown man returned and spoke to the old woman in a voice so low that his words were inaudible to the two attentive listeners in the distant corner.

"Ah!" whispered Max—"what now?"

"Shall we rush the curtain!" said Stuart.

"No!" Max grasped his arm—"wait! wait! See! he is going out. He has perhaps forgotten something. A second fish in the net."

The Oriental went up the steps into the shop. The old woman closed and barred the door, then opened the matting curtain and disappeared within.

"I was right," said Max.

But for once in his career he was wrong.

She was out again almost immediately and bending over a bunk close to the left of the masked opening. The occupant concealed in its shadow did not rise and follow her, however. She seemed to be speaking to him. Stuart and Max watched intently.

The head of Ah-Fang-Fu reappeared in the doorway behind them.

"Now is our time!" whispered Max tensely. "As I rush for the curtains, you run to the shop door and get it unbolted, whistling for Dunbar——"

Ah-Fang-Fu, fully opening the door behind them, crept out stealthily.

"Have your pistol ready," continued Max, "and first put the whistle between your teeth——"

Ah-Fang-Fu silently placed his bowler hat upon the floor, shook down his long pigtail, and moving with catlike tread, stooping, drew nearer.

"Now, doctor!" cried Max.

Both sprang to their feet. Max leapt clear of the matting and other litter and dashed for the curtain. He reached it, seized it and tore bodily from its fastenings. Behind him the long flat note of a police whistle sounded—and ended abruptly.

"Ah! Nom d'un nom!" cried Max.

A cunningly devised door—looking like a section of solid brick and plaster wall—was closing slowly—heavily. Through the opening which yet

remained he caught a glimpse of a small room, draped with Chinese dragon tapestry and having upon a raised, carpeted dais a number of cushions forming a *diwan* and an inlaid table bearing a silver snuff vase. A cowled figure was seated upon the dais. The door closed completely. Within a niche in its centre sat a yellow leering idol, green eyed and complacent.

Wild, gurgling cries brought Max sharply about.

An answering whistle sounded from the street outside ... a second ... a third.

Ah-Fang-Fu, stooping ever lower, at the instant that Stuart had sprung to his feet had seized his ankle from behind, pitching him on to his face. It was then that the note of the whistle had ceased. Now, the Chinaman had his long pigtail about Stuart's neck, at which Stuart, prone with the other kneeling upon his body, plucked vainly.

Max raised his pistol ... and from the bunk almost at his elbow leapt Miguel the quadroon, a sand-bag raised. It descended upon the Frenchman's skull ... and he crumbled up limply and collapsed upon the floor. There came a crash of broken glass from the shop.

Uttering a piercing cry, the old woman staggered from the door near which she had been standing as if stricken helpless, during the lightning moments in which these things had happened—and advanced in the direction of Ah-Fang-Fu.

"Ah, God! You kill him! You *kill* him?" she moaned.

"Through the window, Sowerby! This way!" came Dunbar's voice. "Max! Max!"

The sustained note of a whistle, a confusion of voices and a sound of heavy steps proclaimed the entrance of the police into the shop and the summoning of reinforcements.

Ah-Fang-Fu rose. Stuart had ceased to struggle. The Chinaman replaced his hat and looked up at the woman, whose eyes glared madly into his own.

"Tche', tche'e," he said sibilantly—*"Tchon-dzee-ti Fan-Fu."* ("Yes, yes. It is the will of the Master.")

"Down with the door!" roared Dunbar.

The woman threw herself, with a wild sob, upon the motionless body of Stuart.

Ensued a series of splintering crashes, and finally the head of an axe appeared through the panels of the door. Ah-Fang-Fu tried to drag the

woman away, but she clung to Stuart desperately and was immovable. Thereupon the huge quadroon, running across the room, swept them both up into his giant embrace, man and woman together, and bore them down by the sunken doorway into the cellars below!

The shop door fell inwards, crashing down the four steps, and Dunbar sprang into the place, revolver in hand, followed by Inspector Kelly and four men of the River Police, one of whom carried a hurricane lantern. Ah-Fang-Fu had just descended after Miguel and closed the heavy door.

"Try this way, boys!" cried Kelly, and rushed up the stair. The four men followed him. The lantern was left on the floor. Dunbar stared about him. Sowerby and several other men entered. Suddenly Dunbar saw Gaston Max lying on the floor.

"My God!" he cried—"they have killed him!"

He ran across, knelt and examined Max, pressing his ear against his breast.

Inspector Kelly reaching the top of the stairs and finding the door locked, hurled his great bulk against it and burst it open.

"Follow me, boys!" he cried. "Take care! Bring the lantern, somebody."

The fourth man grasped the lantern and all followed the Inspector up the stair and out through the doorway. His voice came dimly:

"Mind the beam! Pass the light forward...."

Sowerby was struggling with the door by which Miguel and Ah-Fang-Fu unseen had made their escape and Dunbar, having rested Max's head upon a pillow, was glaring all about him, his square jaw set grimly and his eyes fierce with anger.

A voice droned from a bunk:

"Cheal kegur men ms ka-dheer!"

The police were moving from bunk to bunk, scrutinising the occupants. The uproar had penetrated to them even in their drugged slumbers. There were stirrings and mutterings and movements of yellow hands.

"But where is 'The Scorpion'?"

He turned and stared at the wall from which the matting had been torn. And out of the little niche in the cunningly masked door the green-eyed joss leered at him complacently.

PART IV

THE LAIR OF THE SCORPION

I. THE SUBLIME ORDER

Stuart awoke to a discovery so strange that for some time he found himself unable to accept its reality. He passed his hands over his face and eyes and looked about him dazedly. He experienced great pain in his throat, and he could feel that his neck was swollen. He stared down at his ankles, which also were throbbing agonisingly—to learn that they were confined in gyves attached by a short chain to a ring in the floor!

He was lying upon a deep *diwan,* which was covered with leopard-skins and which occupied one corner of the most extraordinary room he had ever seen or ever could have imagined. He sat up, but was immediately overcome with faintness which he conquered with difficulty.

The apartment, then, was one of extraordinary Oriental elegance, having two entrances closed with lacquer sliding doors. Chinese lamps swung from the ceiling, illuminated it warmly, and a great number of large and bright silk cushions were strewn about the floor. There were tapestries in black and gold, rich carpets and couches, several handsome cabinets and a number of tall cases of Oriental workmanship containing large and strangely bound books, scientific paraphernalia, curios and ornaments.

At the further end of the room was a deep tiled hearth in which stood a kind of chemical furnace which hissed constantly. Upon ornate small tables and pedestals were vases and cases—one of the latter containing a number or orchids, in flower.

Preserved lizards, snakes, and other creatures were in a row of jars upon a shelf, together with small skeletons of animals in frames. There was also a perfect human skeleton. Near the centre of the room was a canopied chair, of grotesque Chinese design, upon a dais, a big bronze bell hanging from it; and near to the *diwan* upon which Stuart was lying stood a large, very finely

carved table upon which were some open faded volumes and a litter of scientific implements. Near the table stood a very large bowl of what looked like platinum, upon a tripod, and several volumes lay scattered near it upon the carpet. From a silver incense-burner arose a pencilling of blue smoke.

One of the lacquer doors slid noiselessly open and a man entered, Stuart inhaled sibilantly and clenched his fists.

The new-comer wore a cowled garment of some dark blue material which enveloped him from head to feet. It possessed oval eye-holes, and through these apertures gleamed two eyes which looked scarcely like the eyes of a human being. They were of that brilliant yellow color sometimes seen in the eyes of tigers, and their most marked and awful peculiarity was their unblinking regard. They seemed always to be open to their fullest extent, and Stuart realized with anger that it was impossible to sustain for long the piercing gaze of Fo-Hi ... for he knew that he was in the presence of "The Scorpion"!

Walking with a slow and curious dignity, the cowled figure came across to the table, first closing the lacquer door. Stuart's hands convulsively clutched the covering of the *diwan* as the sinister figure approached. The intolerable gaze of those weird eyes had awakened a horror, a loathing horror, within him, such as he never remembered to have experienced in regard to any human being. It was the sort of horror which the proximity of a poisonous serpent occasions—or the nearness of a scorpion....

Fo-Hi seated himself at the table.

Absolute silence reigned in the big room, except for the hissing of the furnace. No sound penetrated from the outer world. Having no means of judging how long he had been insensible, Stuart found himself wondering if the raid on the den of Ah-Fang-Fu had taken place hours before, days earlier, or weeks ago.

Taking up a test-tube from a rack on the table, Fo-Hi held it near a lamp and examined the contents—a few drops of colourless fluid. These he poured into a curious long-necked yellow bottle. He began to speak, but without looking at Stuart.

His diction was characteristic, resembling his carriage in that it was slow and distinctive. He seemed deliberately to choose each word and to give to it all its value, syllable by syllable. His English was perfect to the verge of

the pedantic; and his voice was metallic and harsh, touching at time, when his words were vested with some subtle or hidden significance, guttural depths which betrayed the Chinaman. He possessed uncanny dignity as of tremendous intellect and conscious power.

"I regret that you were so rash as to take part in last night's abortive raid, Dr. Stuart," he said.

Stuart started. So he had been unconscious for many hour!

"Because of your professional acquirements at one time I had contemplated removing you," continued the unemotional voice. "But I rejoice to think that I failed. It would have been an error of judgement. I have useful work for such men. You shall assist in the extensive laboratories of my distinguished predecessor."

"Never!" snapped Stuart.

The man's callousness was so purposeful and deliberate that it awed. He seemed like one who stands above all ordinary human frailties and emotions.

"Your prejudice is natural," rejoined Fo-Hi calmly. "You are ignorant of our sublime motives, but you shall nevertheless assist us to establish that intellectual control which is destined to be the new World Force. No doubt you are conscious of a mental hiatus extending from the moment when you found the pigtail of the worthy Ah-Fang-Fu about your throat until that when you recovered consciousness in this room. It has covered a period roughly of twenty-four hours, Dr. Stuart."

"I don't believe it," muttered Stuart—and found his own voice to seem as unreal as everything else in the nightmare apartment. "If I had not revived earlier, I should never have revived at all."

He raised his hand to his swollen throat, touching it gingerly.

"Your unconsciousness was prolonged," explained Fo-Hi, consulting an open book written in Chinese characters, "by an injection which I found it necessary to make. Otherwise, as you remark, it would have been prolonged indefinitely. Your clever but rash companion was less happy."

"What!" cried Stuart—"he is dead? You fiend! You damned yellow fiend!" Emotion shook him and he sat clutching the leopard-skins and glaring madly at the cowled figure.

"Fortunately," resumed Fo-Hi, "my people—with one exception—succeeded in making their escape. I may add that the needless scuffling

attendant upon arresting this unfortunate follower of mine, immediately outside the door of the house, led to the discovery of your own presence. Nevertheless, the others departed safely. My own departure is imminent; it has been because of certain domestic details and by the necessity of awaiting nightfall. You see, I am frank with you."

"Because the grave is silent!"

"The grave, and ... China. There is no other alternative in your case."

"Are you sure that there is no other in your own?" asked Stuart huskily.

"An alternative to my returning to China? Can you suggest one?"

"The scaffold!" cried Stuart furiously, "for you and the scum who follow you!"

Fo-Hi lighted a Bunsen burner.

"I trust not," he rejoined placidly. "With two exceptions, all my people are out of England."

Stuart's heart began to throb painfully. With two exceptions! Did Miska still remain? He conquered his anger and tried to speak calmly, recognising how he lay utterly in the power of this uncanny being and how closely his happiness was involved even if he escaped with life.

"And you?" he said.

"In these matters, Dr. Stuart," replied Fo-Hi, "I have always modelled my behavior upon that of the brilliant scientist who preceded me as European representative of our movement. Your beautiful Thames is my highway as it was his highway. No one of my immediate neighbours has ever seen me or my once extensive following enter this house." He selected an empty test-tube. "No one shall see me leave."

The unreality of it all threatened to swamp Stuart's mind again, but he forced himself to speak calmly.

"Your own escape is just possible, if some vessel awaits you; but do you imagine for a moment that you can carry me to China and elude pursuit?"

Fo-Hi, again consulting the huge book with its yellow faded characters, answered him absently.

"Do you recall the death of the Grand Duke Ivan?" he said. "Does your memory retain the name of Van Rembold and has your Scotland Yard yet satisfied itself that Sir Frank Narcombe died from 'natural causes'? Then, there was Ericksen, the most brilliant European electrical expert of the

century, who died quite suddenly last year. I honor you, Dr. Stuart, by inviting you to join a company so distinguished."

"You are raving! What have these men in common with me?"

Stuart found himself holding his breath as he awaited a reply—for he knew that he was on the verge of learning that which poor Gaston Max had given his life to learn. A moment Fo-Hi hesitated—and in that moment his captive recognised, and shuddered to recognise, that he won this secret too late. Then:

"The Grand Duke is a tactician who, had he remained in Europe, might well have readjusted the frontiers of his country. Van Rembold, as a mining engineer, stands alone, as does Henrik Ericksen in the electrical world. As for Sir Frank Narcombe, he is beyond doubt the most brilliant surgeon of today, and I, a judge of men, count you his peer in the realm of pure therapeutics. Whilst your studies in snake-poisons (which were narrowly watched for us in India) give you an unique place in toxicology. These great men will be some of your companions in China."

"In China!"

"In China, Dr. Stuart, where I hope you will join them. You misapprehend the purpose of my mission. It is not destructive, although neither I nor my enlightened predecessor have ever scrupled to remove any obstacle from the path of that world-change which no human power can check or hinder; it is primarily constructive. No state or group of states can hope to resist the progress of a movement guided and upheld by a monopoly of the world's genius. The Sublime Order, of which I am an unworthy member, stands for such a movement."

"Rest assured it will be crushed."

"Van Rembold is preparing radium in quantities hitherto unknown from the vast pitchblend deposits of Ho-Nan—which industry we control. He visited China arrayed in his shroud, and he travelled in a handsome Egyptian sarcophagus purchased at Sotherby's on behalf of a Chinese collector."

Fo-Hi stood up and crossed to the hissing furnace. He busied himself with some obscure experiment which proceeded there, and:

"Your own state-room will be less romantic, Dr. Stuart," he said, speaking without turning his head; "possibly a packing-case. In brief, that intellectual giant who achieved to much for the Sublime Order—my

immediate predecessor in office—devised a means of inducing artificial catalepsy——"

"My God!" muttered Stuart, as the incredible, the appalling truth burst upon his mind.

"My own rather hazardous delay," continued Fo-Hi, "is occasioned in some measure by my anxiety to complete the present experiment. Its product will be your passport to China."

Carrying a tiny crucible, he returned to the table.

Stuart felt that his self-possession was deserting him. Madness threatened ... If he was not already mad. He forced himself to speak.

"You taunt me because I am helpless. I do not believe that those men have been spirited into China. Even if it were so, they would die, as I would die, rather than prostitute their talents to such mad infamy."

Fo-Hi carefully poured the contents of the crucible into a flat platinum pan.

"In China, Dr. Stuart," he said, "we know how to *make* men work! I myself am the deviser of a variant of the unduly notorious *kite* device and the scarcely less celebrated 'Six Gates of Wisdom.' I term it The Feast of a Thousand Ants. It is performed with the aid of African driver ant, a pair of surgical scissors and a pot of honey. I have observed you studying with interest the human skeleton yonder. It is that of one of my followers—a Nubian mute—who met with an untimely end quite recently. You are wondering, no doubt, how I obtained the frame in so short a time? My African driver ants, Dr. Stuart, of which I have three large cases in a cellar below this room, performed the task for me in exactly sixty-nine minutes."

Stuart strained frenziedly at his gyves.

"My God!" he groaned. "All I have heard of you was the merest flattery. You are either a fiend or a madman!"

"When you are enlisted as a member of the Sublime Order," said Fo-Hi softly, "and you awaken in China, Dr. Stuart—you will work. We have no unwilling recruits."

"Stop your accursed talk. I have heard enough."

But the metallic voice continued smoothly:

"I appreciate the difficulty which you must experience in grasping the true significance of this movement. You have seen mighty nations, armed with every known resource of science, at a deadlock on the battlefield. You

naturally fail to perceive how a group of Oriental philosophers can achieve what the might of Europe failed to achieve. You will remember, in favour of my claims, that we command the service of the world's genius, and have a financial backing which could settle the national loans of the world! In other words, exhumation of a large percentage of the great men who have died in recent years would be impossible. Their tombs are empty."

"I have heard enough. Drug me, kill me; but spare me your confidences."

"In the crowded foyer of a hotel," continued Fo-Hi imperturbably, "of a theatre, of a concert-room; in the privacy of their home, of their office; wherever opportunity offered, I caused them to be touched with the point of a hypodermic needle such as this." He held up a small hypodermic syringe.

"It contained a minute quantity of the serum which I am now preparing—the serum whose discovery was the crowning achievement of a great scientist's career (I refer, Dr. Stuart, to my brilliant predecessor). They were buried alive; but no surgeon in Europe or America would have hesitated to certify them dead. Aided by a group of six Hindu fanatics, trained as *Lughais* (grave-diggers), it was easy to gain access to their resting-places. One had the misfortune to be cremated by his family—a great loss to my Council. But the others are now in China, at our headquarters. They are labouring day and night to bring this war-scarred world under the sceptre of an Eastern Emperor."

"Faugh!" cried Stuart. "The whole of that war-scarred world will stand armed before you!"

"We realise that, doctor; therefore we are prepared for it. We spoke of the Norwegian Henrick Ericksen. This is his most recent contribution to our armament."

Fo-Hi rested on long yellow hand upon a kind of model searchlight.

"I nearly committed the clumsy indiscretion of removing you with this little instrument," he said. "You recall the episode? Ericksen's Disintegrating Ray, Dr. Stuart. The model, here, possesses a limited range, of course, but the actual instrument has a compass of seven and a half miles. It can readily be carried by a heavy plane! One such plane in a flight from Suez to Port Said, could destroy all the shipping in the Canal and explode every grain of ammunition on either shore! Since I must leave England to-night, the model must be destroyed, and unfortunately a good collection of bacilli has already suffered the same fate."

Placidly, slowly, and unmoved from his habit of unruffled dignity, Fo-Hi placed the model in a deep mortar, whilst Stuart watched him speechless and aghast. He poured the contents of a large pan into the mortar, whereupon a loud hissing sound broke the awesome silence of the room and a cloud of fumes arose.

"Not a trace, doctor!" said the cowled man. "A little preparation of my own. It destroys the hardest known substance—with the solitary exception of a certain clay—in the same way that nitric acid would destroy tissue paper. You see I might have aspired to become famous among safe-breakers."

"You have preferred to become infamous among murderers!" snapped Stuart.

"To murder, Dr. Stuart, I have never stooped. I am a specialist in selective warfare. When you visit the laboratory of our chief chemist in Kiangsu you will be shown the whole of the armory of the Sublime Order. I regret that the activities of your zealous and painfully inquisitive friend, M. Gaston Max, have forced me to depart from England before I had completed my work here."

"I pray you may never depart," murmured Stuart.

Fo-Hi having added some bright green fluid to that in the flat pan, had now poured the whole into a large test-tube, and was holding it in the flame of the burner. At the moment that it reached the boiling point it became colourless. He carefully placed the whole of the liquid in a retort to which he attached a condensor. He stood up.

Crossing to a glass case which rested upon a table near the *diwan* he struck it lightly with his hand. The case contained sand and fragments of rock, but as Fo-Hi struck it, out from beneath the pieces of rock darted black active creatures.

"The common black scorpion of Southern India," he said softly. "Its venom is the basis of the priceless formula, *F. Katalepsis,* upon which the structure of our Sublime Order rests, Dr. Stuart; hence the adoption of a scorpion as our device."

He took up a long slender flask.

"This virus prepared from a glandular secretion of the Chinese swamp-adder is also beyond price. Again-the case upon the pedestal yonder contains five perfect bulbs, three already in flower, as you observe, of an

orchid discovered by our chief chemist in certain forests of Burma. It only occurs at extremely rare intervals—eighty years or more—and under highly special conditions. If the other two bulbs flower, I shall be enabled to obtain from the blooms a minimum quantity of an essential oil for which the nations of the earth, if they knew its properties, would gladly empty their treasuries. This case must at all costs accompany me."

"Yet because you are still in England," said Stuart huskily, "I venture to hope that your devil dreams may end on the scaffold."

"That can never be, Dr. Stuart," returned Fo-Hi placidly. "The scaffold is not for such as I. Moreover, it is a crude and barbaric institution which I deplore. Do you see that somewhat peculiarly constructed chair, yonder? It is an adaptation, by a brilliant young chemist of Canton, of Ericksen's Disintegrating Ray. A bell hangs beside it. If you were seated in that chair and I desire to dismiss you, it would merely be necessary fro me to strike the bell once with the hammer. Before the vibration of the note had become inaudible you would be seeking your ancestors among the shades. It is the throne of the gods. Such a death is poetic."

He returned to the table and, observing meticulous care, emptied the few drops of colourless liquid from the condenser into a test-tube. Holding the tube near a lamp, he examined the contents, then poured the liquid into the curious yellow bottle. A faint vapour arose from it.

"You would scarcely suppose," he said, "that yonder window opens upon an ivy-grown balcony commanding an excellent view of that picturesque Tudor survival, Hampton Court? I apprehend, however, that the researches of your late friend, M. Gaston Max, may ere long lead Scotland Yard to my doors, although there has been nothing in the outward seeming of this house, in the circumstances of my tenancy, or in my behaviour since I have —secretly—resided here, to excite local suspicion."

"Scotland Yard men may surround the house now!" said Stuart viciously.

"One of the two followers I have retained here with me, watches at the gate," replied Fo-Hi. "An intruder seeking to enter by any other route, through the hedge, over the wall, or from the river, would cause electric bells to ring loudly in this room, the note of the bell signifying the point of entry. Finally, in the event of such a surprise, I have an exit whereby one emerges at a secret spot on the river bank. A motor-boat, suitably concealed, awaits me there."

He placed a thermometer in the neck of the yellow bottle and the bottle in a rack. He directed the intolerable gaze of his awful eyes upon the man who sat, teeth tightly clenched, watching him from the *diwan.*

"Ten minutes of life—in England—yet remain to you, Dr. Stuart. In ten minutes this fluid will have cooled to a temperature of 99 degrees, when I shall be enabled safely make an injection. You will be reborn in Kiangsu."

Fo-Hi walked slowly to the door whereby he had entered, opened it and went out. The door closed.

II. THE LIVING DEATH

The little furnace hissed continuously. A wisp of smoke floated up from the incense-burner.

Stuart sat with his hands locked between his knees, and his gaze set upon the yellow flask.

Even now he found it difficult to credit the verity of his case. He found it almost impossible to believe that such a being as Fo-Hi existed, that such deeds had been done, were being done, in England, as those of which he had heard from the sinister cowled man. Save for the hissing of the furnace and the clanking of the chain as he strove with all his strength to win freedom, that wonderful evil room was silent as the King's Chamber at the heart of the Great Pyramid.

His gaze reverted to the yellow flask.

"Oh, my God!" he groaned.

Terror claimed him—the terror which he had with difficulty been fending off throughout that nightmare interview with Fo-Hi. Madness threatened him, and he was seized by an almost incontrollable desire to shout execrations—prayers—he knew not what. He clenched his teeth grimly and tried to think, to plan.

He had two chances:

The statement left with Inspector Dunbar, in which he had mentioned the existence of a house "near Hampton Court," and ... Miska.

That she was one of the two exceptions mentioned by Fo-Hi he felt assured. But was she in this house, and did she know of his presence there?

Even so, had she access to that room of mysteries—of horrors?

And who was the other who remained? Almost certainly it was the fanatical Hindu, Chunda Lal, of whom she had spoken with such palpable terror and who watched her unceasingly, untiringly. *He* would prevent her intervening even if she had power to intervene.

His great hope, then, was in Dunbar ... for Gaston Max was dead.

At the coming of that thought, the foul doing to death of the fearless Frenchman, he gnashed his teeth savagely and strained at the gyves until the pain in his ankles brought out beads of perspiration upon his forehead.

He dropped his head into his hands and frenziedly clutched at his hair with twitching fingers.

The faint sound occasioned by the opening of one of the sliding doors brought him sharply upright.

Miska entered!

She looked so bewilderingly beautiful that terror and sorrow fled, leaving Stuart filled only with passionate admiration. She wore an Eastern dress of gauzy shimmering silk and high-heeled gilt Turkish slippers upon her stockingless feet. About her left ankle was a gold bangle, and there was barbaric jewellery upon her arms. She was a figure unreal as all lose in that house of dreams, but a figure so lovely that Stuart forgot the yellow flask ... forgot that less than ten minutes of life remained to him.

"Miska!" he whispered—"Miska!"

She exhibited intense but repressed excitement and fear. Creeping to the second door—that by which Fo-Hi had gone out—she pressed her ear to the lacquered panel and listened intently. Then, coming swiftly to the table, she took up a bunch of keys, approached Stuart and, kneeling, unlocked the gyves. The scent of jasmine stole to his nostrils.

"God bless you!" he said with stifled ardour.

She rose quickly to her feet, standing before him with head downcast. Stuart rose with difficulty. His legs were cramped and aching. He grasped Miska's hand and endeavoured to induce her to look up. One swift glance she gave him and looked away again.

"You must go—this instant," she said. "I show you the way. There is not a moment to lose...."

"Miska!"

She glanced at him again.

"You must come with me!"

"Ah!" she whispered—"that is impossible! Have I not told you so?"

"You have told me, but I cannot understand. Here, in England, you are free. Why should you remain with that cowled monster?"

"Shall I tell you?" she asked, and he could feel how she trembled. "If I tell you, will you promise to believe me—and to go?"

"Not without you!"

"Ah! no, no! If I tell you that my only chance of life—such a little, little chance—is to stay, will you go?"

Stuart secured her other hand and drew her toward him, half resisting.

"Tell me," he said softly. "I will believe you—and if it can spare you one moment of pain or sorrow, I will go as you ask me."

"Listen," she whispered, glancing fearfully back toward the closed door—"Fo-Hi has something that make people to die; and only he can bring them to life again. Do you believe this?"

She looked up at him rapidly, her wonderful eyes wide and fearful. He nodded.

"Ah! you know! Very well. On that day in Cairo, which I am taken before him—you remember, I tell you?—he ... oh!"

She shuddered wildly and hid her beautiful face against Stuart's breast. He threw his arms about her.

"Tell me," he said.

"With the needle, he ... inject ..."

"Miska!"

Stuart felt the blood rushing to his heart and knew that he had paled.

"There is something else," she went on, almost inaudibly, "with which he gives life again to those he had made dead with the needle. It is a light green liquid tasting like bitter apples; and once each week for six months it must be drunk or else ... the living death comes. Sometimes I have not seen Fo-Hi for six months at a time, but a tiny flask, one draught, of the green liquid, always comes to me wherever I am, every week ... and twice each year I see him—Fo-Hi ... and he ..."

Her voice quivered and ceased. Moving back, she slipped a soft shoulder free of it s flimsy covering.

Stuart looked—and suppressed a groan.

Her arm was dotted with the tiny marks made by a hypodermic syringe!

"You see!" she whispered tremulously. "If I go, I die, and I am buried alive ... or else I live until my body ..."

"Oh, God!" moaned Stuart—"the fiend! the merciless, cunning fiend! Is there *nothing* ..."

"Yes, yes!" said Miska, looking up. "If I can get enough of the green fluid and escape. But he tell me once—it was in America—that he only prepares one tiny draught at a time! Listen! I must stay, and if he can be captured he must be forced to make this antidote ... Ah! go! go!"

Her words ended in a sob, and Stuart held her to him convulsively, his heart filled with such helpless, fierce misery and bitterness as he had never known.

"Go, please go!" she whispered. "It is my only chance—there is no other. There is not a moment to wait. Listen to me! You will go by that door by which I come in. There is a better way, through a tunnel he has made to the river bank; but I cannot open the door. Only *he* has the key. At the end of the passage some one is waiting——"

"Chunda Lal!" Miska glanced up rapidly and then dropped her eyes again.

"Yes—poor Chunda Lal. He is my only friend. Give him this."

She removed an amulet upon a gold chain from about her neck and thrust it into Stuart's hand.

"It seems to you silly, but Chunda Lal is of the East; and he has promised. Oh! be quick! I am afraid. I tell you something. Fo-Hi does not know, but the police Inspector and many men search the river bank for the house! I see them from a window——"

"What!" cried Stuart—"Dunbar is here!"

"Ssh! ssh!" Miska clutched him wildly. *"He* is not far away. You will go and bring him here. No! for me do not fear. I put the keys back and he will think you have opened the lock by some trick——"

"Miska!"

"Oh, no more!"

She slipped from his arms, crossed and reopened the lacquered door, revealing a corridor dimly lighted. Stuart followed and looked along the corridor.

"Right to the end," she whispered, "and down the steps. You know"—touching the amulet which Stuart carried—"how to deal with—Chunda

Lal."

But still he hesitated; until she seized his hand and urged him. Thereupon he swept her wildly into his arms.

"Miska! how can I leave you! It is maddening!"

"You must! you must!"

He looked into her eyes, stooped and kissed her upon the lips. Then, with no other word, he tore himself away and walked quickly along the corridor. Miska watched him until he was out of sight, then re-entered the great room and closed the door. She turned, and:

"Oh, God of mercy," she whispered.

Just within the second doorway stood Fo-Hi watching her.

III. THE FIFTH SECRET OF RACHE CHURAN

Stricken silent with fear, Miska staggered back against the lacquered door, dropping the keys which she held in her hand. Fo-Hi had removed the cowled garment and was now arrayed in a rich mandarin robe. Through the grotesque green veil which obscured his features the brilliant eyes shone catlike.

"So," he said softly, "you speed the parting guest. And did I not hear the sound of a chaste salute?"

Miska watched him, wild-eyed.

"And he knows," continued the metallic voice, "'how to deal with Chunda Lal'? But it may be that Chunda Lal will know how to deal with *him!* I had suspected that Dr. Keppel Stuart entertained an unprofessional interest in his charming patient. Your failure to force the bureau drawer in his study excited my suspicion—unjustly, I admit; for did not I fail also when I paid the doctor a personal visit? True, I was disturbed. But this suspicion later returned. It was in order that some lingering doubt might be removed that I afforded you the opportunity of interviewing my guest. But whatever surprise his ingenuity, aided by your woman's wit, has planned for Chunda Lal, I dare to believe that Chunda Lal, being forewarned, will meet successfully. He is expecting an attempt, by Dr. Stuart, to leave this house. He has my orders to detain him."

At that, anger conquered terror in the heart of Miska, and:

"You mean he has your orders to kill him!" she cried desperately.

Fo-Hi closed the door.

"On the contrary, he has my orders to take every possible care of him. Those blind, tempestuous passions which merely make a woman more desirable find no place in the trained mind of the scientist. That Dr. Stuart covets my choicest possession in no way detracts from his value to my Council."

Miska had never moved from the doorway by which Stuart had gone out; and now, having listened covertly and heard no outcry, her faith in Chunda Lal was restored. Her wonderful eyes narrowed momentarily, and she spoke with the guile, which seems so naive, of the Oriental woman.

"I care nothing for him—this Dr. Stuart. But he had done you no wrong ____"

"Beyond seeking my death—none. I have already said"—the eyes of Fo-Hi gleamed through the hideous veil—"that I bear him no ill will."

"But you plan to carry him to China—like those others."

"I assign him a part in the New Renaissance—yes. In the Deluge that shall engulf the world, his place is in the Ark. I honor him."

"Perhaps he rather remain a—nobody—than be so honored."

"In his present state of imperfect understanding it is quite possible," said Fo-Hi smoothly. "But if he refuses to achieve greatness he must have greatness thrust upon him. Van Rembold, I seem to recall, hesitated for some time to direct his genius to the problem of producing radium in workable quantities from the pitchblend deposits of Ho-Nan. But the *split rod* had not been applied to the soles of his feet more than five times ere he reviewed his prejudices and found them to be surmountable."

Miska, knowing well the moods of the monstrous being whose unveiled face she had never seen, was not deceived by the suavity of his manner. Nevertheless, she fought down her terror, knowing how much might depend upon her retaining her presence of mind. How much of her interview with Stuart he had overheard she did not know, nor how much he had witnessed.

"But," she said, moving away from him, "he does not matter—this one. Forgive me if I think to let him go; but I am afraid——"

Fo-Hi crossed slowly, intercepting her.

"Ah!" said Miska, her eyes opening widely—"you are going to punish me again! For why? Because I am a woman and cannot always be cruel?"

From its place on the wall Fo-Hi took a whip. At that:

"Ah! no, no!" she cried. "You drive me mad! I am only in part of the East and I cannot bear it—I cannot bear it! You teach me to be like the women of England, who are free, and you treat me like the women of China, who are slaves. Once, it did not matter. I thought it was a part of a woman's life to be treated so. But now I cannot bear it!" She stamped her foot fiercely upon the floor. "I tell you I cannot bear it!"

Whip in hand, Fo-Hi stood watching her.

"You release that man—for whom you 'care nothing'—in order that he may bring my enemies about me, in order that he may hand me over to the barbarous law of England. Now, you 'cannot bear' so light a rebuke as the whip. Here, I perceive, is some deep psychological change. Such protests do not belong to the women of my country; they are never heard in the *zenana,* and would provoke derision in the *harems* of Stambul.

"You have trained me to know that life in a *harem* is not life, but only the existence of an animal."

"I have trained you—yes. What fate was before you when I intervened in that Mecca slave-market? You who are 'only in part of the East.' Do you forget so soon how you cowered there amongst the others, Arabs, Circassians, Georgians, Nubians, striving to veil your beauty from those ravenous eyes? From *what* did I rescue you?"

"And *for* what?" cried Miska bitterly. "To use me as a lure—and beat me if I failed."

Fo-Hi stood watching her, and slowly, as he watched, terror grew upon her and she retreated before him, step by step. He made no attempt to follow her, but continued to watch. Then, raising the whip he broke it across his knee and dropped the pieces on the floor.

At that she extended her hands towards him pitifully.

"Oh! what are you going to do to me!" she said. "Let me go! let me go! I can no more be of use to you. Give me back my life and let me go—et me go and hide away from them all—from all ... the world...."

Her words died away and ceased upon a suppressed hysterical sob. For, in silence, Fo-Hi stood watching her, unmoved.

"Oh!" she moaned, and sank cowering upon a *diwan*—"why do you watch me so!"

"Because," came the metallic voice, softly—"you are beautiful with a beauty given but rarely to the daughters of men. The Sublime Order has acquired many pretty women—for they are potent weapons—but none so fair as you. Miska, I would make life sweet for you."

"Ah! you do not mean that!" she whispered fearfully.

"Have I not clothed you in the raiment of a princess!" continued Fo-Hi. "To-night, at my urgent request, you wear the charming national costume in which I delight to see you. But is there a woman of Paris, of London, of New York, who has such robes, such jewels, such apartments as you possess? Perhaps the peculiar duties which I have required you to perform, the hideous disguises, which you have sometimes been called upon to adopt, have disgusted you."

Her heart beating wildly, for she did not know this mood but divined it to portend some unique horror, Miska crouched, head averted.

"To-night the hour has come to break the whip. To-night the master in me dies. My cloak of wise authority has fallen from me and I offer myself in bondage to *you*, my slave!"

"This is some trap you set for me!" she whispered.

But Fo-Hi, paying no heed to her words, continued in the same rapt voice:

"Truly have you observed that the Chinese wife is but a slave to her lord. I have said that the relation of master and slave is ended between us. I offer you a companionship that signifies absolute freedom and perfect understanding. Half of all I have—and the world lies in my grasp—is yours. I offer a throne set upon the Seven Mountains of the Universe. Look into my eyes and read the truth."

But lower and lower she cowered upon the *diwan.*

"No, no! I am afraid!"

Fo-Hi approached her closely and abject terror now had robbed her of strength. Her limbs seemed to have become numbed, her tongue clave to the roof of her mouth.

"Fear me no more, Miska," said Fo-Hi. "I *will* you nothing but joy. The man who has learned the Fifth Secret of Rache Churan—who has learned how to control his will—holds a power absolute and beyond perfectability.

You know, who have dwelt beneath my roof, that there is no escape from my will." His calm was terrible, and his glance, through the green veil, was like a ray of scorching heat. His voice sank lower and lower.

"There is one frailty, Miska, that even the Adept cannot conquer. It is inherent in every man. Miska, I would not *force* you to grasp the joy I offer; I would have you *accept* it willingly. No! do not turn from me! No woman in all the world has ever heard me plead, as I plead to you. Never before have I *sued* for favours. Do not turn from me, Miska."

Slightly, the metallic voice vibrated, and the ruffling of that giant calm was a thing horrible to witness. Fo-Hi extended his long yellow hands, advancing step by step until he stood over the cowering girl. Irresistibly her glance was drawn to those blazing eyes which the veil could not hide, and as she met that unblinking gaze her own eyes dilated and grew fixed as those of a sleep-walker. A moment Fo-Hi stood so. Then passion swept him from his feet and he seized her fiercely.

"Your eyes drive me mad!" he hissed. "Your lips taunt me, and I know all earthly greatness to be a mirage, its conquests visions, and its fairness dust. I would rather be a captive in your white arms than the emperor of heaven! Your sweetness intoxicates me, Miska. A fever burns me up!"

Helpless, enmeshed in the toils of that mighty will, Miska raised her head; and gradually her expression changed. Fear was smoothed away from her lovely face as by some magic brush. She grew placid; and finally she smiled—the luresome, caressing smile of the East. Nearer and nearer drew the green veil. Then, uttering a sudden fierce exclamation, Fo-Hi thrust her from him.

"That smile is not for *me,* the man!" he cried gutterally. "Ah! I could curse the power that I coveted and set above all earthly joys! I who boasted that he could control his will—I read in your eyes that I am *willing* you to love me! I seek a gift and can obtain but a tribute!"

Miska, with a sobbing moan, sank upon the *diwan.* Fo-Hi stood motionless, looking straight before him. His terrible calm was restored.

"It is the bitter truth," he said—"that to win the world I have bartered the birthright of men; the art of winning a woman's heart. There is much in our Chinese wisdom. I erred in breaking the whip. I erred in doubting my own prescience, which told me that the smiles I could not woo were given freely

to another ... and perhaps the kisses. At least I can set these poor frail human doubts at rest."

He crossed and struck a gong which hung midway between the two doors.

IV. THE GUILE OF THE EAST

Her beautiful face a mask of anguish, Miska cowered upon the *diwan,* watching the closed doors. Fo-Hi stood in the centre of the great room with his back to the entrance. Silently one of the lacquered panels slid open and Chunda Lal entered. He saluted the figure of the veiled Chinaman but never once glanced in the direction of the *diwan* from which Miska wildly was watching him.

Without turning his head, Fo-Hi, who seemed to detect the presence of the silent Hindu by means of some fifth sense, pointed to a bundle of long rods stacked in a corner of the room.

His brown face expressionless as that of a bronze statue, Chunda Lal crossed and took the rods from their place.

"Tum samajhte ho?" (Do you understand?) said Fo-Hi. Chunda Lal inclined his head.

"Main tumhari bat manunga" (Your orders shall be obeyed), he replied.

"Ah, God! no!" whispered Miska—"what are you going to do?"

"Your Hindustani was ever poor, Miska," said Fo-Hi.

He turned to Chunda Lal.

"Until you hear the gong," he said in English.

Miska leapt to her feet, as Chunda Lal, never once glancing at her, went out bearing the rods, and closed the door behind him. Fo-Hi turned and confronted her.

"Ta'ala hina (come hither), Miska!" he said softly. "Shall I speak to you in the soft Arab tongue? Come to me, lovely Miska. Let me feel how that sorrowful heart will leap like a captive gazelle."

But Miska shrank back from him, pale to the lips.

"Very well." His metallic voice sank to a hiss. "I employ no force. You shall yield to me your heart as a love offering. Of such motives as jealousy

and revenge you know me incapable. What I do, I do with a purpose. That compassion of yours shall be a lever to cast you into my arms. Your hatred you shall conquer."

"Oh, have you no mercy? Is there *nothing* human in your heart? Did I say I hate you!"

"Your eyes are eloquent, Miska. I cherish two memories of those beautiful eyes. One is of their fear and loathing—of *me;* the other is of their sweet softness when they watched the departure of my guest. Listen! Do you hear nothing?"

In an attitude of alert and fearful attention Miska stood listening. Fo-Hi watched her through the veil with those remorseless blazing eyes.

"I will open the door," he said smoothly, "that we may more fully enjoy the protests of one for whom you 'care nothing'—of one whose lips have pressed—your hand."

He opened the door by which Chunda Lal had gone out and turned again to Miska. Her eyes looked unnaturally dark by contrast with the pallor of her face.

Chunda Lal had betrayed her. She no longer doubted it. For he had not dared to meet her glance. His fear of Fo-Hi had overcome his love for her ... and Stuart had been treacherously seized somewhere in the corridors and rendered helpless by the awful art of the thug.

"There is a brief interval," hissed the evil voice. "Chunda Lal is securing him to the frame and baring the soles of his feet for the caresses of the rod."

Suddenly, from somewhere outside the room, came the sound of dull, regular blows ... then, a smothered moan!

Miska sprang forward and threw herself upon her knees before Fo-Hi, clutching at his robe frantically.

"Ah! merciful God! he is there! Spare him! spare him! No more—no more!"

"He is there?" repeated Fo-Hi suavely. "Assuredly he is there, Miska. I know not by what trick he hoped to 'deal with' Chunda Lal. But, as I informed you, Chunda Lal was forewarned."

The sound of blows continued, followed by that of another, louder groan.

"Stop him! Stop him!" shrieked Miska.

"You 'care nothing' for this man. Why do you tremble?"

"Oh!" she wailed piteously. "I cannot bear it ... oh, I cannot bear it! Do what you like with me, but spare him. Ah! you have no mercy."

Fo-Hi handed her the hammer for striking the gong.

"It is *you* who have no mercy," he replied. "I have asked but one gift. The sound of the gong will end Dr. Stuart's discomfort ... and will mean that you *voluntarily* accept my offer. What! you hesitate?" A stifled scream rang out sharply.

"Ah, yes! yes!"

Miska ran and struck the gong, then staggered back to the *diwan* and fell upon it, hiding her face in her hands. The sounds of torture ceased.

Fo-Hi closed the door and stood looking at her where she lay.

"I permit you some moments of reflection," he said, "in order that you may compose yourself to receive the addresses which I shall presently have the honour, and joy, of making to you. Yes—this door is unlocked." He threw the keys on the table. "I respect your promise ... and Chunda Lal guards the *outer* exits."

He opened the further door, by which he had entered, and went out.

Miska, through the fingers of her shielding hands, watched him go.

When he had disappeared she sprang up, clenching her teeth, and her face was contorted with anguish. She began to move aimlessly about the room, glancing at the many strange objects on the big table and fearfully at the canopied chair beside which hung the bronze bell. Finally:

"Oh, Chunda Lal! Chunda Lal!" she moaned, and threw herself face downward on the *diwan,* sobbing wildly.

So she lay, her whole body quivering with the frenzy of her emotions, and as she lay there, inch by inch, cautiously, the nearer door began to open. Chunda Lal looked in.

Finding the room to be occupied only by Miska, he crossed rapidly to the *diwan,* bending over her with infinite pity and tenderness.

"Miska!" he whispered softly.

As though an adder had touched her, Miska sprang to her feet—and back from the Hindu. Her eyes flashed fiercely.

"Ah! *you! you!"* she cried at him, with a repressed savagery that spoke of the Oriental blood in her veins. "Do not speak to me—look at me! Do not come near me! I hate you! God! how I hate you!"

"Miska! Miska!" he said beseechingly—"you pierce my heart! you kill me! Can you not understand——"

"Go! go!"

She drew back from him, clenching and unclenching her jewelled fingers and glaring madly into his eyes.

"Look, Miska!" He took the gold chain and amulet from his bosom. "Your token! Can you not understand! *Yah Allah!* how little you trust me—and I would die for one glance of your eyes!

"*He*—Stuart Sahib—has gone, gone long since!"

"Ah! Chunda Lal!"

Miska swayed dizzily and extended her hands towards him. Chunda Lal glanced fearfully about him.

"Did I not," he whispered, with an intense ardour in his soft voice,—"did I not lay my life, my service, all I have, at your feet? Did I not vow to serve you in the name of *Bhowani!* He is long since gone to bring his friends—who are searching from house to house along the river. At any moment they may be here!"

Miska dropped weakly upon her knees before him and clasped his hand.

"Chunda Lal, my friend! Oh, forgive me!" Her voice broke. "Forgive ..."

Chunda Lal raised her gently.

"Not upon your knees to *me,* Miska. It was a little thing to do—for you. Did I not tell you that *he* had cast his eyes upon you? Mine was the voice you heard to cry out. Ah! you do not know; it is to gain *time* that I seem to serve *him!* Only this, Miska"—he revealed the blade of a concealed knife—"stand between Fo-Hi and—you! Had I not read it in his eyes!"

He raised his glance upward frantically.

"Jey Bhowani! give me strength, give me courage! For if I fail ..."

He glared at her passionately, clutching his bosom; then, pressing the necklet to his lips, he concealed it again, and bent, whispering urgently:

"Listen again—I reveal it to you without price or hope of reward, for I know there is no love in your heart to give, Miska; I know that it takes you out of my sight for always. But I tell you what I learn in the house of Abdul Rozan. Your life is your own, Miska! With the needle"—yet closer he bent to her ear and even softer he spoke—"he pricks your white skin—no more! The vial he sends contains a harmless cordial!"

"Chunda Lal!"

Miska swayed again dizzily, clutching at the Hindu for support.

"Quick! fly!" he said, leading her to the door. "I will see *he* does not pursue!"

"No, no! you shall shed no blood for me! Not even *his*. You come also!"

"And if he escape, and know that I was false to him, he will *call me back,* and I shall be dragged to those yellow eyes, though I am a thousand miles away! *Inshalla!* those eyes! No—I must strike swift, or he robs me of my strength."

For a long moment Miska hesitated.

"Then, I also remain, Chunda Lal, my friend! We will wait—and watch - and listen for the bells—here—that tell they are in the grounds of the house."

"Ah, Miska!" the glance of the Hindu grew fearful—"you are clever—but *he* is the Evil One! I fear for you. Fly now. There is yet time ..."

A faint sound attracted Miska's attention. Placing a quivering finger to her lips, she gently thrust Chunda Lal out into the corridor.

"He returns!" she whispered: "If I call—come to me, my friend. But we have not long to wait!"

She closed the door.

V. WHAT HAPPENED TO STUART

Stuart had gained the end of the corridor, unmolested. There he found a short flight of steps, which he descended and came to a second corridor forming a right angle with the first. A lamp was hung at the foot of the steps, and by its light he discerned a shadowy figure standing at the further end of this second passage.

A moment he hesitated, peering eagerly along the corridor. The man who waited was Chunda Lal. Stuart approached him and silently placed in his hand the gold amulet.

Chunda Lal took it as one touching something holy, and raising it he kissed it with reverence. His dark eyes were sorrowful. Long and ardently he pressed the little trinket to his lips, then concealed it under the white robe

which he wore and turned to Stuart. His eyes were sorrowful no more, but fierce as the eyes of a tiger.

"Follow!" he said.

He unlocked a door and stepped out into a neglected garden, Stuart close at his heels. The sky was cloudy, and the moon obscured. Never glancing back, Chunda Lal led the way along a path skirting a high wall upon which climbing fruit trees were growing until they came to a second door and this also the Hindu unlocked. He stood aside.

"To the end of this lane," he said, in his soft queerly modulated voice, "and along the turning to the left to the river bank. Follow the bank towards the palace and you will meet them."

"I owe you my life," said Stuart.

"Go! you owe me nothing," returned the Hindu fiercely.

Stuart turned and walked rapidly along the lane. Once he glanced back. Chunda Lal was looking after him ... and he detected something that gleamed in his hand, gleamed not like gold but like the blade of a knife!

Turning the corner, Stuart began to run. For he was unarmed and still weak, and there had been that in the fierce black eyes of the Hindu when he had scorned Stuart's thanks which had bred suspicion and distrust.

From the position of the moon, Stuart judged the hour to be something after midnight. No living thing stirred about him. The lane in which now he found himself was skirted on one side by a hedge beyond which was open country and on the other by a continuation of the high wall which evidently enclosed the grounds of the house that he had just quitted. A cool breezed fanned his face, and he knew that he was approaching the Thames. Ten more paces and he came to the bank.

In his weak condition the short run had exhausted him. His bruised throat was throbbing painfully, and he experienced some difficulty in breathing. He leaned up against the moss-grown wall, looking back into the darkness of the lane.

No one was in sight. There was no sound save the gently lapping of the water upon the bank.

He would have like to bathe his throat and to quench his feverish thirst, but a mingled hope and despair spurred him and he set off along the narrow path towards where dimly above some trees he could discern in the distance a group of red-roofed buildings. Having proceeded for a considerable

distance, he stood still, listening for any sound that might guide him to the search-party—or warn him that he was followed. But he could hear nothing.

Onward he pressed, not daring to think of what the future held for him, not daring to dwell upon the memory, the maddening sweetness, of that parting kiss. His eyes grew misty, he stumbled as he walked, and became oblivious of his surrounding. His awakening was a rude one.

Suddenly a man, concealed behind a bush, sprang out upon him and bore him irresistibly to the ground!

"Not a word!" rapped his assailant, "or I'll knock you out!"

Stuart glared into the red face lowered so threateningly over his own, and:

"Sergeant Sowerby!" he gasped.

The grip upon his shoulders relaxed.

"Damn!" cried Sowerby—"if it isn't Dr. Stuart?"

"What is that!" cried another voice from the shelter of the bush. *"Pardieu!* say it again! ... Dr. Stuart!"

And Gaston Max sprang out!

"Max!" murmured Stuart, staggering to his feet—"Max!"

"Nom d'un nom! Two dead men meet!" exclaimed Gaston Max. "But indeed"—he grasped Stuart by both hands and his voice shook with emotion—"I thank God that I see you!"

Stuart was dazed. Words failed him, and he swayed dizzily.

"I thought *you* were murdered," said Max, still grasping his hand, "and I perceive that you had made the same mistake about me! Do you know what saved me, my friend, from the consequences of that frightful blow? It was the bandage of 'Le Balafre'!"

"You must possess a skull like a negro's!" said Stuart feebly.

"I believe I have a skull like a baboon!" returned Max, laughing with joyous excitement. "And you, doctor, you must possess a steel wind-pipe; for flesh and blood could never have survived the pressure of that horrible pigtail. You will rejoice to learn that Miguel was arrested on the Dover boat-train this morning and Ah-Fang-Fu at Tilbury Dock some four hours ago. So we are both avenged! But we waste time!"

He unscrewed a flask and handed it to Stuart.

"A terrible experience has befallen you," he said. "But tell me—do you know where it is—the lair of 'The Scorpion'?"

"I do!" replied Stuart, having taken a welcome draught from the flask. "Where is Dunbar? We must carefully surround the place or he will elude us."

"Ah! as he eluded us at 'The Pidgin House'!" cried Max. "Do you know what happened? They had a motorboat in the very cellar of that warren. At high tide they could creep out into the cutting, drawing their craft along from pile to pile, and reach the open river at a point fifty yards above the house! In the damnable darkness they escaped. But we have two of them."

"It was all my fault," said Sowerby guiltily. "I missed my spring when I went for the Chinaman who came out first, and he gave one yell. The old fox in the shop heard it and the fat was in the fire."

"You didn't miss your spring at me!" retort Stuart ruefully.

"No," agreed Sowerby. "I didn't mean to miss a second time!"

"What's all this row," came a gruff voice.

"Ah! Inspector Dunbar!" said Max.

Dunbar walked up the path, followed by a number of men. At first he did not observe Stuart, and:

"You'll be waking all the neighborhood," he said. "It's the next big house, Sowerby, the one we thought, surrounded by the brick wall. There's no doubt, I think ... Why!"

He had seen Stuart, and he sprang forward with outstretched hand.

"Thank God!" he cried, disregarding his own counsel about creating a disturbance. "This is fine! Eh, man! but I'm glad to see you!"

"And *I* am glad to be here!" Stuart assured him.

They shook hands warmly.

"You have read my statement, of course?" asked Stuart.

"I have," replied the Inspector, and gave him a swift glance of the tawny eyes. "And considering that you've nearly been strangled, I'll forgive you! But I wish we'd known about this house——"

"Ah! Inspector," interrupted Gaston Max, "but you have never seen Zara el-Khala! I have seen her—and *I* forgive him, also!"

Stuart continued rapidly:

"We have little time to waste. There are only three people in the house, so far as I am aware: Miska—known to you, M. Max, as Zara el-Khala—the Hindu, Chunda Lal, and—Fo-Hi——"

"Ah!" cried Max—"'The Scorpion.' Chunda Lal, for some obscure personal reason, not entirely unconnected with Miska, enabled me to make my escape in order that I might lead you to the house. Therefore we may look upon Chunda Lal, as well as Miska, in the light of an accomplice——"

"Eh, bien! a spy in the camp! This is where we see how fatal to the success of any enterprise, criminal or otherwise, is the presence of a pretty woman! Proceed, my friend!"

"There are three entrances to the apartment in which Fo-Hi apparently spends the greater part of his time. Two of these I know, although I am unaware where one of them leads to. But the third, of which he alone holds the key, communicates with a tunnel leading to the river bank, where a motorboat is concealed."

"Ah, that motor-boat!" cried Max. "He travels at night, you understand ____"

"Always, I am told."

"Yes, always. Therefore, once he is out on the river, he is moderately secure between the first lock and the Nore! When a police patrol is near he can shut off his engine and lie under the bank. Last night he crept away from us in that fashion. Tonight is not so dark, and the River Police are watching all the way down."

"Furthermore," replied Stuart, "Chunda Lal, who acts as engineer, has it in his power to prevent Fo-Hi's escape by that route! But we must count upon the possibility of his attempting to leave by water. Therefore, in disposing your forces, place a certain number of men along the bank and below the house. Is there a River Police boat near?"

"Not nearer than Putney Bridge," answered Dunbar. "We shall have to try and block that exit."

"There's no time to waste," continued Stuart excitedly—"and I have a very particular request to make: that you will take Fo-Hi *alive."*

"But of course," said Gaston Max, "if it is humanly possible."

Stuart repressed a groan; for even so he had little hope of inducing the awful veiled man to give back life to the woman who would have been instrumental in bringing him to the scaffold ... and no compromise was possible!

"If you will muster your men, Inspector," he said, "I will lead you to the spot. Once we have affected an entrance we must proceed with dispatch. He

has alarm-bells connected with every possible point of entry."

"Lead on, my friend," cried Gaston Max. "I perceive that time is precious."

VI. "JEY BHOWANI!"

As the door closed upon Chunda Lal, Miska stepped back from it and stood, unconsciously, in a curiously rigid and statuesque attitude, her arms pressed to her sides and her hands directed outward. It was the physical expression of an intense mental effort to gain control of herself. Her heart was leaping wildly in her breast—for the future that had held only horror and a living tomb, now opened out sweetly before her. She had only to ply her native wiles for a few precious moments ... and *someone* would have her in his arms, to hold her safe from harm! If the will of the awful Chinaman threatened to swamp her individuality, then—there was Chunda Lal!

But because of his helpless, unselfish love, she hesitated even at the price of remaining alone again with Fo-Hi, to demand any further sacrifice of the Hindu. Furthermore—he might fail!

The lacquer door slid noiselessly open and Fo-Hi entered. He paused, watching her.

"Ah," he said, in that low-pitched voice which was so terrifying—"a *gaziyeh* of Ancient Egypt! How beautiful you are, Miska! You transport me to the court of golden Pharaoh. Miska! daughter of the moon-magic of Isis—Zara el-Khala! At any hour my enemies may be clamoring at my doors. But *this* hour is mine!"

He moved at his customary slow gait to the table, took up the keys ... and locked both doors!

Miska, perceiving in this her chance of aid from Chunda Lal utterly destroyed, sank slowly upon the *diwan,* her pale face expressing the utmost consternation. Suppose the police did not come!

Fo-Hi dropped the keys on the table again and approached her. She stood up, retreating before him. He inhaled sibilantly and paused.

"So your 'acceptance' was only a trick," he said. "Your loathing of my presence is as strong as ever. Well!" At the word, as a volcano leaps into life, the hidden fires which burned within this terrible man leapt up consumingly—"if the gift of the flower is withheld, at least I will grasp the Dead Sea Fruit!"

He leapt toward Miska—and she fled shrieking before him. Running around a couch which stood near the centre of the room, she sprang to the door and beat upon it madly.

"Chunda Lal!" she cried—"Chunda Lal!"

Fo-Hi was close upon her, and she turned striving to elude him.

"Oh, merciful God! *Chunda Lal!"*

The name burst from her lips in a long frenzied scream. Fo-Hi had seized her!

Grasping her shoulders, he twisted her about so that he could look into her eyes. A low, shuddering cry, died away, and her gaze became set, hypnotically, upon Fo-Hi. He raised one hand, fingers outstretched before her. She swayed slightly.

"Forget!" he said in a deep, guttural voice of command—"forget. I *will* it. We stand in an empty world, you and I; you, Miska, and I, Fo-Hi, your master."

"My master," she whispered mechanically.

"Your lover."

"My lover."

"You give me your life, to do with as I will."

"As you will."

Fo-Hi momentarily raised the blazing eyes.

"Oh, empty shell of a vanished joy!" he cried.

Then, frenziedly grasping Miska by her arms, he glared into her impassive face.

"Your heart leaps wildly in your breast!" he whispered tenderly. "Look into my eyes...."

Miska sighed and opened her eyes yet more widely. She shuddered and a slow smile appeared upon her lips.

The lacquer screen making the window was pushed open and Chunda Lal leapt in over the edge. As Fo-Hi drew the yielding, hypnotised girl towards

him, Chunda Lal, a gleaming *kukri* held aloft, ran with a silent panther step across the floor.

He reached Fo-Hi, drew himself upright; the glittering blade quivered ... and Fo-Hi divined his presence.

Uttering a short, guttural exclamation, he thrust Miska aside. She staggered dazedly and fell prone upon the floor. The quivering blade did not descend.

Fo-Hi drew himself rigidly upright, extending his hands, palms downward, before him. He was exerting a superhuman effort. The breath whistled through his nostrils. Chunda Lal, knife upraised, endeavored to strike; but his arm seemed to have become incapable of movement and to be held, helpless, aloft.

Staring at the rigid figure before him, he began to pant like a man engaged in a wrestle for life.

Fo-Hi stretched his right arm outward, and with a gesture of hand and fingers beckoned to Chunda Lal to come before him.

And now, Miska, awakening as from a fevered dream, looked wildly about her, and then, serpentine, began to creep to the table upon which the keys were lying. Always watching the awful group of two, she rose slowly, snatched the keys and leapt across to the open window....

Chunda Lal, swollen veins standing out cord-like on his brow, his gaze set hypnotically upon the moving hand, dropped his knife and began to move in obedience to the will of Fo-Hi.

As he came finally face to face with the terrible Adept of Rache Churan, Miska disappeared into the shadow of the balcony. Fo-Hi by an imperious gesture commanded Chunda Lal to kneel and bow his head. The Hindu, gasping, obeyed.

Thereupon Fo-Hi momentarily relaxed his giant concentration and almost staggered as he glared down at the kneeling man. But never was that dreadful gaze removed from Chunda Lal. And now the veiled man drew himself rigidly upright again and stepped backward until the fallen *kukri* lay at his feet. He spoke, "Chunda Lal!"

The Hindu rose, gazing before him with unseeing eyes. His forehead was wet with perspiration.

Fo-Hi pointed to the knife.

Chunda Lal, without removing his sightless gaze from the veiled face, stooped, groped until he found the knife and rose with it in his hand.

Back stepped Fo-Hi, and back, until he could touch the big table. He moved a brass switch—and a trap opened in the floor behind Chunda Lal. Fo-Hi raised his right hand, having the fingers tightly closed as if grasping the hilt of a knife. With his left hand he pointed to the trap. Again he spoke.

"Tum samauhe ho?"

Mechanically Chunda La replied:

"Ah, Sahib, tumhara huken jaldi: kiya' jaega'" (Yes, I hear and obey.)

As Fo-Hi raised his clenched right hand, so did Chunda Lal raise the *kukri.* Fo-Hi extended his left hand rigidly towards the Hindu and seemed to force him, step by step, back towards the open trap. Almost at the brink, Chunda Lal paused, swayed, and began to utter short, agonised cries. Froth appeared upon his lips.

Raising his right hand yet further aloft, Fo-Hi swiftly brought it down, performing the gesture of stabbing himself to the heart. His ghastly reserve deserted him.

"Jey Bhowana!" he screamed—"Yah Allah!"

Chunda Lal, uttering a loud groan, stabbed himself and fell backward into the opening. Ensued a monstrous crash of broken glass.

As he fell, Fo-Hi leapt to the brink of the trap, glaring down madly into the cellar below. His yellow fingers opened and closed spasmodically.

"Lie there," he shrieked—"my 'faithful' servant! The ants shall pick your bones!"

He grasped the upstanding door of the trap and closed it. It descended with a reverberating boom. Fo-Hi raised his clenched fists and stepped to the door. Finding it locked, he stood looking toward the open screen before the window.

"Miska!" he whispered despairingly.

He crossed to the window and was about to look out, when a high-pitched electric bell began to ring in the room.

Instantly Fo-Hi closed the screen and turned, looking in the direction from whence the sound of ringing proceeded. As he did so, a second bell, in another key, began to ring—a third—a fourth.

Momentarily the veiled man exhibited evidence of indecision. Then, from beneath his robe he took a small key. Approaching an ornate cabinet

set against the wall to the left of one of the lacquer doors, he inserted the key in a hidden lock, and slid the entire cabinet partly aside revealing an opening.

Fo-Hi bent, peering down into the darkness of the passage below. A muffled report came, a flash out of the blackness of the river tunnel, and a bullet passed through the end of the cabinet upon which his hand was resting, smashing an ivory statuette and shattering the glass.

Hurriedly he slid the cabinet into place again and stood with his back to it, arms outstretched.

"Miska!" he said—and a note of yet deeper despair had crept into the harsh voice.

Awhile he stood thus; then he drew himself up with dignity. The bells had ceased.

Methodically Fo-Hi began to take certain books from the shelves and to cast them into the great metal bowl which stood upon the tripod. Into the bowl he poured the contents of a large glass jar. Flames and clouds of smoke arose. He paused, listening.

Confused voices were audible, seemingly from all around him, together with a sound of vague movements.

Fo-Hi took up vials and jars and dashed them to pieces upon the tiled hearth in which the furnace rested. Test-tubes, flasks and retorts he shattered, and finally, raising the large glass case of orchids he dashed it down amid the debris of the other nameless and priceless monstrosities unknown to Western science.

VII. THE WAY OF A SCORPION

A black cloud swept past the face of the moon and cold illumination flooded the narrow lane and patched with light the drive leading up to the front of the isolated mansion. Wrought-iron gates closed both entrances and a high wall, surmounted by broken glass and barbed wire, entirely surrounded the grounds.

"This one also is locked," said Gaston Max, trying the gate and then peering through the bars in the direction of the gloomy house.

All the visible windows were shuttered. No ray of light showed anywhere. The house must have been pronounced deserted by anyone contemplating it.

"Upon which side do you suppose the big room to be?" asked Max.

"It is difficult to judge," replied Stuart. "But I am disposed to believe that it is in the front of the house and on the first floor, for I traversed a long corridor, descended several stairs, turned to the right and emerged in a part of the garden bordering the lane in which Inspector Kelly is posted."

"I was thinking of the window and the balcony which 'The Scorpion' informed you commanded a view of Hampton Court. Hampton Court," he turned half-left, "lies about yonder. Therefore you are probably right, doctor; the room as you say should be in front of the house. Since we do not know how to disconnect the alarms, once we have entered the grounds it is important that we should gain access to the house immediately. Ah! *morbleu!* the moon disappears again!"

Darkness crept over the countryside.

"There is an iron balcony jutting out amongst the ivy just above and to the right of the porch!" cried Stuart, who had also been peering up the moon-patched drive. "I would wager that that is the room!"

"Ah!" replied Max, "I believe you are right. This, then is how we shall proceed: Inspector Kelly, with the aid of two men, can get over the wall near that garden door by which you came out. If they cannot force it from inside, you also must get over and lead the way to the entrance you know of. Sowerby and two more men will remain to watch the lane. The river front is well guarded. We will post a man here at this gate and one at the other. Dunbar and I will climb this one and rush straight for that balcony which we must hope to reach by climbing up the ivy. Ah! here comes Inspector Dunbar ... and *someone* is with him!"

Dunbar appeared at the double around the corner of the lane which led riverward, and beside him ran a girl who presented a bizarre figure beside the gaunt Scotsman and a figure wildly out of place in that English riverside setting.

It was Miska, arrayed in her flimsy *harem* dress!

"Miska!" cried Stuart, and sprang towards her, sweeping her hungrily into his arms—forgetful of, indifferent to, the presence of Max and Dunbar.

"Ah!" sighed the Frenchman—"yes, she is beautiful!"

Trembling wildly, Miska clung to Stuart and began to speak, her English more broken than ever, because of her emotion.

"Listen—quick!" she panted. "Oh! do not hold me so tight. I have the house-keys—look!"—she held up a bunch of keys—"but not the keys of the gates. Two men have gone to the end of the tunnel where the boat is hid beside the river. Someone—he better climb this gate and by the ivy he can reach the room in which Fo-Hi is! I come down so. You do not see me because the moon goes out and I run to the side-door. It is open. *You* come with me!"

She clung to Stuart, looking up into his eyes.

"Yes, yes, Miska!"

"Oh! Chunda Lal"—she choked down a sob. "Be quick! be quick! *He* will kill him! he will kill him!"

"Off you go, doctor!" cried Max. "Come along, Dunbar!"

He began to climb the ironwork of the gate.

"This way!" said Miska, dragging Stuart by the arm. "Oh! I am wild with fear and sorrow and joy!"

"With joy, dear little Miska!" whispered Stuart, as he followed her.

They passed around the bend into the narrower lane which led toward the river and upon which the garden-door opened. Stuart detained her. If the fate of the whole world had hung in the balance—as indeed, perhaps it did—he could not have acted otherwise. He raised her bewitching face and kissed her ardently.

She trembled and clung to him rapturously.

"I *live*!" she whispered. "Oh! I am mad with happiness! It is Chunda Lal that gives me life—for he tells me the truth. It is not with the living-death that *he* touches me; it is a trick, it is all a trick to bind me to him! Oh, Chunda Lal! Hurry! he is going to kill him!"

But supreme above all the other truths in the world, the joyous truth that Miska was to live set Stuart's heart on fire.

"Thank God!" he said fervently—"oh, thank God! Miska!"

At the garden-door a group of men awaited them. Sergeant Sowerby and two assistants remaining to watch the entrance and the lane, Miska led Stuart and the burly Inspector Kelly along that path beside the wall which Stuart so well remembered.

"Hurry!" she whispered urgently. "We must try to reach him before ..."

"You fear for Chunda Lal?" said Stuart.

"Oh, yes! He has a terrible power—Fo-Hi—which he never employs with me, until to-night. Ah! it is only Chunda Lal, who saved me! But Chunda Lal he can command with his *Will.* From it, once he has made anyone a slave to it, there is no escape. I have seen one in the city of Quebec, in Canada, forget all else and begin to act in obedience to the will of Fo-Hi who is thousands of miles away!"

"My God!" murmured Stuart, "what a horrible monster!"

They had reached the open door beyond which showed the dimly lighted passage. Miska hesitated.

"Oh! I am afraid!" she whispered.

She thrust the keys into the hand of Inspector Kelly, pointing to one of them, and:

"That is the key!" she said. "Have your pistol ready. Do not touch anything in the room and do not go in if I tell you not to. Come!"

They pressed along the passage, came to the stair and were about to ascend, when there ensued a dull reverberating boom, and Miska shrank back into Stuart's arms with a stifled shriek.

"Oh! Chunda Lal!" she moaned—"Chunda Lal! It is the trap!"

"The trap!" said Inspector Kelly.

"The cellar trap. He has thrown him down ... to the ants!"

Inspector Kelly uttered a short laugh; but Stuart repressed a shudder. He was never likely to forget the skeleton of the Nubian mute which had been stripped by the ants in sixty-nine minutes!

"We are too late!" whispered Miska. "Oh! listen! listen!"

Bells began to ring somewhere above them.

"Max and Dunbar are in!" said Kelly. "Come on, sir! Follow closely, boys!"

He ran up the stairs and along the corridor to the door at the end.

A muffled shot sounded from somewhere in the depths of the house.

"That's Harvey!" said one of the men who followed—"Our man must have tried to escape by the tunnel to the river bank!"

Inspector Kelly placed the key in the lock of the door.

It was at this moment that Gaston Max, climbing up to the front balcony by means of the natural ladder afforded by the ancient ivy, grasped the iron

railing and drew himself up to the level of the room. By this same stairway Chunda Lal had ascended to death and Miska had climbed down to life.

"Mind the ironwork doesn't give way, sir!" called Dunbar from below.

"It is strong," replied Max. "Join me here, my friend."

Max, taking a magazine pistol from his pocket, stepped warily over the ledge into the mysterious half-light behind the great screen. As he did so, one of the lacquer doors was unlocked from the outside, and across the extraordinary, smoke-laden room he saw Inspector Kelly enter. He saw something else.

Seated in a strangely-shaped canopied chair was a figure wearing a rich mandarin robe, but having its face covered with a green veil.

"Mon Deiu! at last!" he cried, and leapt into the room. "'The Scorpion'!"

Even as he leapt, and as the Scotland Yard men closed in upon the chair also, all of them armed and all half fearful, a thing happened which struck awe to every heart—for it seemed to be supernatural.

Raising a metal hammer which he held in his hand, Fo-Hi struck the bronze bell hung beside the chair. It emitted a deep, loud note....

There came a flash of blinding light, and intense crackling sound, the crash of broken glass, and a dense cloud of pungent fumes rose in the heated air.

Dunbar had just climbed in behind Gaston Max. Bother were all but hurled from their feet by the force of the explosion. Then:

"Oh, my God!" cried Dunbar, staggering, half blinded, *"look—look!"*

A deathly silence claimed them all. Just within the doorway Stuart appeared, having his arm about the shoulders of Miska.

The Throne of the Gods was empty! A thin coating of grey dust was settling upon it and upon the dais which supported it.

They had witnessed a scientific miracle ... the complete and instantaneous disintegration of a human body. Gaston Max was the first to recover speech.

"We are defeated," he said. "'The Scorpion,' surrounded, destroys himself. It is the way of a scorpion."

THE END

Bat-Wing

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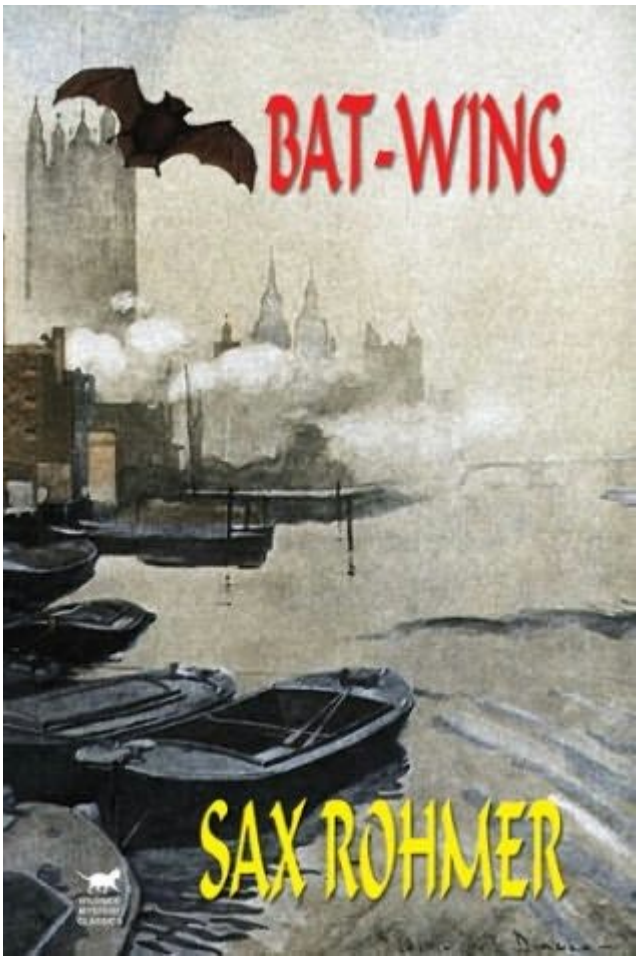

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I. PAUL HARLEY OF CHANCERY LANE

Toward the hour of six on a hot summer's evening Mr. Paul Harley was seated in his private office in Chancery Lane reading through a number of letters which Innes, his secretary, had placed before him for signature. Only one more remained to be passed, but it was a long, confidential report upon a certain matter, which Harley had prepared for His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department. He glanced with a sigh of weariness at the little clock upon his table before commencing to read.

"Shall detain you only a few minutes, now, Knox," he said.

I nodded, smiling. I was quite content to sit and watch my friend at work.

Paul Harley occupied a unique place in the maelstrom of vice and ambition which is sometimes called London life. Whilst at present he held no official post, some of the most momentous problems of British policy during the past five years, problems imperilling inter-state relationships and not infrequently threatening a renewal of the world war, had owed their solution to the peculiar genius of this man.

No clue to his profession appeared upon the plain brass plate attached to his door, and little did those who regarded Paul Harley merely as a successful private detective suspect that he was in the confidence of some who guided the destinies of the Empire. Paul Harley's work in Constantinople during the feverish months preceding hostilities with Turkey, although unknown to the general public, had been of a most extraordinary nature. His recommendations were never adopted, unfortunately. Otherwise, the tragedy of the Dardanelles might have been averted.

His surroundings as he sat there, gaze bent upon the typewritten pages, were those of any other professional man. So it would have seemed to the casual observer. But perhaps there was a quality in the atmosphere of the office which would have told a more sensitive visitor that it was the apartment of no ordinary man of business. Whilst there were filing cabinets and bookshelves laden with works of reference, many of them legal, a large and handsome Burmese cabinet struck an unexpected note.

On closer inspection, other splashes of significant colour must have been detected in the scheme, notably a very fine engraving of Edgar Allan Poe, from the daguerreotype of 1848; and upon the man himself lay the indelible mark of the tropics. His clean-cut features had that hint of underlying bronze which tells of years spent beneath a merciless sun, and the touch of gray at his temples only added to the eager, almost fierce vitality of the dark face. Paul Harley was notable because of that intellectual strength which does not strike one immediately, since it is purely temperamental, but which, nevertheless, invests its possessor with an aura of distinction.

Writing his name at the bottom of the report, Paul Harley enclosed the pages in a long envelope and dropped the envelope into a basket which contained a number of other letters. His work for the day was ended, and glancing at me with a triumphant smile, he stood up. His office was a part of a residential suite, but although, like some old-time burgher of the city, he lived on the premises, the shutting of a door which led to his private rooms marked the close of the business day. Pressing a bell which connected with the public office occupied by his secretary, Paul Harley stood up as Innes entered.

"There's nothing further, is there, Innes?" he asked.

"Nothing, Mr. Harley, if you have passed the Home Office report?"

Paul Harley laughed shortly.

"There it is," he replied, pointing to the basket; "a tedious and thankless job, Innes. It is the fifth draft you have prepared and it will have to do."

He took up a letter which lay unsealed upon the table. "This is the Rokeby affair," he said. "I have decided to hold it over, after all, until my return."

"Ah!" said Innes, quietly glancing at each envelope as he took it from the basket. "I see you have turned down the little job offered by the Marquis."

"I have," replied Harley, smiling grimly, "and a fee of five hundred guineas with it. I have also intimated to that distressed nobleman that this is a business office and that a laundry is the proper place to take his dirty linen. No, there's nothing further to-night, Innes. You can get along now. Has Miss Smith gone?"

But as if in answer to his enquiry the typist, who with Innes made up the entire staff of the office, came in at that moment, a card in her hand. Harley glanced across in my direction and then at the card, with a wry expression.

"Colonel Juan Menendez," he read aloud, "Cavendish Club," and glanced reflectively at Innes. "Do we know the Colonel?"

"I think not," answered Innes; "the name is unfamiliar to me."

"I wonder," murmured Harley. He glanced across at me. "It's an awful nuisance, Knox, but just as I thought the decks were clear. Is it something really interesting, or does he want a woman watched? However, his name sounds piquant, so perhaps I had better see him. Ask him to come in, Miss Smith."

Innes and Miss Smith retiring, there presently entered a man of most striking and unusual presence. In the first place, Colonel Menendez must have stood fully six feet in his boots, and he carried himself like a grandee of the golden days of Spain. His complexion was extraordinarily dusky, whilst his hair, which was close cropped, was iron gray. His heavy eyebrows and curling moustache with its little points were equally black, so that his large teeth gleamed very fiercely when he smiled. His eyes were large, dark, and brilliant, and although he wore an admirably cut tweed suit, for some reason I pictured him as habitually wearing riding kit. Indeed I almost seemed to hear the jingle of his spurs.

He carried an ebony cane for which I mentally substituted a crop, and his black derby hat I thought hardly as suitable as a sombrero. His age might have been anything between fifty and fifty-five.

Standing in the doorway he bowed, and if his smile was Mephistophelean, there was much about Colonel Juan Menendez which commanded respect.

"Mr. Harley," he began, and his high, thin voice afforded yet another surprise, "I feel somewhat ill at ease to—how do you say it?—appropriate your time, as I am by no means sure that what I have to say justifies my doing so."

He spoke most fluent, indeed florid, English. But his sentences at times were oddly constructed; yet, save for a faint accent, and his frequent interpolation of such expressions as "how do you say?"—a sort of nervous mannerism—one might have supposed him to be a Britisher who had lived much abroad. I formed the opinion that he had read extensively, and this, as I learned later, was indeed the case.

"Sit down, Colonel Menendez," said Harley with quiet geniality. "Officially, my working day is ended, I admit, but if you have no objection

to the presence of my friend, Mr. Knox, I shall be most happy to chat with you."

He smiled in a way all his own.

"If your business is of a painfully professional nature," he added, "I must beg you to excuse me for fourteen days, as I am taking a badly needed holiday with my friend."

"Ah, is it so?" replied the Colonel, placing his hat and cane upon the table, and sitting down rather wearily in a big leathern armchair which Harley had pushed forward. "If I intrude I am sorry, but indeed my business is urgent, and I come to you on the recommendation of my friend, Senor Don Merry del Val, the Spanish Ambassador."

He raised his eyes to Harley's face with an expression of peculiar appeal. I rose to depart, but:

"Sit down, Knox," said Harley, and turned again to the visitor. "Please proceed," he requested. "Mr. Knox has been with me in some of the most delicate cases which I have ever handled, and you may rely upon his discretion as you may rely upon mine." He pushed forward a box of cigars. "Will you smoke?"

"Thanks, no," was the answer; "you see, I rarely smoke anything but my cigarettes."

Colonel Menendez extracted a slip of rice paper from a little packet which he carried, next, dipping two long, yellow fingers into his coat pocket, he brought out a portion of tobacco, laid it in the paper, and almost in the twinkling of an eye had made, rolled, and lighted a very creditable cigarette. His dexterity was astonishing, and seeing my surprise he raised his heavy eyebrows, and:

"Practice makes perfect, is it not said?" he remarked.

He shrugged his shoulders and dropped the extinguished match in an ash tray, whilst I studied him with increasing interest. Some dread, real or imaginary, was oppressing the man's mind, I mused. I felt my presence to be unwelcome, but:

"Very well," he began, suddenly. "I expect, Mr. Harley, that you will be disposed to regard what I have to tell you rather as a symptom of what you call nerves than as evidence of any agency directed against me."

Paul Harley stared curiously at the speaker. "Do I understand you to suspect that someone is desirous of harming you?" he enquired.

Colonel Menendez slowly nodded his head.

"Such is my meaning," he replied.

"You refer to bodily harm?"

"But yes, emphatically."

"Hm," said Harley; and taking out a tin of tobacco from a cabinet beside him he began in leisurely manner to load a briar. "No doubt you have good reasons for this suspicion?"

"If I had not good reasons, Mr. Harley, nothing could have induced me to trouble you. Yet, even now that I have compelled myself to come here, I find it difficult, almost impossible, to explain those reasons to you."

An expression of embarrassment appeared upon the brown face, and now Colonel Menendez paused and was plainly at a loss for words with which to continue.

Harley replaced the tin in the cupboard and struck a match. Lighting his pipe he nodded good humouredly as if to say, "I quite understand." As a matter of fact, he probably thought, as I did, that this was a familiar case of a man of possibly blameless life who had become subject to that delusion which leads people to believe themselves threatened by mysterious and unnameable danger.

Our visitor inhaled deeply.

"You, of course, are waiting for the facts," he presently resumed, speaking with a slowness which told of a mind labouring for the right mode of expression. "These are so scanty, I fear, of so, shall I say, phantom a kind, that even when they are in your possession you will consider me to be merely the victim of a delusion. In the first place, then, I have reason to believe that someone followed me from my home to your office."

"Indeed," said Paul Harley, sympathetically, for this I perceived was exactly what he had anticipated, and merely tended to confirm his suspicion. "Some member of your household?"

"Certainly not."

"Did you actually see this follower?"

"My dear sir," cried Colonel Menendez, excitement emphasizing his accent, "if I had seen him, so much would have been made clear, so much! I have never seen him, but I have heard him and felt him—felt his presence, I mean."

"In what way?" asked Harley, leaning back in his chair and studying the fierce face.

"On several occasions on turning out the light in my bedroom and looking across the lawn from my window I have observed the shadow of someone—how do you say?—lurking in the garden."

"The shadow?"

"Precisely. The person himself was concealed beneath a tree. When he moved his shadow was visible on the ground."

"You were not deceived by a waving branch?"

"Certainly not. I speak of a still, moonlight night."

"Possibly, then, it was the shadow of a tramp," suggested Harley. "I gather that you refer to a house in the country?"

"It was not," declared Colonel Menendez, emphatically; "it was not. I wish to God I could believe it had been. Then there was, a month ago, an attempt to enter my house."

Paul Harley exhibited evidence of a quickening curiosity. He had perceived, as I had perceived, that the manner of the speaker differed from that of the ordinary victim of delusion, with whom he had become professionally familiar.

"You had actual evidence of this?" he suggested.

"It was due to insomnia, sleeplessness, brought about, yes, I will admit it, by apprehension, that I heard the footsteps of this intruder."

"But you did not see him?"

"Only his shadow"

"What!"

"You can obtain the evidence of all my household that someone had actually entered," declared Colonel Menendez, eagerly. "Of this, at least, I can give you the certain facts. Whoever it was had obtained access through a kitchen window, had forced two locks, and was coming stealthily along the hallway when the sound of his footsteps attracted my attention."

"What did you do?"

"I came out on to the landing and looked down the stairs. But even the slight sound which I made had been sufficient to alarm the midnight visitor, for I had never a glimpse of him. Only, as he went swiftly back in the direction from which he had come, the moonlight shining in through a window in the hall cast his shadow on the carpet."

"Strange," murmured Harley. "Very strange, indeed. The shadow told you nothing?"

"Nothing at all."

Colonel Menendez hesitated momentarily, and glanced swiftly across at Harley.

"It was just a vague—do you say blur?—and then it was gone. But—"

"Yes," said Harley. "But?"

"Ah," Colonel Menendez blew a cloud of smoke into the air, "I come now to the matter which I find so hard to explain."

He inhaled again deeply and was silent for a while.

"Nothing was stolen?" asked Harley.

"Nothing whatever."

"And no clue was left behind?"

"No clue except the filed fastening of a window and two open doors which had been locked as usual when the household retired."

"Hm," mused Harley again; "this incident, of course, may have been an isolated one and in no way connected with the surveillance of which you complain. I mean that this person who undoubtedly entered your house might prove to be an ordinary burglar."

"On a table in the hallway of Cray's Folly," replied Colonel Menendez, impressively—"so my house is named—stands a case containing presentation gold plate. The moonlight of which I have spoken was shining fully upon this case, and does the burglar live who will pass such a prize and leave it untouched?"

"I quite agree," said Harley, quietly, "that this is a very big point."

"You are beginning at last," suggested the Colonel, "to believe that my suspicions are not quite groundless?"

"There is a distinct possibility that they are more than suspicions," agreed Harley; "but may I suggest that there is something else? Have you an enemy?"

"Who that has ever held public office is without enemies?"

"Ah, quite so. Then I suggest again that there is something else."

He gazed keenly at his visitor, and the latter, whilst meeting the look unflinchingly with his large dark eyes, was unable to conceal the fact that he had received a home thrust.

"There are two points, Mr. Harley," he finally confessed, "almost certainly associated one with the other, if you understand, but both these so —shall I say remote?—from my life, that I hesitate to mention them. It seems fantastic to suppose that they contain a clue."

"I beg of you," said Harley, "to keep nothing back, however remote it may appear to be. It is sometimes the seemingly remote things which prove upon investigation to be the most intimate."

"Very well," resumed Colonel Menendez, beginning to roll a second cigarette whilst continuing to smoke the first, "I know that you are right, of course, but it is nevertheless very difficult for me to explain. I mentioned the attempted burglary, if so I may term it, in order to clear your mind of the idea that my fears were a myth. The next point which I have concerns a man, a neighbour of mine in Surrey. Before I proceed I should like to make it clear that I do not believe for a moment that he is responsible for this unpleasant business."

Harley stared at him curiously. "Nevertheless," he said, "there must be some data in your possession which suggest to your mind that he has some connection with it."

"There are, Mr. Harley, but they belong to things so mystic and far away from ordinary crime that I fear you will think me," he shrugged his great shoulders, "a man haunted by strange superstitions. Do you say 'haunted?' Good. You understand. I should tell you, then, that although of pure Spanish blood, I was born in Cuba. The greater part of my life has been spent in the West Indies, where prior to '98 I held an appointment under the Spanish Government. I have property, not only in Cuba, but in some of the smaller islands which formerly were Spanish, and I shall not conceal from you that during the latter years of my administration I incurred the enmity of a section of the population. Do I make myself clear?"

Paul Harley nodded and exchanged a swift glance with me. I formed a rapid mental picture of native life under the governorship of Colonel Juan Menendez and I began to consider his story from a new viewpoint. Seemingly rendered restless by his reflections, he stood up and began to pace the floor, a tall but curiously graceful figure. I noticed the bulldog tenacity of his chin, the intense pride in his bearing, and I wondered what kind of menace had induced him to seek the aid of Paul Harley; for whatever his failings might be, and I could guess at the nature of several of

them, that this thin-lipped Spanish soldier knew the meaning of fear I was not prepared to believe.

"Before you proceed further, Colonel Menendez," said Harley, "might I ask when you left Cuba?"

"Some three years ago," was his reply. "Because—" he hesitated curiously—"of health motives, I leased a property in England, believing that here I should find peace."

"In other words, you were afraid of something or someone in Cuba?"

Colonel Menendez turned in a flash, glaring down at the speaker.

"I never feared any man in my life, Mr. Harley," he said, coldly.

"Then why are you here?"

The Colonel placed the stump of his first cigarette in an ash tray and lighted that which he had newly made.

"It is true," he admitted. "Forgive me. Yet what I said was that I never feared any man."

He stood squarely in front of the Burmese cabinet, resting one hand upon his hip. Then he added a remark which surprised me.

"Do you know anything of Voodoo?" he asked.

Paul Harley took his pipe from between his teeth and stared at the speaker silently for a moment. "Voodoo?" he echoed. "You mean negro magic?"

"Exactly."

"My studies have certainly not embraced it," replied Harley, quietly, "nor has it hitherto come within my experience. But since I have lived much in the East, I am prepared to learn that Voodoo may not be a negligible quantity. There are forces at work in India which we in England improperly understand. The same may be true of Cuba."

"The same *is* true of Cuba."

Colonel Menendez glared almost fiercely across the room at Paul Harley.

"And do I understand," asked the latter, "that the danger which you believe to threaten you is associated with Cuba?"

"That, Mr. Harley, is for you to decide when all the facts shall be in your possession. Do you wish that I proceed?"

"By all means. I must confess that I am intensely interested."

"Very well, Mr. Harley. I have something to show you."

From an inside breast pocket Colonel Menendez drew out a gold-mounted case, and from the case took some flat, irregularly shaped object wrapped in a piece of tissue paper. Unfolding the paper, he strode across and laid the object which it had contained upon the blotting pad in front of my friend.

Impelled by curiosity I stood up and advanced to inspect it. It was of a dirty brown colour, some five or six inches long, and appeared to consist of a kind of membrane. Harley, his elbow on the table, was staring down at it questioningly.

"What is it?" I said; "some kind of leaf?"

"No," replied Harley, looking up into the dark face of the Spanish colonel; "I think I know what it is."

"I, also, know what it is." declared Colonel Menendez, grimly." But tell me what to you it seems like, Mr. Harley?"

Paul Harley's expression was compounded of incredulity, wonder, and something else, as, continuing to stare at the speaker, he replied:

"It is the wing of a bat."

II. THE VOODOO SWAMP

Often enough my memory has recaptured that moment in Paul Harley's office, when Harley, myself, and the tall Spaniard stood looking down at the bat wing lying upon the blotting pad.

My brilliant friend at times displayed a sort of prescience, of which I may have occasion to speak later, but I, together with the rest of pur-blind humanity, am commonly immune from the prophetic instinct. Therefore I chronicle the fact for what it may be worth, that as I gazed with a sort of disgust at the exhibit lying upon the table I became possessed of a conviction, which had no logical basis, that a door had been opened through which I should step into a new avenue of being; I felt myself to stand upon the threshold of things strange and terrible, but withal alluring. Perhaps it is true that in the great crises of life the inner eye becomes momentarily opened.

With intense curiosity I awaited the Colonel's next words, but, a cigarette held nervously between his fingers, he stood staring at Harley, and it was the latter who broke that peculiar silence which had fallen upon us.

"The wing of a bat," he murmured, then touched it gingerly. "Of what kind of bat, Colonel Menendez? Surely not a British species?"

"But emphatically not a British species," replied the Spaniard. "Yet even so the matter would be strange."

"I am all anxiety to learn the remainder of your story, Colonel Menendez."

"Good. Your interest comforts me very greatly, Mr. Harley. But when first I came, you led me to suppose that you were departing from London?"

"Such, at the time, was my intention, sir." Paul Harley smiled slightly. "Accompanied by my friend, Mr. Knox, I had proposed to indulge in a fortnight's fishing upon the Norfolk Broads."

"Fishing?"

"Yes."

"A peaceful occupation, Mr. Harley, and a great rest-cure for one who like yourself moves much amid the fiercer passions of life. You were about to make holiday?"

Paul Harley nodded.

"It is cruel of me to intrude upon such plans," continued Colonel Menendez, dexterously rolling his cigarette around between his fingers. "Yet because of my urgent need I dare to do so. Would yourself and your friend honour me with your company at Cray's Folly for a few days? I can promise you good entertainment, although I regret that there is no fishing; but it may chance that there will be other and more exciting sport."

Harley glanced at me significantly.

"Do I understand you to mean, Colonel Menendez," he asked, "that you have reason to believe that this conspiracy directed against you is about to come to a head?"

Colonel Menendez nodded, at the same time bringing his hand down sharply upon the table.

"Mr. Harley," he replied, his high, thin voice sunken almost to a whisper, "Wednesday night is the night of the full moon."

"The full moon?"

"It is at the full moon that the danger comes."

Paul Harley stood up, and watched by the Spanish colonel paced slowly across the office. At the outer door he paused and turned.

"Colonel Menendez," he said, "that you would willingly waste the time of a busy man I do not for a moment believe, therefore I shall ask you as briefly as possible to state your case in detail. When I have heard it, if it appears to me that any good purpose can be served by my friend and myself coming to Cray's Folly I feel sure that he will be happy to accept your proffered hospitality."

"If I am likely to be of the slightest use I shall be delighted," said I, which indeed was perfectly true.

Whilst I had willingly agreed to accompany Harley to Norfolk I had none of his passion for the piscatorial art, and the promise of novel excitement held out by Colonel Menendez appealed to me more keenly than the lazy days upon the roads which Harley loved.

"Gentlemen"—the Colonel bowed profoundly—"I am honoured and delighted. When you shall have heard my story I know what your decision will be."

He resumed his seat, and began, it seemed almost automatically, to roll a fresh cigarette.

"I am all attention," declared Harley, and his glance strayed again in a wondering fashion to the bat wing lying on his table.

"I will speak briefly," resumed our visitor, "and any details which may seem to you to be important can be discussed later when you are my guests. You must know then that I first became acquainted with the significance belonging to the term 'Bat Wing' and to the object itself some twenty years ago."

"But surely," interrupted Harley, incredulously, "you are not going to tell me that the menace of which you complain is of twenty years' standing?"

"At your express request, Mr. Harley," returned the Colonel a trifle brusquely, "I am dealing with possibilities which are remote, because in your own words it is sometimes the remote which proves to be the intimate. It was then rather more than twenty years ago, at a time when great political changes were taking place in the West Indies, that my business interests, which are mainly concerned with sugar, carried me to one of the smaller islands which had formerly been under—my jurisdiction, do you say? Here

I had a house and estate, and here in the past I had experienced much trouble with the natives.

"I do not disguise from you that I was unpopular, and on my return I met with unmistakable signs of hostility. My native workmen were insubordinate. In fact, it was the reports from my overseers which had led me to visit the island. I made a tour of the place, believing it to be necessary to my interests that I should get once more in touch with negro feeling, since I had returned to my home in Cuba after the upheavals in '98. Very well.

"The manager of my estate, a capable man, was of opinion that there existed a secret organization amongst the native labourers operating—you understand?—against my interests. He produced certain evidences of this. They were not convincing; and all my enquiries and examinations of certain inhabitants led to no definite results. Yet I grew more and more to feel that enemies surrounded me."

He paused to light his third cigarette, and whilst he did so I conjured up a mental picture of his "examinations of certain inhabitants." I recalled hazily those stories of Spanish mismanagement and cruelty which had directly led to United States interferences in the islands. But whilst I could well believe that this man's life had not been safe in those bad old days in the West Indies, I found it difficult to suppose that a native plot against his safety could have survived for more than twenty years and have come to a climax in England. However, I realized that there was more to follow, and presently, having lighted his cigarette, the Colonel resumed:

"In the neighbourhood of the hacienda which had once been my official residence there was a belt of low-lying pest country—you understand pest country?—which was a hot-bed of poisonous diseases. It followed the winding course of a nearly stagnant creek. From the earliest times the Black Belt—it was so called—had been avoided by European inhabitants, and indeed by the coloured population as well. Apart from the malaria of the swampy ground it was infested with reptiles and with poisonous insects of a greater variety and of a more venomous character than I have ever known in any part of the world.

"I must explain that what I regarded as a weak point in my manager's theory was this: Whilst he held that the native labourers to a man were linked together under some head, or guiding influence, he had never

succeeded in surprising anything in the nature of a negro meeting. Indeed, he had prohibited all gatherings of this kind. His answer to my criticism was a curious one. He declared that the members of this mysterious society met and received their instructions at some place within the poison area to which I have referred, believing themselves there to be safe from European interference.

"For a long time I disputed this with poor Valera—for such was my manager's name; when one night as I was dismounting from my horse before the veranda, having returned from a long ride around the estate, a shot was fired from the border of the Black Belt which at one point crept up dangerously close to the hacienda.

"The shot was a good one. I had caught my spur in the stirrup in dismounting, and stumbled. Otherwise I must have been a dead man. The bullet pierced the crown of my hat, only missing my skull by an inch or less. The alarm was given. But no search-party could be mustered, do you say?—which was prepared to explore the poison swamp—or so declared my native servants. Valera, however, seized upon this incident to illustrate his theory that there were those in the island who did not hesitate to enter the Black Belt popularly supposed to cast up noxious vapours at dusk of a sort fatal to any traveller.

"That night over our wine we discussed the situation, and he pointed out to me that now was the hour to test his theory. Orders had evidently been given for my assassination and the attempt had failed.

"'There will be a meeting,' said Valera, 'to discuss the next move. And it will take place to-morrow night!'

"I challenged him with a glance and I replied:

"'To-morrow night is a full moon, and if you are agreeable we will make a secret expedition into the swamp, and endeavour to find the clearing which you say is there, and which you believe to be the rendezvous of the conspirators.'

"Even in the light of the lamp I saw Valera turn pale, but he was a Spaniard and a man of courage.

"'I agree, señor,' he replied. 'If my information is correct we shall find the way.'

"I must explain that the information to which he referred had been supplied by a native girl who loved him. That this clearing was a meeting-

place she had denied. But she had admitted that it was possible to obtain access to it, and had even described the path." He paused. "She died of a lingering sickness."

Colonel Menendez spoke these last words with great deliberation and treated each of us to a long and significant stare.

"Presently," he added, "I will tell you what was nailed to the wall of her hut on the night that she fell ill. But to continue my narrative. On the following evening, suitably equipped, Valera and myself set out, leaving by a side door and striking into the woods at a point east of the hacienda, where, according to his information, a footpath existed, which would lead us to the clearing we desired to visit. Of that journey, gentlemen, I have most terrible memories.

"Imagine a dense and poisonous jungle, carpeted by rotten vegetation in which one's feet sank deeply and from which arose a visible and stenching vapour. Imagine living things, slimy things, moving beneath the tread, sometimes coiling about our riding boots, sometimes making hissing sounds. Imagine places where the path was overgrown, and we must thrust our way through bushes where great bloated spiders weaved their webs, where clammy night things touched us as we passed, where unfamiliar and venomous insects clung to our garments.

"We proceeded onward for more than half an hour guided by the moonlight, but this, although tropically brilliant, at some places scarcely penetrated the thick vapour which arose from the jungle. In those days I was a young and vigorous man; my companion was several years my senior; and his sufferings were far greater than my own. But if the jungle was horrible, worse was yet to come.

"Presently we stumbled upon an open space almost quite bare of vegetation, a poisonous green carpet spread in the heart of the woods. Here the vapour was more dense than ever, but I welcomed the sight of open ground after the reptile-infested thicket. Alas! it was a snare, a death-trap, a sort of morass, in which we sank up to our knees. Pah! it was filthy—vile! And I became aware of great—lassitude, do you say?—whilst Valera's panting breath told that he had almost reached the end of his resources.

"A faint breeze moved through the clearing and for a few moments we were enabled to perceive one another more distinctly. I uttered an exclamation of horror.

"My companion's garments were a mass of strange-looking patches.

"Even as I noticed them I glanced rapidly down—and found myself in similar condition. As I did so one of these patches upon the sleeve of my tunic intruded coldly upon my bare wrist. At that I cried out aloud in fear. Valera and I commenced what was literally a fight for life.

"Gentlemen, we were attacked by some kind of blood-red leeches, which came out of the slime! In detaching them one detached patches of skin, and they swarmed over our bodies like ants upon carrion.

"They penetrated beneath our garments, these swollen, lustful, unclean things; and it was whilst we staggered on through the swamp in agony of mind and body that we saw the light of many torches amid the trees ahead of us, and in their smoky glare witnessed the flight of hundreds of bats. The moonlight creeping dimly through the mist, and the torchlight—how do you say?—enflaming the vegetation, created a scene like that of Inferno, in which naked figures danced wildly, uttering animal cries.

"Above the shrieking and howling, which rose and fell in a sort of unholy chorus, I heard one long, wailing sound, repeated and repeated. It was an African word. But I knew its meaning.

"It was '*Bat Wing*!'

"My doubts were dispersed. This was a meeting-place of Devil-worshippers, or devotees of the cult of Voodoo! One man only could I see clearly so as to remember him, a big negro employed upon one of my estates. He seemed to be a sort of high priest or president of the orgies. Attached to his arms were giant imitations of bat wings which he moved grotesquely as if in flight. There were many women in the throng, which numbered fully I should think a hundred people. But the final collapse of my brave, unhappy Valera at this point brought home to me the nature of the peril in which I stood.

"He lay at my feet, moving convulsively, and sinking ever deeper in the swamp, red leeches moving slowly, slowly over his fast-disappearing body."

Colonel Menendez paused in his appalling narrative and wiped his moist forehead with a silk handkerchief. Neither Harley nor I spoke. I knew not if my friend believed the Spaniard's story. For my own part I found it difficult to do so. But that the narrator was deeply moved was a fact beyond dispute.

He suddenly commenced again:

"My next recollection is of awakening in my own bed at the hacienda. I had staggered back as far as the veranda, in raving delirium, and in the grip of a strange fever which prostrated me for many months, and which defied the knowledge of all the specialists who could be procured from Cuba and the United States. My survival was due to an iron constitution; but I have never been the same man. I was ordered to leave the West Indies directly it became possible for me to be moved. I arranged my affairs accordingly, and did not return for many years.

"Finally, however, I again took up my residence in Cuba, and for a time all went well, and might have continued to do so, but for the following incident. One night, being troubled by insomnia—sleeplessness—and the heat, I walked out on to the balcony in front of my bedroom window. As I did so, a figure which had been—you say lurking?—somewhere under the veranda ran swiftly off; but not so swiftly that I failed to obtain a glimpse of the uplifted face.

"It was the big negro! Although many years had elapsed since I had seen him wearing the bat wings at those unholy rites, I knew him instantly.

"On a little table close behind me where I stood lay a loaded revolver. I snatched it in a flash and fired shot after shot at the retreating figure."

Colonel Menendez shrugged his shoulders and selected a fresh cigarette paper.

"Gentlemen," he continued, "from that moment until this I have gone in hourly peril of my life. Whether I hit my man or missed him, I have never known to this day. If he lives or is dead I cannot say. But—" he paused impressively—"I have told you of something that was nailed to the hut of a certain native girl? Before she died I knew that it was a death-token.

"On the morning after the episode which I have just related attached to the main door of the hacienda was found that same token."

"And it was??" said Harley, eagerly.

"It was the wing of a bat!

"I am perhaps a hasty man. It is in my blood. I tore the unclean thing from the panel and stamped it under my feet. No one of the servants who had drawn my attention to its presence would consent to touch it. Indeed, they all shrank from me as though I, too, were unclean. I endeavoured to forget it. Who was I to be influenced by the threats of natives?

"That night, just at the hour of sunset, a shot was fired at me from a neighbouring clump of trees, only missing me I think by the fraction of an inch. I realized that the peril was real, and was one against which I could not fight.

"Permit me to be brief, gentlemen. Six attempts of various kinds were made upon my life in Cuba. I crossed to the United States. In Washington, the political capital of the country, an assassin gained access to my hotel apartment and but for the fact that a friend chanced to call me up on the telephone at that late hour of the night, thereby awakening me, I should have received a knife in my heart. I saw the knife in the dim light; I saw the shadowy figure. I leapt out on the opposite side of the bed, seized a table-lamp which stood there, and hurled it at my assailant.

"There was a crash, a stifled exclamation, shuffling, the door opened, and my would-be assassin was gone. But I had learned something, and to my old fears a new one was added."

"What had you learned?" asked Harley, whose interest in the narrative was displayed by the fact that his pipe had long since gone out.

"Vaguely, vaguely, you understand, for there was little light, I had seen the face of the man. He wore some kind of black cloak doubtless to conceal his movements. His silhouette resembled that of a bat. But, gentlemen, he was neither a negro nor even a half-caste; he was of the white races, to that I could swear."

Colonel Menendez lighted the cigarette which he had been busily rolling, and fixed his dark eyes upon Harley.

"You puzzle me, sir," said the latter. "Do you wish me to believe that this cult of Voodoo claims European or American devotees?"

"I wish you to believe," returned the Colonel, "that although as the result of the alarm which I gave the hotel was searched and the Washington police exerted themselves to the utmost, no trace was ever found of the man who had tried to murder me, except"—he extended a long, yellow forefinger, and pointed to the wing of the bat lying upon Harley's table—"a bat wing was found pinned to my bedroom door."

Silence fell for a while; an impressive silence. Truly this was the strangest story to which I had ever listened.

"How long ago was that?" asked Harley.

"Only two years ago. At about the time that the great war terminated. I came to Europe and believed that at last I had found security. I lived for a time in London amidst a refreshing peace that was new to me. Then, chancing to hear of a property in Surrey which was available, I leased it for a period of years, installing—is it correct?—my cousin, Madame de Stämer, as housekeeper. Madame, alas, is an invalid, but"—he kissed his fingers—"a genius. She has with her, as companion, a very charming English girl, Miss Val Beverley, the orphaned daughter of a distinguished surgeon of Edinburgh. Miss Beverley was with my cousin in the hospital which she established in France during the war. If you will honour me with your presence at Cray's Folly to-morrow, gentlemen, you will not lack congenial company, I can assure you."

He raised his heavy eyebrows, looking interrogatively from Harley to myself.

"For my own part," said my friend, slowly, "I shall be delighted. What do you say, Knox?"

"I also."

"But," continued Harley, "your presence here today, Colonel Menendez, suggests to my mind that England has not proved so safe a haven as you had anticipated?"

Colonel Menendez crossed the room and stood once more before the Burmese cabinet, one hand resting upon his hip; a massive yet graceful figure.

"Mr. Harley," he replied, "four days ago my butler, who is a Spaniard, brought me—" He pointed to the bat wing lying upon the blotting pad. "He had found it pinned to an oaken panel of the main entrance door."

"Was it prior to this discovery, or after it," asked Harley, "that you detected the presence of someone lurking in the neighbourhood of the house?"

"Before it."

"And the burglarious entrance?"

"That took place rather less than a month ago. On the eve of the full moon."

Paul Harley stood up and relighted his pipe.

"There are quite a number of other details, Colonel," he said, "which I shall require you to place in my possession. Since I have determined to visit

Cray's Folly, these can wait until my arrival. I particularly refer to a remark concerning a neighbour of yours in Surrey."

Colonel Menendez nodded, twirling his cigarette between his long, yellow fingers.

"It is a delicate matter, gentlemen," he confessed.

"I must take time to consider how I shall place it before you. But I may count upon your arrival tomorrow?"

"Certainly. I am looking forward to the visit with keen interest."

"It is important," declared our visitor; "for on Wednesday is the full moon, and the full moon is in some way associated with the sacrificial rites of Voodoo."

III. THE VAMPIRE BAT

An hour had elapsed since the departure of our visitor, and Paul Harley and I sat in the cosy, book-lined study discussing the strange story which had been related to us. Harley, who had a friend attached to the Spanish Embassy, had succeeded in getting in touch with him at his chambers, and had obtained some few particulars of interest concerning Colonel Don Juan Sarmiento Menendez, for such were the full names and titles of our late caller.

He was apparently the last representative of a once great Spanish family, established for many generations in Cuba. His wealth was incalculable, although the value of his numerous estates had depreciated in recent years. His family had produced many men of subtle intellect and powerful administrative qualities; but allied to this they had all possessed traits of cruelty and debauchery which at one time had made the name of Menendez a by-word in the West Indies. That there were many people in that part of the world who would gladly have assassinated the Colonel, Paul Harley's informant did not deny. But although this information somewhat enlarged our knowledge of my friend's newest client, it threw no fresh light upon that side of his story which related to Voodoo and the extraordinary bat wing episodes.

"Of course," said Harley, after a long silence, "there is one possibility of which we must not lose sight."

"What possibility is that?" I asked.

"That Menendez may be mad. Remorse for crimes of cruelty committed in his youth, and beyond doubt he has been guilty of many, may have led to a sort of obsession. I have known such cases."

"That was my first impression," I confessed, "but it faded somewhat as the Colonel's story proceeded. I don't think any such explanation would cover the facts."

"Neither do I," agreed my friend; "but it is distinctly possible that such an obsession exists, and that someone is deliberately playing upon it for his own ends."

"You mean that someone who knows of these episodes in the earlier life of Menendez is employing them now for a secret purpose of his own?"

"Exactly."

"It renders the case none the less interesting."

"I quite agree, Knox. With you, I believe, that even if the Colonel is not quite sane, at the same time his fears are by no means imaginary."

He gingerly took up the bat wing from the arm of his chair where he had placed it after a detailed examination.

"It seems to be pretty certain," he said, "that this thing is the wing of a Desmodus or Vampire Bat. Now, according to our authority"—he touched a work which lay open on the other arm of his chair—"these are natives of tropical America, therefore the presence of a living vampire bat in Surrey is not to be anticipated. I am personally satisfied, however, that this unpleasant fragment has been preserved in some way."

"You mean that it is part of a specimen from someone's collection?"

"Quite possibly. But even a collection of such bats would be quite a novelty. I don't know that I can recollect one outside the Museums. To follow this bat wing business further: there was one very curious point in the Colonel's narrative. You recollect his reference to a native girl who had betrayed certain information to the manager of the estate?"

I nodded rapidly.

"A bat wing was affixed to the wall of her hut and she died, according to our informant, of a lingering sickness. Now this lingering sickness might

have been anæmia, and anæmia may be induced, either in man or beast, by frequent but unsuspected visits of a Vampire Bat."

"Good heavens, Harley!" I exclaimed, "what a horrible idea."

"It *is* a horrible idea, but in countries infested by these creatures such things happen occasionally. I distinctly recollect a story which I once heard, of a little girl in some district of tropical America falling into such a decline, from which she was only rescued in the nick of time by the discovery that one of these Vampire Bats, a particularly large one, had formed the habit of flying into her room at night and attaching itself to her bare arm which lay outside the coverlet."

"How did it penetrate the mosquito curtains?" I enquired, incredulously. "The very point, Knox, which led to the discovery of the truth. The thing, exhibiting a sort of uncanny intelligence, used to work its way up under the edge of the netting. This disturbance of the curtains was noticed on several occasions by the nurse who occupied an adjoining room, and finally led to the detection of the bat!

"But surely," I said, "such a visitation would awaken any sleeper?"

"On the contrary, it induces deeper sleep. But I have not yet come to my point, Knox. The vengeance of the High Priest of Voodoo, who figured in the Colonel's narrative, was characteristic in the case of the native woman, since her symptoms at least simulated those which would result from the visits of a Vampire Bat, although of course they may have been due to a slow poison. But you will not have failed to note that the several attacks upon the Colonel personally were made with more ordinary weapons. On two occasions at least a rifle was employed."

"Yes," I replied, slowly. "You are wondering why the lingering sickness did not visit him?"

"I am, Knox. I can only suppose that he proved to be immune. You recall his statement that he made an almost miraculous recovery from the fever which attacked him after his visit to the Black Belt? This would seem to point to the fact that he possesses that rare type of constitution which almost defies organisms deadly to ordinary men."

"I see. Hence the dagger and the rifle?"

"So it would appear."

"But, Harley," I cried, "what appalling crime can the man have committed to call down upon his head a vengeance which has survived for

so many years?"

Paul Harley shrugged his shoulders in a whimsical imitation of the Spaniard.

"I doubt if the feud dates any earlier," he replied, "than the time of Menendez's last return to Cuba. On that occasion he evidently killed the High Priest of Voodoo."

I uttered an exclamation of scorn.

"My dear Harley," I said, "the whole thing is too utterly fantastic. I begin to believe again that we are dealing with a madman."

Harley glanced down at the wing of the bat.

"We shall see," he murmured. "Even if the only result of our visit is to make the acquaintance of the Colonel's household our time will not have been wasted."

"No," said I, "that is true enough. I am looking forward to meeting Madame de Stämer—"

"The Colonel's invalid cousin," added Harley, tonelessly.

"And her companion, Miss Beverley."

"Quite so. Nor must we forget the Spanish butler, and the Colonel himself, whose acquaintance I am extremely anxious to renew."

"The whole thing is wildly bizarre, Harley."

"My dear Knox," he replied, stretching himself luxuriously in the long lounge chair, "the most commonplace life hovers on the edge of the bizarre. But those of us who overstep the border become preposterous in the eyes of those who have never done so. This is not because the unusual is necessarily the untrue, but because writers of fiction have claimed the unusual as their particular province, and in doing so have divorced it from fact in the public eye. Thus I, myself, am a myth, and so are you, Knox!"

He raised his hand and pointed to the doorway communicating with the office.

"We owe our mythological existence to that American genius whose portrait hangs beside the Burmese cabinet and who indiscreetly created the character of C. Auguste Dupin. The doings of this amateur investigator were chronicled by an admirer, you may remember, since when no private detective has been allowed to exist outside the pages of fiction. My most trivial habits confirm my unreality.

"For instance, I have a friend who is good enough sometimes to record my movements. So had Dupin. I smoke a pipe. So did Dupin. I investigate crime, and I am sometimes successful. Here I differ from Dupin. Dupin was always successful. But my argument is this—you complain that the life of Colonel Don Juan Sarmiento Menendez, on his own showing, has been at least as romantic as his name. It would not be accounted romantic by the adventurous, Knox; it is only romantic to the prosaic mind. In the same way his name is only unusual to our English ears. In Spain it would pass unnoticed."

"I see your point," I said, grudgingly; "but think of Voodoo in the Surrey Hills."

"I am thinking of it, Knox, and it affords me much delight to think of it. You have placed your finger I upon the very point I was endeavouring to make. Voodoo in the Surrey Hills! Quite so. Voodoo in some island of the Caribbean Seas, yes, but Voodoo in the Surrey Hills, no. Yet, my dear fellow, there is a regular steamer service between South America and England. Or one may embark at Liverpool and disembark in the Spanish Main. Why, then, may not one embark in the West Indies and disembark at Liverpool? This granted, you will also grant that from Liverpool to Surrey is a feasible journey. Why, then, should you exclaim, 'but Voodoo in the Surrey Hills!' You would be surprised to meet an Esquimaux in the Strand, but there is no reason why an Esquimaux should not visit the Strand. In short, the most annoying thing about fact is its resemblance to fiction. I am looking forward to the day, Knox, when I can retire from my present fictitious profession and become a recognized member of the community; such as a press agent, a theatrical manager, or some other dealer in Fact!"

He burst out laughing, and reaching over to a side-table refilled my glass and his own.

"There lies the wing of a Vampire Bat," he said, pointing, "in Chancery Lane. It is impossible. Yet," he raised his glass, "'Pussyfoot' Johnson has visited Scotland, the home of Whisky!"

We were silent for a while, whilst I considered his remarks.

"The conclusion to which I have come," declared Harley, "is that nothing is so strange as the commonplace. A rod and line, a boat, a luncheon hamper, a jar of good ale, and the peculiar peace of a Norfolk river—these joys I willingly curtail in favour of the unknown things which await us at

Cray's Folly. Remember, Knox," he stared at me queerly, "Wednesday is the night of the full moon."

IV. CRAY'S FOLLY

Paul Harley lay back upon the cushions and glanced at me with a quizzical smile. The big, up-to-date car which Colonel Menendez had placed at our disposal was surmounting a steep Surrey lane as though no gradient had existed.

"Some engine!" he said, approvingly.

I nodded in agreement, but felt disinclined for conversation, being absorbed in watching the characteristically English scenery. This, indeed, was very beautiful. The lane along which we were speeding was narrow, winding, and over-arched by trees. Here and there sunlight penetrated to spread a golden carpet before us, but for the most part the way lay in cool and grateful shadow.

On one side a wooded slope hemmed us in blackly, on the other lay dell after dell down into the cradle of the valley. It was a poetic corner of England, and I thought it almost unbelievable that London was only some twenty miles behind. A fit place this for elves and fairies to survive, a spot in which the presence of a modern automobile seemed a desecration. Higher we mounted and higher, the engine running strongly and smoothly; then, presently, we were out upon a narrow open road with the crescent of the hills sweeping away on the right and dense woods dipping valleyward to the left and behind us.

The chauffeur turned, and, meeting my glance:

"Cray's Folly, sir," he said.

He jerked his hand in the direction of a square, gray-stone tower somewhat resembling a campanile, which uprose from a distant clump of woods cresting a greater eminence.

"Ah," murmured Harley, "the famous tower."

Following the departure of the Colonel on the previous evening, he had looked up Cray's Folly and had found it to be one of a series of houses erected by the eccentric and wealthy man whose name it bore. He had had a

mania for building houses with towers, in which his rival—and contemporary—had been William Beckford, the author of "Vathek," a work which for some obscure reason has survived as well as two of the three towers erected by its writer.

I became conscious of a keen sense of anticipation. In this, I think, the figure of Miss Val Beverley played a leading part. There was something pathetic in the presence of this lonely English girl in so singular a household; for if the menage at Cray's Folly should prove half so strange as Colonel Menendez had led us to believe, then truly we were about to find ourselves amid unusual people.

Presently the road inclined southward somewhat and we entered the fringe of the trees. I noticed one or two very ancient cottages, but no trace of the modern builder. This was a fragment of real Old England, and I was not sorry when presently we lost sight of the square tower; for amidst such scenery it was an anomaly and a rebuke.

What Paul Harley's thoughts may have been I cannot say, but he preserved an unbroken silence up to the very moment that we came to the gate lodge.

The gates were monstrosities of elaborate iron scrollwork, craftsmanship clever enough in its way, but of an ornate kind more in keeping with the orange trees of the South than with this wooded Surrey countryside.

A very surly-looking girl, quite obviously un-English (a daughter of Pedro, the butler, I learned later), opened the gates, and we entered upon a winding drive literally tunnelled through the trees. Of the house we had never a glimpse until we were right under its walls, nor should I have known that we were come to the main entrance if the car had not stopped.

"Looks like a monastery," muttered Harley.

Indeed that part of the building—the north front—which was visible from this point had a strangely monastic appearance, being built of solid gray blocks and boasting only a few small, heavily barred windows. The eccentricity of the Victorian gentleman who had expended thousands of pounds upon erecting this house was only equalled, I thought, by that of Colonel Menendez, who had chosen it for a home. An out-jutting wing shut us in on the west, and to the east the prospect was closed by the tallest and most densely grown box hedge I had ever seen, trimmed most perfectly and

having an arched opening in the centre. Thus, the entrance to Cray's Folly lay in a sort of bay.

But even as we stepped from the car, the great church-like oaken doors were thrown open, and there, framed in the monkish porch, stood the tall, elegant figure of the Colonel.

"Gentlemen," he cried, "welcome to Cray's Folly."

He advanced smiling, and in the bright sunlight seemed even more Mephistophelean than he had seemed in Harley's office.

"Pedro," he called, and a strange-looking Spanish butler who wore his side-whiskers like a bull fighter appeared behind his master; a sallow, furtive fellow with whom I determined I should never feel at ease.

However, the Colonel greeted us heartily enough, and conducted us through a kind of paved, covered courtyard into a great lofty hall. Indeed it more closely resembled a studio, being partly lighted by a most curious dome. It was furnished in a manner quite un-English, but very luxuriously. A magnificent oaken staircase communicated with a gallery on the left, and at the foot of this staircase, in a mechanical chair which she managed with astonishing dexterity, sat Madame de Stämer.

She had snow-white hair crowning the face of a comparatively young woman, and large, dark-brown eyes which reminded me strangely of the eyes of some animal although in the first moment of meeting I could not identify the resemblance. Her hands were very slender and beautiful, and when, as the Colonel presented us, she extended her fingers, I was not surprised to see Harley stoop and kiss them in Continental fashion; for this Madame evidently expected. I followed suit; but truth to tell, after that first glance at the masterful figure in the invalid chair I had had no eyes for Madame de Stämer, being fully employed in gazing at someone who stood beside her.

This was an evasively pretty girl, or such was my first impression. That is to say, that whilst her attractiveness was beyond dispute, analysis of her small features failed to detect from which particular quality this charm was derived. The contour of her face certainly formed a delightful oval, and there was a wistful look in her eyes which was half appealing and half impish. Her demure expression was not convincing, and there rested a vague smile, or promise of a smile, upon lips which were perfectly moulded, and indeed the only strictly regular feature of a nevertheless

bewitching face. She had slightly curling hair and the line of her neck and shoulder was most graceful and charming. Of one thing I was sure: She was glad to see visitors at Cray's Folly.

"And now, gentlemen," said Colonel Menendez, "having presented you to Madame, my cousin, permit me to present you to Miss Val Beverley, my cousin's companion, and our very dear friend."

The girl bowed in a formal English fashion, which contrasted sharply with the Continental manner of Madame. Her face flushed slightly, and as I met her glance she lowered her eyes.

"Now M. Harley and M. Knox," said Madame, vivaciously, "you are quite at home. Pedro will show you to your rooms and lunch will be ready in half an hour."

She waved her white hand coquettishly, and ignoring the proffered aid of Miss Beverley, wheeled her chair away at a great rate under a sort of arch on the right of the hall, which communicated with the domestic offices of the establishment.

"Is she not wonderful?" exclaimed Colonel Menendez, taking Harley's left arm and my right and guiding us upstairs followed by Pedro and the chauffeur, the latter carrying our grips. "Many women would be prostrated by such an affliction, but she—" he shrugged his shoulders.

Harley and I had been placed in adjoining rooms. I had never seen such rooms as those in Cray's Folly. The place contained enough oak to have driven a modern builder crazy. Oak had simply been lavished upon it. My own room, which was almost directly above the box hedge to which I have referred, had a beautiful carved ceiling and a floor as highly polished as that of a ballroom. It was tastefully furnished, but the foreign note was perceptible everywhere.

"We have here some grand prospects," said the Colonel, and truly enough the view from the great, high, wide window was a very fine one.

I perceived that the grounds of Cray's Folly were extensive and carefully cultivated. I had a glimpse of a Tudor sunken garden, but the best view of this was from the window of Harley's room, which because it was the end room on the north front overlooked another part of the grounds, and offered a prospect of the east lawns and distant park land.

When presently Colonel Menendez and I accompanied my friend there I was charmed by the picturesque scene below. Here was a real old herbal

garden, gay with flowers and intersected by tiled moss-grown paths. There were bushes exhibiting fantastic examples of the topiary art, and here, too, was a sun-dial. My first impression of this beautiful spot was one of delight. Later I was to regard that enchanted demesne with something akin to horror; but as we stood there watching a gardener clipping the bushes I thought that although Cray's Folly might be adjudged ugly, its grounds were delightful.

Suddenly Harley turned to our host. "Where is the famous tower?" he enquired. "It is not visible from the front of the house, nor from the drive."

"No, no," replied the Colonel, "it is right out at the end of the east wing, which is disused. I keep it locked up. There are four rooms in the tower and a staircase, of course, but it is inconvenient. I cannot imagine why it was built."

"The architect may have had some definite object in view," said Harley, "or it may have been merely a freak of his client. Is there anything characteristic about the topmost room, for instance?"

Colonel Menendez shrugged his massive shoulders. "Nothing," he replied. "It is the same as the others below, except that there is a stair leading to a gallery on the roof. Presently I will take you up, if you wish."

"I should be interested," murmured Harley, and tactfully changed the subject, which evidently was not altogether pleasing to our host. I concluded that he had found the east wing of the house something of a white elephant, and was accordingly sensitive upon the point.

Presently, then, he left us and I returned to my own room, but before long I rejoined Harley. I did not knock but entered unceremoniously.

"Halloa!" I exclaimed. "What have you seen?"

He was standing staring out of the window, nor did he turn as I entered.

"What is it?" I said, joining him.

He glanced at me oddly.

"An impression," he replied; "but it has gone now."

"I understand," I said, quietly.

Familiarity with crime in many guises and under many skies had developed in Paul Harley a sort of sixth sense. It was a fugitive, fickle thing, as are all the powers which belong to the realm of genius or inspiration. Often enough it failed him entirely, he had assured me, that odd,

sudden chill as of an abrupt lowering of the temperature, which, I understood, often advised him of the nearness of enmity actively malignant.

Now, standing at the window, looking down into that old-world garden, he was "sensing" the atmosphere keenly, seeking for the note of danger. It was sheer intuition, perhaps, but whilst he could never rely upon its answering his summons, once active it never misled him.

"You think some real menace overhangs Colonel Menendez?"

"I am sure of it." He stared into my face. "There is something very, very strange about this bat wing business."

"Do you still incline to the idea that he has been followed to England?"

Paul Harley reflected for a moment, then:

"That explanation would be almost too simple," he said. "There is something bizarre, something unclean—I had almost said unholy—at work in this house, Knox."

"He has foreign servants."

Harley shook his head.

"I shall make it my business to become acquainted with all of them," he replied, "but the danger does not come from there. Let us go down to lunch."

V. VAL BEVERLEY

The luncheon was so good as to be almost ostentatious. One could not have lunched better at the Carlton. Yet, since this luxurious living was evidently customary in the colonel's household, a charge of ostentation would not have been deserved. The sinister-looking Pedro proved to be an excellent servant; and because of the excitement of feeling myself to stand upon the edge of unusual things, the enjoyment of a perfectly served repast, and the sheer delight which I experienced in watching the play of expression upon the face of Miss Beverley, I count that luncheon at Cray's Folly a memorable hour of my life.

Frankly, Val Beverley puzzled me. It may or may not have been curious, that amidst such singular company I selected for my especial study a girl so freshly and typically English. I had thought at the moment of meeting her

that she was provokingly pretty; I determined, as the lunch proceeded, that she was beautiful. Once I caught Harley smiling at me in his quizzical fashion, and I wondered guiltily if I were displaying an undue interest in the companion of Madame.

Many topics were discussed, I remember, and beyond doubt the colonel's cousin-housekeeper dominated the debate. She possessed extraordinary force of personality. Her English was not nearly so fluent as that spoken by the colonel, but this handicap only served to emphasize the masculine strength of her intellect. Truly she was a remarkable woman. With her blanched hair and her young face, and those fine, velvety eyes which possessed a quality almost hypnotic, she might have posed for the figure of a sorceress. She had unfamiliar gestures and employed her long white hands in a manner that was new to me and utterly strange.

I could detect no family resemblance between the cousins, and I wondered if their kinship were very distant. One thing was evident enough: Madame de Stämer was devoted to the Colonel. Her expression when she looked at him changed entirely. For a woman of such intense vitality her eyes were uncannily still; that is to say that whilst she frequently moved her head she rarely moved her eyes. Again and again I found myself wondering where I had seen such eyes before. I lived to identify that memory, as I shall presently relate.

In vain I endeavoured to define the relationship between these three people, so incongruously set beneath one roof. Of the fact that Miss Beverly was not happy I became assured. But respecting her exact position in the household I was reduced to surmises.

The Colonel improved on acquaintance. I decided that he belonged to an order of Spanish grandees now almost extinct. I believed he would have made a very staunch friend; I felt sure he would have proved a most implacable enemy. Altogether, it was a memorable meal, and one notable result of that brief companionship was a kind of link of understanding between myself and Miss Beverley.

Once, when I had been studying Madame de Stämer, and again, as I removed my glance from the dark face of Colonel Menendez, I detected the girl watching me; and her eyes said, "You understand; so do I."

Some things perhaps I did understand, but how few the near future was to show.

The signal for our departure from table was given by Madame de Stämer. She whisked her chair back with extraordinary rapidity, the contrast between her swift, nervous movements and those still, basilisk eyes being almost uncanny.

"Off you go, Juan," she said; "your visitors would like to see the garden, no doubt. I must be away for my afternoon siesta. Come, my dear"—to the girl—"smoke one little cigarette with me, then I will let you go."

She retired, wheeling herself rapidly out of the room, and my glance lingered upon the graceful figure of Val Beverley until both she and Madame were out of sight.

"Now, gentlemen," said the Colonel, resuming his seat and pushing the decanter toward Paul Harley, "I am at your service either for business or amusement. I think"—to Harley—"you expressed a desire to see the tower?"

"I did," my friend replied, lighting his cigar, "but only if it would amuse you to show me."

"Decidedly. Mr. Knox will join us?"

Harley, unseen by the Colonel, glanced at me in a way which I knew.

"Thanks all the same," I said, smiling, "but following a perfect luncheon I should much prefer to loll upon the lawn, if you don't mind."

"But certainly I do not mind," cried the Colonel. "I wish you to be happy."

"Join you in a few minutes, Knox," said Harley as he went out with our host.

"All right," I replied, "I should like to take a stroll around the gardens. You will join me there later, no doubt."

As I walked out into the bright sunshine I wondered why Paul Harley had wished to be left alone with Colonel Menendez, but knowing that I should learn his motive later, I strolled on through the gardens, my mind filled with speculations respecting these unusual people with whom Fate had brought me in contact. I felt that Miss Beverley needed protection of some kind, and I was conscious of a keen desire to afford her that protection. In her glance I had read, or thought I had read, an appeal for sympathy.

Not the least mystery of Cray's Folly was the presence of this girl. Only toward the end of luncheon had I made up my mind upon a point which had

been puzzling me. Val Beverley's gaiety was a cloak, Once I had detected her watching Madame de Stämer with a look strangely like that of fear.

Puffing contentedly at my cigar I proceeded to make a tour of the house. It was constructed irregularly. Practically the entire building was of gray stone, which created a depressing effect even in the blazing sunlight, lending Cray's Folly something of an austere aspect. There were fine lofty windows, however, to most of the ground-floor rooms overlooking the lawns, and some of those above had balconies of the same gray stone. Quite an extensive kitchen garden and a line of glasshouses adjoined the west wing, and here were outbuildings, coach-houses and a garage, all connected by a covered passage with the servants' quarters.

Pursuing my enquiries, I proceeded to the north front of the building, which was closely hemmed in by trees, and which as we had observed on our arrival resembled the entrance to a monastery.

Passing the massive oaken door by which we had entered and which was now closed again, I walked on through the opening in the box hedge into a part of the grounds which was not so sprucely groomed as the rest. On one side were the yews flanking the Tudor garden and before me uprose the famous tower. As I stared up at the square structure, with its uncurtained windows, I wondered, as others had wondered before me, what could have ever possessed any man to build it.

Visible at points for many miles around, it undoubtedly disfigured an otherwise beautiful landscape.

I pressed on, noting that the windows of the rooms in the east wing were shuttered and the apartments evidently disused. I came to the base of the tower, To the south, the country rose up to the highest point in the crescent of hills, and peeping above the trees at no great distance away, I detected the red brick chimneys of some old house in the woods. North and east, velvet sward swept down to the park.

As I stood there admiring the prospect and telling myself that no Voodoo devilry could find a home in this peaceful English countryside, I detected a faint sound of voices far above. Someone had evidently come out upon the gallery of the tower. I looked upward, but I could not see the speakers. I pursued my stroll, until, near the eastern base of the tower, I encountered a perfect thicket of rhododendrons. Finding no path through this shrubbery, I

retraced my steps, presently entering the Tudor garden; and there strolling toward me, a book in her hand, was Miss Beverley.

"Holloa, Mr. Knox," she called; "I thought you had gone up the tower?"

"No," I replied, laughing, "I lack the energy."

"Do you?" she said, softly, "then sit down and talk to me."

She dropped down upon a grassy bank, looking up at me invitingly, and I accepted the invitation without demur.

"I love this old garden," she declared, "although of course it is really no older than the rest of the place. I always think there should be peacocks, though."

"Yes," I agreed, "peacocks would be appropriate."

"And little pages dressed in yellow velvet."

She met my glance soberly for a moment and then burst into a peal of merry laughter.

"Do you know, Miss Beverley," I said, watching her, "I find it hard to place you in the household of the Colonel."

"Yes?" she said simply; "you must."

"Oh, then you realize that you are—"

"Out of place here?"

"Quite."

"Of course I am."

She smiled, shook her head, and changed the subject.

"I am so glad Mr. Paul Harley has come down," she confessed.

"You know my friend by name, then?"

"Yes," she replied, "someone I met in Nice spoke of him, and I know he is very clever."

"In Nice? Did you live in Nice before you came here?"

Val Beverley nodded slowly, and her glance grew oddly retrospective.

"I lived for over a year with Madame de Stämer in a little villa on the Promenade des Anglaise," she replied. "That was after Madame was injured."

"She sustained her injuries during the war, I understand?"

"Yes. Poor Madame. The hospital of which she was in charge was bombed and the shock left her as you see her. I was there, too, but I luckily escaped without injury."

"What, you were there?"

"Yes. That was where I first met Madame de Stämer. She used to be very wealthy, you see, and she established this hospital in France at her own expense, and I was one of her assistants for a time. She lost both her husband and her fortune in the war, and as if that were not bad enough, lost the use of her limbs, too."

"Poor woman," I said. "I had no idea her life had been so tragic. She has wonderful courage."

"Courage!" exclaimed the girl, "if you knew all that I know about her."

Her face grew sweetly animated as she bent toward me excitedly and confidentially.

"Really, she is simply wonderful. I learned to respect her in those days as I have never respected any other woman in the world; and when, after all her splendid work, she, so vital and active, was stricken down like that, I felt that I simply could not leave her, especially as she asked me to stay."

"So you went with her to Nice?"

"Yes. Then the Colonel took this house, and we came here, but—"

She hesitated, and glanced at me curiously.

"Perhaps you are not quite happy?"

"No," she said, "I am not. You see it was different in France. I knew so many people. But here at Cray's Folly it is so lonely, and Madame is—"

Again she hesitated.

"Yes?"

"Well," she laughed in an embarrassed fashion, "I am afraid of her at times."

"In what way?"

"Oh, in a silly, womanish sort of way. Of course she is a wonderful manager; she rules the house with a rod of iron. But really I haven't anything to do here, and I feel frightfully out of place sometimes. Then the Colonel—Oh, but what am I talking about?"

"Won't you tell me what it is that the Colonel fears?"

"You know that he fears something, then?"

"Of course. That is why Paul Harley is here."

A change came over the girl's face; a look almost of dread.

"I wish I knew what it all meant."

"You are aware, then, that there is something wrong?"

"Naturally I am. Sometimes I have been so frightened that I have made up my mind to leave the very next day."

"You mean that you have been frightened at night?" I asked with curiosity.

"Dreadfully frightened."

"Won't you tell me in what way?"

She looked up at me swiftly, then turned her head aside, and bit her lip.

"No, not now," she replied. "I can't very well."

"Then at least tell me why you stayed?"

"Well," she smiled rather pathetically, "for one thing, I haven't anywhere else to go."

"Have you no friends in England?"

She shook her head.

"No. There was only poor daddy, and he died over two years ago. That was when I went to Nice."

"Poor little girl," I said; and the words were spoken before I realized their undue familiarity.

An apology was on the tip of my tongue, but Miss Beverley did not seem to have noticed the indiscretion. Indeed my sympathy was sincere, and I think she had appreciated the fact.

She looked up again with a bright smile.

"Why are we talking about such depressing things on this simply heavenly day?" she exclaimed.

"Goodness knows," said I. "Will you show me round these lovely gardens?"

"Delighted, sir!" replied the girl, rising and sweeping me a mocking curtsey.

Thereupon we set out, and at every step I found a new delight in some wayward curl, in a gesture, in the sweet voice of my companion. Her merry laugh was music, but in wistful mood I think she was even more alluring.

The menace, if menace there were, which overhung Cray's Folly, ceased to exist—for me, at least, and I blessed the lucky chance which had led to my presence there.

We were presently rejoined by Colonel Menendez and Paul Harley, and I gathered that my surmise that it had been their voices which I had heard proceeding from the top of the tower to have been only partly accurate.

"I know you will excuse me, Mr. Harley," said the Colonel, "for detailing the duty to Pedro, but my wind is not good enough for the stairs."

He used idiomatic English at times with that facility which some foreigners acquire, but always smiled in a self-satisfied way when he had employed a slang term.

"I quite understand, Colonel," replied Harley. "The view from the top was very fine."

"And now, gentlemen," continued the Colonel, "if Miss Beverley will excuse us, we will retire to the library and discuss business." "As you wish," said Harley; "but I have an idea that it is your custom to rest in the afternoon."

Colonel Menendez shrugged his shoulders. "It used to be," he admitted, "but I have too much to think about in these days."

"I can see that you have much to tell me," admitted Harley; "and therefore I am entirely at your service."

Val Beverley smiled and walked away swinging her book, at the same time treating me to a glance which puzzled me considerably. I wondered if I had mistaken its significance, for it had seemed to imply that she had accepted me as an ally. Certainly it served to awaken me to the fact that I had discovered a keen personal interest in the mystery which hung over this queerly assorted household.

I glanced at my friend as the Colonel led the way into the house. I saw him staring upward with a peculiar expression upon his face, and following the direction of his glance I could see an awning spread over one of the gray-stone balconies. Beneath it, reclining in a long cane chair, lay Madame de Stämer. I think she was asleep; at any rate, she gave no sign, but lay there motionless, as Harley and I walked in through the open French window followed by Colonel Menendez.

Odd and unimportant details sometimes linger long in the memory. And I remember noticing that a needle of sunlight, piercing a crack in the gaily-striped awning rested upon a ring which Madame wore, so that the diamonds glittered like sparks of white-hot fire.

VI. THE BARRIER

Colonel Menendez conducted us to a long, lofty library in which might be detected the same note of un-English luxury manifested in the other appointments of the house. The room, in common with every other which I had visited in Cray's Folly, was carried out in oak: doors, window frames, mantelpiece, and ceiling representing fine examples of this massive woodwork. Indeed, if the eccentricity of the designer of Cray's Folly were not sufficiently demonstrated by the peculiar plan of the building, its construction wholly of granite and oak must have remarked him a man of unusual if substantial ideas.

There were four long windows opening on to a veranda which commanded a view of part of the rose garden and of three terraced lawns descending to a lake upon which I perceived a number of swans. Beyond, in the valley, lay verdant pastures, where cattle grazed. A lark hung carolling blithely far above, and the sky was almost cloudless. I could hear a steam reaper at work somewhere in the distance. This, with the more intimate rattle of a lawn-mower wielded by a gardener who was not visible from where I stood, alone disturbed the serene silence, except that presently I detected the droning of many bees among the roses. Sunlight flooded the prospect; but the veranda lay in shadow, and that long, oaken room was refreshingly cool and laden with the heavy perfume of the flowers.

From the windows, then, one beheld a typical English summer-scape, but the library itself struck an altogether more exotic note. There were many glazed bookcases of a garish design in ebony and gilt, and these were laden with a vast collection of works in almost every European language, reflecting perhaps the cosmopolitan character of the colonel's household. There was strange Spanish furniture upholstered in perforated leather and again displaying much gilt. There were suits of black armour and a great number of Moorish ornaments. The pictures were fine but sombre, and all of the Spanish school.

One Velasquez in particular I noted with surprise, reflecting that, assuming it to be an authentic work of the master, my entire worldly possessions could not have enabled me to buy it. It was the portrait of a typical Spanish cavalier and beyond doubt a Menendez. In fact, the resemblance between the haughty Spanish grandee, who seemed about to step out of the canvas and pick a quarrel with the spectator, and Colonel

Don Juan himself was almost startling. Evidently, our host had imported most of his belongings from Cuba.

"Gentlemen," he said, as we entered, "make yourselves quite at home, I beg. All my poor establishment contains is for your entertainment and service."

He drew up two long, low lounge chairs, the arms provided with receptacles to contain cooling drinks; and the mere sight of these chairs mentally translated me to the Spanish Main, where I pictured them set upon the veranda of that hacienda which had formerly been our host's residence.

Harley and I became seated and Colonel Menendez disposed himself upon a leather-covered couch, nodding apologetically as he did so.

"My health requires that I should recline for a certain number of hours every day," he explained. "So you will please forgive me."

"My dear Colonel Menendez," said Harley, "I feel sure that you are interrupting your siesta in order to discuss the unpleasant business which finds us in such pleasant surroundings. Allow me once again to suggest that we postpone this matter until, shall we say, after dinner?"

"No, no! No, no," protested the Colonel, waving his hand deprecatingly. "Here is Pedro with coffee and some curaçao of a kind which I can really recommend, although you may be unfamiliar with it."

I was certainly unfamiliar with the liqueur which he insisted we must taste, and which was contained in a sort of square, opaque bottle unknown, I think, to English wine merchants. Beyond doubt it was potent stuff; and some cigars which the Spaniard produced on this occasion and which were enclosed in little glass cylinders resembling test-tubes and elaborately sealed, I recognized to be priceless. They convinced me, if conviction had not visited me already, that Colonel Don Juan Sarmiento Menendez belonged to that old school of West Indian planters by whom the tradition of the Golden Americas had been for long preserved in the Spanish Main.

We discussed indifferent matters for a while, sipping this wonderful curaçao of our host's. The effect created by the Colonel's story faded entirely, and when, the latter being unable to conceal his drowsiness, Harley stood up, I took the hint with gratitude; for at that moment I did not feel in the mood to discuss serious business or indeed business of any kind.

"Gentlemen," said the Colonel, also rising, in spite of our protests, "I will observe your wishes. My guests' wishes are mine. We will meet the ladies

for tea on the terrace."

Harley and I walked out into the garden together, our courteous host standing in the open window, and bowing in that exaggerated fashion which in another might have been ridiculous but which was possible in Colonel Menendez, because of the peculiar grace of deportment which was his.

As we descended the steps I turned and glanced back, I know not why. But the impression which I derived of the Colonel's face as he stood there in the shadow of the veranda was one I can never forget.

His expression had changed utterly, or so it seemed to me. He no longer resembled Velasquez' haughty cavalier; gone, too, was the debonnaire bearing, I turned my head aside swiftly, hoping that he had not detected my backward glance.

I felt that I had violated hospitality. I felt that I had seen what I should not have seen. And the result was to bring about that which no story of West Indian magic could ever have wrought in my mind.

A dreadful, cold premonition claimed me, a premonition that this was a doomed man.

The look which I had detected upon his face was an indefinable, an indescribable look; but I had seen it in the eyes of one who had been bitten by a poisonous reptile and who knew his hours to be numbered. It was uncanny, unnerving; and whereas at first the atmosphere of Colonel Menendez's home had seemed to be laden with prosperous security, now that sense of ease and restfulness was gone—and gone for ever.

"Harley," I said, speaking almost at random, "this promises to be the strangest case you have ever handled."

"Promises?" Paul Harley laughed shortly. "It *is* the strangest case, Knox. It is a case of wheels within wheels, of mystery crowning mystery. Have you studied our host?"

"Closely."

"And what conclusion have you formed?"

"None at the moment; but I think one is slowly crystalizing."

"Hm," muttered Harley, as we paced slowly on amid the rose trees. "Of one thing I am satisfied."

"What is that?"

"That Colonel Menendez is not afraid of Bat Wing, whoever or whatever Bat Wing may be."

"Not afraid?"

"Certainly he is not afraid, Knox. He has possibly been afraid in the past, but now he is resigned."

"Resigned to what?"

"Resigned to death!"

"Good God, Harley, you are right!" I cried. "You are right! I saw it in his eyes as we left the library."

Harley stopped and turned to me sharply.

"You saw this in the Colonel's eyes?" he challenged.

"I did."

"Which corroborates my theory," he said, softly; "for *I* had seen it elsewhere."

"Where do you mean, Harley?"

"In the face of Madame de Stämer."

"What?"

"Knox"—Harley rested his hand upon my arm and looked about him cautiously—"*she knows.*"

"But knows what?"

"That is the question which we are here to answer, but I am as sure as it is humanly possible to be sure of anything that whatever Colonel Menendez may tell us to-night, one point at least he will withhold."

"What do you expect him to withhold?"

"The meaning of the sign of the Bat Wing."

"Then you think he knows its meaning?"

"He has told us that it is the death-token of Voodoo."

I stared at Harley in perplexity.

"Then you believe his explanation to be false?"

"Not necessarily, Knox. It may be what he claims for it. But he is keeping something back. He speaks all the time from behind a barrier which he, himself, has deliberately erected against me."

"I cannot understand why he should do so," I declared, as he looked at me steadily. "Within the last few moments I have become definitely convinced that his appeal to you was no idle one. Therefore, why should he not offer you every aid in his power?"

"Why, indeed?" muttered Harley.

"The same thing," I continued, "applies to Madame de Stämer. If ever I have seen love-light in a woman's eyes I have seen it in hers, to-day, whenever her glance has rested upon Colonel Menendez. Harley, I believe she literally worships the ground he walks upon."

"She does, she does!" cried my companion, and emphasized the words with beats of his clenched fist. "It is utterly, damnably mystifying. But I tell you, she knows, Knox, she knows!"

"You mean she knows that he is a doomed man?"

Harley nodded rapidly.

"They both know," he replied; "but there is something which they dare not divulge."

He glanced at me swiftly, and his bronzed face wore a peculiar expression.

"Have you had an opportunity of any private conversation with Miss Val Beverley?" he enquired.

"Yes," I said. "Surely you remember that you found me chatting with her when you returned from your inspection of the tower."

"I remember perfectly well, but I thought you might have just met. Now it appears to me, Knox, that you have quickly established yourself in the good books of a very charming girl. My only reason for visiting the tower was to afford you just this opportunity! Don't frown. Beyond reminding you of the fact that she has been on intimate terms with Madame de Stämer for some years, I will not intrude in any way upon your private plans in that direction."

I stared at him, and I suppose my expression was an angry one.

"Surely you don't misunderstand me?" he said. "A cultured English girl of that type cannot possibly have lived with these people without learning something of the matters which are puzzling us so badly. Am I asking too much?"

"I see what you mean," I said, slowly. "No, I suppose you are right, Harley."

"Good," he muttered. "I will leave that side of the enquiry in your very capable hands, Knox."

He paused, and began to stare about him.

"From this point," said he, "we have an unobstructed view of the tower."

We turned and stood looking up at the unsightly gray structure, with its geometrical rows of windows and the minaret-like gallery at the top.

"Of course"—I broke a silence of some moments duration—"the entire scheme of Cray's Folly is peculiar, but the rooms, except for a uniformity which is monotonous, and an unimaginative scheme of decoration which makes them all seem alike, are airy and well lighted, eminently sane and substantial. The tower, however, is quite inexcusable, unless the idea was to enable the occupant to look over the tops of the trees in all directions."

"Yes," agreed Harley, "it is an ugly landmark. But yonder up the slope I can see the corner of what seems to be a very picturesque house of some kind."

"I caught a glimpse of it earlier to-day," I replied, "Yes, from this point a little more of it is visible. Apparently quite an old place."

I paused, staring up the hillside, but Harley, hands locked behind him and chin lowered reflectively, was pacing on. I joined him, and we proceeded for some little distance in silence, passing a gardener who touched his cap respectfully and to whom I thought at first my companion was about to address some remark. Harley passed on, however, still occupied, it seemed, with his reflections, and coming to a gravel path which, bordering one side of the lawns, led down from terrace to terrace into the valley, turned, and began to descend.

"Let us go and interview the swans," he murmured absently.

VII. AT THE LAVENDER ARMS

In certain moods Paul Harley was impossible as a companion, and I, who knew him well, had learned to leave him to his own devices at such times. These moods invariably corresponded with his meeting some problem to the heart of which the lance of his keen wit failed to penetrate. His humour might not display itself in the spoken word, he merely became oblivious of everything and everybody around him. People might talk to him and he scarce noted their presence, familiar faces appear and he would see them not. Outwardly he remained the observant Harley who could see further into a mystery than any other in England, but his observation was entirely

introspective; although he moved amid the hustle of life he was spiritually alone, communing with the solitude which dwells in every man's heart.

Presently, then, as we came to the lake at the foot of the sloping lawns, where water lilies were growing and quite a number of swans had their habitation, I detected the fact that I had ceased to exist so far as Harley was concerned. Knowing this mood of old, I pursued my way alone, pressing on across the valley and making for a swing gate which seemed to open upon a public footpath. Coming to this gate I turned and looked back.

Paul Harley was standing where I had left him by the edge of the lake, staring as if hypnotized at the slowly moving swans. But I would have been prepared to wager that he saw neither swans nor lake, but mentally was far from the spot, deep in some complex maze of reflection through which no ordinary mind could hope to follow him.

I glanced at my watch and found that it was but little after two o'clock. Luncheon at Cray's Folly was early. I therefore had some time upon my hands and I determined to employ it in exploring part of the neighbourhood. Accordingly I filled and lighted my pipe and strolled leisurely along the footpath, enjoying the beauty of the afternoon, and admiring the magnificent timber which grew upon the southerly slopes of the valley.

Larks sang high above me and the air was fragrant with those wonderful earthy scents which belong to an English countryside. A herd of very fine Jersey cattle presently claimed inspection, and a little farther on I found myself upon a high road where a brown-faced fellow seated aloft upon a hay-cart cheerily gave me good-day as I passed.

Quite at random I turned to the left and followed the road, so that presently I found myself in a very small village, the principal building of which was a very small inn called the "Lavender Arms."

Colonel Menendez's curaçao, combined with the heat of the day, had made me thirsty; for which reason I stepped into the bar-parlour determined to sample the local ale. I was served by the landlady, a neat, round, red little person, and as she retired, having placed a foam-capped mug upon the counter, her glance rested for a moment upon the only other occupant of the room, a man seated in an armchair immediately to the right of the door. A glass of whisky stood on the window ledge at his elbow, and that it was by no means the first which he had imbibed, his appearance seemed to indicate.

Having tasted the cool contents of my mug, I leaned back against the counter and looked at this person curiously.

He was apparently of about medium height, but of a somewhat fragile appearance. He was dressed like a country gentleman, and a stick and soft hat lay upon the ledge near his glass. But the thing about him which had immediately arrested my attention was his really extraordinary resemblance to Paul Harley's engraving of Edgar Allan Poe.

I wondered at first if Harley's frequent references to the eccentric American genius, to whom he accorded a sort of hero-worship, were responsible for my imagining a close resemblance where only a slight one existed. But inspection of that strange, dark face convinced me of the fact that my first impression had been a true one. Perhaps, in my curiosity, I stared rather rudely.

"You will pardon me, sir," said the stranger, and I was startled to note that he spoke with a faint American accent, "but are you a literary man?"

As I had judged to be the case, he was slightly bemused, but by no means drunk, and although his question was abrupt it was spoken civilly enough.

"Journalism is one of the several occupations in which I have failed," I replied, lightly.

"You are not a fiction writer?"

"I lack the imagination necessary for that craft, sir."

The other wagged his head slowly and took a drink of whisky. "Nevertheless," he said, and raised his finger solemnly, "you were thinking that I resembled Edgar Allan Poe!"

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed, for the man had really amazed me. "You clearly resemble him in more ways than one. I must really ask you to inform me how you deduced such a fact from a mere glance of mine."

"I will tell you, sir," he replied. "But, first, I must replenish my glass, and I should be honoured if you would permit me to replenish yours."

"Thanks very much," I said, "but I would rather you excused me."

"As you wish, sir," replied the American with grave courtesy, "as you wish."

He stepped up to the counter and rapped upon it with half a crown, until the landlady appeared. She treated me to a pathetic glance, but refilled the empty glass.

My American acquaintance having returned to his seat and having added a very little water to the whisky went on:

"Now, sir," said he, "my name is Colin Camber, formerly of Richmond, Virginia, United States of America, but now of the Guest House, Surrey, England, at your service."

Taking my cue from Mr. Camber's gloomy but lofty manner, I bowed formally and mentioned my name.

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Knox," he assured me; "and now, sir, to answer your question. When you came in a few moments ago you glanced at me. Your eyes did not open widely as is the case when one recognizes, or thinks one recognizes, an acquaintance, they narrowed. This indicated retrospection. For a moment they turned aside. You were focussing a fugitive idea, a memory. You captured it. You looked at me again, and your successive glances read as follows: The hair worn uncommonly long, the mathematical brow, the eyes of a poet, the slight moustache, small mouth, weak chin; the glass at his elbow. The resemblance is complete. Knowing how complete it is myself, sir, I ventured to test my theory, and it proved to be sound."

Now, as Mr. Colin Camber had thus spoken in the serious manner of a slightly drunken man, I had formed the opinion that I stood in the presence of a very singular character. Here was that seeming mesalliance which not infrequently begets genius: a powerful and original mind allied to a weak will. I wondered what Mr. Colin Camber's occupation might be, and somewhat, too, I wondered why his name was unfamiliar to me. For that the possessor of that brow and those eyes could fail to make his mark in any profession which he might take up I was unwilling to believe.

"Your exposition has been very interesting, Mr. Camber," I said. "You are a singularly close observer, I perceive."

"Yes," he replied, "I have passed my life in observing the ways of my fellowmen, a study which I have pursued in various parts of the world without appreciable benefit to myself. I refer to financial benefit."

He contemplated me with a look which had grown suddenly pathetic.

"I would not have you think, sir," he added, "that I am an habitual toper. I have latterly been much upset by—domestic worries, and—er—" He emptied his glass at a draught. "Surely, Mr. Knox, you are going to

replenish? Whilst you are doing so, would you kindly request Mrs. Wootton to extend the same favour to myself?"

But at that moment Mrs. Wootton in person appeared behind the counter. "Time, please, gentlemen," she said; "it is gone half-past two."

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Camber, rising. "What is that? You decline to serve me, Mrs. Wootton?"

"Why, not at all, Mr. Camber," answered the landlady, "but I can serve no one now; it's after time."

"You decline to serve me," he muttered, his speech becoming slurred. "Am I, then, to be insulted?"

I caught a glance of entreaty from the landlady. "My dear sir," I said, genially, "we must bow to the law, I suppose. At least we are better off here than in America."

"Ah, that is true," agreed Mr. Camber, throwing his head back and speaking the words as though they possessed some deep dramatic significance. "Yes, but such laws are an insult to every intelligent man."

He sat down again rather heavily, and I stood looking from him to the landlady, and wondering what I should do. The matter was decided for me, however, in a way which I could never have foreseen. For, hearing a light footfall upon the step which led up to the bar-parlour, I turned—and there almost beside me stood a wrinkled little Chinaman!

He wore a blue suit and a tweed cap, he wore queer, thick-soled slippers, and his face was like a smiling mask hewn out of very old ivory. I could scarcely credit the evidence of my senses, since the Lavender Arms was one of the last places in which I should have looked for a native of China.

Mr. Colin Camber rose again, and fixing his melancholy eyes upon the newcomer:

"Ah Tsong," he said in a tone of cold anger, "what are you doing here?"

Quite unmoved the Chinaman replied:

"Blingee you chit, sir, vellee soon go back."

"What do you mean?" demanded Mr. Camber. "Answer me, Ah Tsong: who sent you?"

"Lilly missee," crooned the Chinaman, smiling up into the other's face with a sort of childish entreaty. "Lilly missee."

"Oh," said Mr. Camber in a changed voice. "Oh."

He stood very upright for a moment, his gaze set upon the wrinkled Chinese face. Then he looked at Mrs. Wootton and bowed, and looked at me and bowed, very stiffly.

"I must excuse myself, sir," he announced. "My wife desires my presence at home."

I returned his bow, and as he walked quite steadily toward the door, followed by Ah Tsong, he paused, turned, and said: "Mr. Knox, I should esteem it a friendly action if you would spare me an hour of your company before you leave Surrey. My visitors are few. Any one, any one, will direct you to the Guest House. I am persuaded that we have much in common. Good-day, sir."

He went down the steps, disappearing in company with the Chinaman, and having watched them go, I turned to Mrs. Wootton, the landlady, in silent astonishment.

She nodded her head and sighed.

"The same every day and every evening for months past," she said. "I am afraid it's going to be the death of him."

"Do you mean that Mr. Camber comes here every day and is always fetched by the Chinaman?"

"Twice every day," corrected the landlady, "and his poor wife sends here regularly."

"What a tragedy," I muttered, "and such a brilliant man."

"Ah," said she, busily removing jugs and glasses from the counter, "it does seem a terrible thing."

"Has Mr. Camber lived for long in this neighbourhood?" I ventured to inquire.

"It was about three years ago, sir, that he took the old Guest House at Mid-Hatton. I remember the time well enough because of all the trouble there was about him bringing a Chinaman down here."

"I can imagine it must have created something of a sensation," I murmured. "Is the Guest House a large property?"

"Oh, no, sir, only ten rooms and a garden, and it had been vacant for a long time. It belongs to what is called the Crayland Park Estate."

"Mr. Camber, I take it, is a literary man?"

"So I believe, sir."

Mrs. Wootton, having cleared the counter, glanced up at the clock and then at me with a cheery but significant smile.

"I see that it is after time," I said, returning the smile, "but the queer people who seem to live hereabouts interest me very much."

"I can't wonder at that, sir!" said the landlady, laughing outright. "Chinamen and Spanish men and what-not. If some of the old gentry that lived here before the war could see it, they wouldn't recognize the place, of that I am sure."

"Ah, well," said I, pausing at the step, "I shall hope to see more of Mr. Camber, and of yourself too, madam, for your ale is excellent."

"Thank you, sir, I'm sure," said the landlady much gratified, "but as to Mr. Camber, I really doubt if he would know you if you met him again. Not if he was sober, I mean."

"Really?"

"Oh, it's a fact, believe me. Just in the last six months or so he has started on the rampage like, but some of the people he has met in here and asked to call upon him have done it, thinking he meant it."

"And they have not been well received?" said I, lingering.

"They have had the door shut in their faces!" declared Mrs. Wootton with a certain indignation. "He either does not remember what he says or does when he is in drink, or he pretends he doesn't. Oh, dear, it's a funny world. Well, good-day, sir."

"Good-day," said I, and came out of the Lavender Arms full of sympathy with the views of the "old gentry," as outlined by Mrs. Wootton; for certainly it would seem that this quiet spot in the Surrey Hills had become a rallying ground for peculiar people.

VIII. THE CALL OF M'KOMBO

Of tea upon the veranda of Cray's Folly that afternoon I retain several notable memories. I got into closer touch with my host and hostess, without achieving anything like a proper understanding of either of them, and I procured a new viewpoint of Miss Val Beverley. Her repose was misleading. She deliberately subjugated her own vital personality to that of

Madame de Stämer, why, I knew not, unless she felt herself under an obligation to do so. That her blue-gray eyes could be wistful was true enough, they could also be gay; and once I detected in them a look of sadness which dispelled the butterfly illusion belonging to her dainty slenderness, to her mobile lips, to the vagabond curling hair of russet brown.

Paul Harley's manner remained absent, but I who knew his moods so well recognized that this abstraction was no longer real. It was a pose which he often adopted when in reality he was keenly interested in his surroundings. It baffled me, however, as effectively as it baffled others, and whilst at one moment I decided that he was studying Colonel Menendez, in the next I became convinced that Madame de Stämer was the subject upon his mental dissecting table.

That he should find in Madame a fascinating problem did not surprise me. She must have afforded tempting study for any psychologist. I could not fathom the nature of the kinship existing between herself and the Spanish colonel, for Madame de Stämer was French to her fingertips. Her expressions, her gestures, her whole outlook on life proclaimed the fashionable Parisienne.

She possessed a vigorous masculine intelligence and was the most entertaining companion imaginable. She was daringly outspoken, and it was hard to believe that her gaiety was forced. Yet, as the afternoon wore on, I became more and more convinced that such was the case.

I thought that before affliction visited her Madame de Stämer must have been a vivacious and a beautiful woman. Her vivacity remained and much of her beauty, so that it was difficult to believe her snow-white hair to be a product of nature. Again and again I found myself regarding it as a powdered coiffure of the Pompadour period and wondering why Madame wore no patches.

That a deep and sympathetic understanding existed between herself and Colonel Menendez was unmistakable. More than once I intercepted glances from the dark eyes of Madame which were lover-like, yet laden with a profound sorrow. She was playing a rôle, and I was convinced that Harley knew this. It was not merely a courageous fight against affliction on the part of a woman of the world, versed in masking her real self from the prying

eyes of society, it was a studied performance prompted by some deeper motive.

She dressed with exquisite taste, and to see her seated there amid her cushions, gesticulating vivaciously, one would never have supposed that she was crippled. My admiration for her momentarily increased, the more so since I could see that she was sincerely fond of Val Beverley, whose every movement she followed with looks of almost motherly affection. This was all the more strange as Madame de Stämer whose age, I supposed, lay somewhere on the sunny side of forty, was of a type which expects, and wins, admiration, long after the average woman has ceased to be attractive.

One endowed with such a temperament is as a rule unreasonably jealous of youth and good looks in another. I could not determine if Madame's attitude were to be ascribed to complacent self-satisfaction or to a nobler motive. It sufficed for me that she took an unfeigned joy in the youthful sweetness of her companion.

"Val, dear," she said, presently, addressing the girl, "you should make those sleeves shorter, my dear."

She had a rapid way of speaking, and possessed a slightly husky but fascinatingly vibrant voice.

"Your arms are very pretty. You should not hide them."

Val Beverley blushed, and laughed to conceal her embarrassment.

"Oh, my dear," exclaimed Madame, "why be ashamed of arms? All women have arms, but some do well to hide them."

"Quite right, Marie," agreed the Colonel, his thin voice affording an odd contrast to the deeper tones of his cousin. "But it is the scraggy ones who seem to delight in displaying their angles."

"The English, yes," Madame admitted, "but the French, no. They are too clever, Juan."

"Frenchwomen think too much about their looks," said Val Beverley, quietly. "Oh, you know they do, Madame. They would rather die than be without admiration."

Madame shrugged her shoulders.

"So would I, my dear," she confessed, "although I cannot walk. Without admiration there is"—she snapped her fingers—"nothing. And who would notice a linnet when a bird of paradise was about, however sweet her voice? Tell me that, my dear?"

Paul Harley aroused himself and laughed heartily.

"Yet," he said, "I think with Miss Beverley, that this love of elegance does not always make for happiness. Surely it is the cause of half the domestic tragedies in France?"

"Ah, the French love elegance," cried Madame, shrugging, "they cannot help it. To secure what is elegant a Frenchwoman will sometimes forget her husband, yes, but never forget herself."

"Really, Marie," protested the Colonel, "you say most strange things!"

"Is that so, Juan?" she replied, casting one of her queer glances in his direction; "but how would you like to be surrounded by a lot of drabs, eh? That man, Mr. Knox," she extended one white hand in the direction of Colonel Menendez, the fingers half closed, in a gesture which curiously reminded me of Sarah Bernhardt, "that man would notice if a parlourmaid came into the room with a shoe unbuttoned. Poof! if we love elegance it is because without it the men would never love *us*."

Colonel Menendez bent across the table and kissed the white fingers in his courtier-like fashion.

"My sweet cousin," he said, "I should love you in rags."

Madame smiled and flushed like a girl, but withdrawing her hand she shrugged.

"They would have to be *pretty* rags!" she added.

During this little scene I detected Val Beverley looking at me in a vaguely troubled way, and it was easy to guess that she was wondering what construction I should place upon it. However:

"I am going into the town," declared Madame de Stämer, energetically." Half the things ordered from Hartley's have never been sent."

"Oh, Madame, please let *me* go," cried Val Beverley.

"My dear," pronounced Madame, "I will not let you go, but I will let you come with me if you wish."

She rang a little bell which stood upon the tea-table beside the urn, and Pedro came out through the drawing room.

"Pedro," she said, "is the car ready?"

The Spanish butler bowed.

"Tell Carter to bring it round. Hurry, dear," to the girl, "if you are coming with me. I shall not be a minute."

Thereupon she whisked her mechanical chair about, waved her hand to dismiss Pedro, and went steering through the drawing room at a great rate, with Val Beverley walking beside her.

As we resumed our seats Colonel Menendez lay back with half-closed eyes, his glance following the chair and its occupant until both were swallowed up in the shadows of the big drawing room.

"Madame de Stämer is a very remarkable woman," said Paul Harley.

"Remarkable?" replied the Colonel. "The spirit of all the old chivalry of France is imprisoned within her, I think."

He passed cigarettes around, of a long kind resembling cheroots and wrapped in tobacco leaf. I thought it strange that having thus emphasized Madame's nationality he did not feel it incumbent upon him to explain the mystery of their kinship. However, he made no attempt to do so, and almost before we had lighted up, a racy little two-seater was driven around the gravel path by Carter, the chauffeur who had brought us to Cray's Folly from London.

The man descended and began to arrange wraps and cushions, and a few moments later back came Madame again, dressed for driving. Carter was about to lift her into the car when Colonel Menendez stood up and advanced.

"Sit down, Juan, sit down!" said Madame, sharply.

A look of keen anxiety, I had almost said of pain, leapt into her eyes, and the Colonel hesitated.

"How often must I tell you," continued the throbbing voice, "that you must not exert yourself."

Colonel Menendez accepted the rebuke humbly, but the incident struck me as grotesque; for it was difficult to associate delicacy with such a fine specimen of well-preserved manhood as the Colonel.

However, Carter performed the duty of assisting Madame into her little car, and when for a moment he supported her upright, before placing her among the cushions, I noted that she was a tall woman, slender and elegant.

All smiles and light, sparkling conversation, she settled herself comfortably at the wheel and Val Beverley got in beside her. Madame nodded to Carter in dismissal, waved her hand to Colonel Menendez, cried "Au revoir!" and then away went the little car, swinging around the angle of the house and out of sight.

Our host stood bare-headed upon the veranda listening to the sound of the engine dying away among the trees. He seemed to be lost in reflection from which he only aroused himself when the purr of the motor became inaudible.

"And now, gentlemen," he said, and suppressed a sigh, "we have much to talk about. This spot is cool, but is it sufficiently private? Perhaps, Mr. Harley, you would prefer to talk in the library?"

Paul Harley flicked ash from the end of his cigarette.

"Better still in your own study, Colonel Menendez," he replied.

"What, do you suspect eavesdroppers?" asked the Colonel, his manner becoming momentarily agitated.

He looked at Harley as though he suspected the latter of possessing private information.

"We should neglect no possible precaution," answered my friend. "That agencies inimical to your safety are focussed upon the house your own statement amply demonstrates."

Colonel Menendez seemed to be on the point of speaking again, but he checked himself and in silence led the way through the ornate library to a smaller room which opened out of it, and which was furnished as a study.

Here the motif was distinctly one of officialdom. Although the Southern element was not lacking, it was not so marked as in the library or in the hall. The place was appointed for utility rather than ornament. Everything was in perfect order. In the library, with the blinds drawn, one might have supposed oneself in Trinidad; in the study, under similar conditions, one might equally well have imagined Downing Street to lie outside the windows. Essentially, this was the workroom of a man of affairs.

Having settled ourselves comfortably, Paul Harley opened the conversation.

"In several particulars," said he, "I find my information to be incomplete."

He consulted the back of an envelope, upon which, I presumed during the afternoon, he had made a number of pencilled notes.

"For instance," he continued, "your detection of someone watching the house, and subsequently of someone forcing an entrance, had no visible association with the presence of the bat wing attached to your front door?"

"No," replied the Colonel, slowly, "these episodes took place a month ago."

"Exactly a month ago?"

"They took place immediately before the last full moon."

"Ah, before the full moon. And because you associate the activities of Voodoo with the full moon, you believe that the old menace has again become active?"

The Colonel nodded emphatically. He was busily engaged in rolling one of his eternal cigarettes.

"This belief of yours was recently confirmed by the discovery of the bat wing?"

"I no longer doubted," said Colonel Menendez, shrugging his shoulders. "How could I?"

"Quite so," murmured Harley, absently, and evidently pursuing some private train of thought. "And now, I take it that your suspicions, if expressed in words would amount to this: During your last visit to Cuba you (*a*) either killed some high priest of Voodoo, or (*b*) seriously injured him? Assuming the first theory to be the correct one, your death was determined upon by the sect over which he had formerly presided. Assuming the second to be accurate, however, it is presumably the man himself for whom we must look. Now, Colonel Menendez, kindly inform me if you recall the name of this man?"

"I recall it very well," replied the Colonel. "His name was M'kombo, and he was a Benin negro."

"Assuming that he is still alive, what, roughly, would his age be to-day?"

The Colonel seemed to meditate, pushing a box of long Martinique cigars across the table in my direction.

"He would be an old man," he pronounced. "I, myself, am fifty-two, and I should say that M'kombo if alive to-day would be nearer to seventy than sixty."

"Ah," murmured Harley, "and did he speak English?"

"A few words, I believe."

Paul Harley fixed his gaze upon the dark, aquiline face.

"In short," he said, "do you really suspect that it was M'kombo whose shadow you saw upon the lawn, who a month ago made a midnight entrance into Cray's Folly, and who recently pinned a bat wing to the door?"

Colonel Menendez seemed somewhat taken aback by this direct question. "I cannot believe it," he confessed.

"Do you believe that this order or religion of Voodooism has any existence outside those places where African negroes or descendents of negroes are settled?"

"I should not have been prepared to believe it, Mr. Harley, prior to my experiences in Washington and elsewhere."

"Then you do believe that there are representatives of this cult to be met with in Europe and America?"

"I should have been prepared to believe it possible in America, for in America there are many negroes, but in England——"

Again he shrugged his shoulders.

"I would remind you," said Harley, quietly, "that there are also quite a number of negroes in England. If you seriously believe Voodoo to follow negro migration, I can see no objection to assuming it to be a universal cult."

"Such an idea is incredible."

"Yet by what other hypothesis," asked Harley, "are we to cover the facts of your own case as stated by yourself? Now," he consulted his pencilled notes, "there is another point. I gather that these African sorcerers rely largely upon what I may term intimidation. In other words, they claim the power of wishing an enemy to death."

He raised his eyes and stared grimly at the Colonel.

"I should not like to suppose that a man of your courage and culture could subscribe to such a belief."

"I do not, sir," declared the Colonel, warmly. "No Obeah man could ever exercise his will upon *me!*"

"Yet, if I may say so," murmured Harley, "your will to live seems to have become somewhat weakened."

"What do you mean?"

Colonel Menendez stood up, his delicate nostrils dilated. He glared angrily at Harley.

"I mean that I perceive a certain resignation in your manner of which I do not approve."

"You do not *approve?*" said Colonel Menendez, softly; and I thought as he stood looking down upon my friend that I had rarely seen a more

formidable figure.

Paul Harley had roused him unaccountably, and knowing my friend for a master of tact I knew also that this had been deliberate, although I could not even dimly perceive his object.

"I occupy the position of a specialist," Harley continued, "and you occupy that of my patient. Now, you cannot disguise from me that your mental opposition to this danger which threatens has become slackened. Allow me to remind you that the strongest defence is counter-attack. You are angry, Colonel Menendez, but I would rather see you angry than apathetic. To come to my last point. You spoke of a neighbour in terms which led me to suppose that you suspected him of some association with your enemies. May I ask for the name of this person?"

Colonel Menendez sat down again, puffing furiously at his cigarette, whilst beginning to roll another. He was much disturbed, was fighting to regain mastery of himself.

"I apologize from the bottom of my heart," he said, "for a breach of good behaviour which really was unforgivable. I was angry when I should have been grateful. Much that you have said is true. Because it is true, I despise myself."

He flashed a glance at Paul Harley.

"Awake," he continued, "I care for no man breathing, black or white; but *asleep*"—he shrugged his shoulders. "It is in sleep that these dealers in unclean things obtain their advantage."

"You excite my curiosity," declared Harley.

"Listen," Colonel Menendez bent forward, resting his elbows upon his knees. Between the yellow fingers of his left hand he held the newly completed cigarette whilst he continued to puff vigorously at the old one. "You recollect my speaking of the death of a certain native girl?"

Paul Harley nodded.

"The real cause of her death was never known, but I obtained evidence to show that on the night after the wing of a bat had been attached to her hut, she wandered out in her sleep and visited the Black Belt. Can you doubt that someone was calling her?"

"Calling her?"

"Mr. Harley, she was obeying the call of M'kombo!"

"The *call* of M'kombo? You refer to some kind of hypnotic suggestions?"

"I illustrate," replied the Colonel, "to help to make clear something which I have to tell you. On the night when last the moon was full—on the night after someone had entered the house—I had retired early to bed. Suddenly I awoke, feeling very cold. I awoke, I say, and where do you suppose I found myself?"

"I am all anxiety to hear."

"On the point of entering the Tudor garden—you call it Tudor garden?—which is visible from the window of your room!"

"Most extraordinary," murmured Harley; "and you were in your night attire?"

"I was."

"And what had awakened you?"

"An accident. I believe a lucky accident. I had cut my bare foot upon the gravel and the pain awakened! me."

"You had no recollection of any dream which had prompted you to go down into the garden?" "None whatever."

"Does your room face in that direction?"

"It does not. It faces the lake on the south of the house. I had descended to a side door, unbarred it, and walked entirely around the east wing before I awakened."

"Your room faces the lake," murmured Harley.

"Yes."

Their glances met, and in Paul Harley's expression there seemed to be a challenge.

"You have not yet told me," said he, "the name of your neighbour."

Colonel Menendez lighted his new cigarette.

"Mr. Harley," he confessed, "I regret that I ever referred to this suspicion of mine. Indeed it is hardly a suspicion, it is what I may call a desperate doubt. Do you say that, a desperate doubt?"

"I think I follow you," said Harley.

"The fact is this, I only know of one person within ten miles of Cray's Folly who has ever visited Cuba."

"Ah."

"I have no other scrap of evidence to associate him I with my shadowy enemy. This being so, you will pardon me if I ask you to forget that I ever referred to his existence."

He spoke the words with a sort of lofty finality, and accompanied them with a gesture of the hands which really left Harley no alternative but to drop the subject.

Again their glances met, and it was patent to me that underlying all this conversation was something beyond my ken. What it was that Harley suspected I could not imagine, nor what it was that Colonel Menendez desired to conceal; but tension was in the very air. The Spaniard was on the defensive, and Paul Harley was puzzled, irritated.

It was a strange interview, and one which in the light of after events I recognized to possess extraordinary significance. That sixth sense of Harley's was awake, was prompting him, but to what extent he understood its promptings at that hour I did not know, and have never known to this day. Intuitively, I believe, as he sat there staring at Colonel Menendez, he began to perceive the shadow within a shadow which was the secret of Cray's Folly, which was the thing called Bat Wing, which was the devilish force at that very hour alive and potent in our midst.

IX. OBEAH

This conversation in Colonel Menendez's study produced a very unpleasant impression upon my mind. The atmosphere of Cray's Folly seemed to become charged with unrest. Of Madame de Stämer and Miss Beverley I saw nothing up to the time that I retired to dress. Having dressed I walked into Harley's room, anxious to learn if he had formed any theory to account for the singular business which had brought us to Surrey.

Harley had excused himself directly we had left the study, stating that he wished to get to the village post-office in time to send a telegram to London. Our host had suggested a messenger, but this, as well as the offer of a car, Harley had declined, saying that the exercise would aid reflection. Nevertheless, I was surprised to find his room empty, for I could not imagine why the sending of a telegram should have detained him so long.

Dusk was falling, and viewed from the open window the Tudor garden below looked very beautiful, part of it lying in a sort of purplish shadow and the rest being mystically lighted as though viewed through a golden

veil. To the whole picture a sort of magic quality was added by a speck of high-light which rested upon the face of the old sun-dial.

I thought that here was a fit illustration for a fairy tale; then I remembered the Colonel's account of how he had awakened in the act of entering this romantic plaisance, and I was touched anew by an unrestfulness, by a sense of the uncanny,

I observed a book lying upon the dressing table, and concluding that it was one which Harley had brought with him, I took it up, glancing at the title. It was "Negro Magic," and switching on the light, for there was a private electric plant in Cray's Folly, I opened the book at random and began to read.

"The religion of the negro," said this authority, "is emotional, and more often than not associated with beliefs in witchcraft and in the rites known as Voodoo or Obi Mysteries. It has been endeavoured by some students to show that these are relics of the Fetish worship of equatorial Africa, but such a genealogy has never been satisfactorily demonstrated. The cannibalistic rituals, human sacrifices, and obscene ceremonies resembling those of the Black Sabbath of the Middle Ages, reported to prevail in Haiti and other of the islands, and by some among the negroes of the Southern States of America, may be said to rest on doubtful authority. Nevertheless, it is a fact beyond doubt that among the negroes both of the West Indies and the United States there is a widespread belief in the powers of the Obeah man. A native who believes himself to have come under the spell of such a sorcerer will sink into a kind of decline and sometimes die."

At this point I discovered several paragraphs underlined in pencil, and concluding that the underlining had been done by Paul Harley, I read them with particular care. They were as follows: "According to Hesketh J. Bell, the term Obeah is most probably derived from the substantive Obi, a word used on the East coast of Africa to denote witchcraft, sorcery, and fetishism in general. The etymology of Obi has been traced to a very antique source, stretching far back into Egyptian mythology. A serpent in the Egyptian language was called Ob or Aub. Obion is still the Egyptian name for a serpent. Moses, in the name of God, forbade the Israelites ever to enquire of the demon, Ob, which is translated in our Bible: Charmer or wizard, divinator or sorcerer. The Witch of Endor is called Oub or Ob, translated

Pythonissa; and Oubois was the name of the basilisk or royal serpent, emblem of the Sun and an ancient oracular deity of Africa."

A paragraph followed which was doubly underlined, and pursuing my reading I made a discovery which literally caused me to hold my breath. This is what I read:

"In a recent contribution to the *Occult Review*, Mr. Colin Camber, the American authority, offered some very curious particulars in support of a theory to show that whereas snakes and scorpions have always been recognized as sacred by Voodoo worshippers, the real emblem of their unclean religion is the bat, especially *the Vampire Bat of South America.*

"He pointed out that the symptoms of one dying beneath the spell of an Obeah man are closely paralleled in the cases of men and animals who have suffered from nocturnal attacks of blood-sucking bats."

I laid the open book down upon the bed. My brain was in a tumult. The several theories, or outlines of theories which hitherto I had entertained, were, by these simple paragraphs, cast into the utmost disorder. I thought of the Colonel's covert references to a neighbour whom he feared, of his guarded statement that the devotees of Voodoo were not confined to the West Indies, of the attack upon him in Washington, of the bat wing pinned to the door of Cray's Folly.

Incredulously, I thought of my acquaintance of the Lavender Arms, with his bemused expression and his magnificent brow; and a great doubt and wonder grew up in my mind.

I became increasingly impatient for the return of Paul Harley. I felt that a clue of the first importance had fallen into my possession; so that when, presently, as I walked impatiently up and down the room, the door opened and Harley entered, I greeted him excitedly.

"Harley!" I cried, "Harley! I have learned a most extraordinary thing!"

Even as I spoke and looked into the keen, eager face, the expression in Harley's eyes struck me. I recognized that in him, too, intense excitement was pent up. Furthermore, he was in one of his irritable moods. But, full of my own discoveries:

"I chanced to glance at this book," I continued, "whilst I was waiting for you. You have underlined certain passages."

He stared at me queerly.

"I discovered the book in my own library after you had gone last night, Knox, and it was then that I marked the passages which struck me as significant."

"But, Harley," I cried, "the man who is quoted here, Colin Camber, lives in this very neighbourhood!"

"I know."

"What! You know?"

"I learned it from Inspector Aylesbury of the County Police half an hour ago."

Harley frowned perplexedly. "Then, why, in Heaven's name didn't you tell me?" he exclaimed. "It would have saved me a most disagreeable journey into Market Hilton."

"Market Hilton! What, have you been into the town?"

"That is exactly where I have been, Knox. I 'phoned through to Innes from the village post-office after lunch to have the car sent down. There is a convenient garage by the Lavender Arms."

"But the Colonel has three cars," I exclaimed.

"The horse has four legs," replied Harley, irritably, "but although I have only two, there are times when I prefer to use them. I am still wondering why you failed to mention this piece of information when you had obtained it."

"My dear Harley," said I, patiently, "how could I possibly be expected to attach any importance to the matter? You must remember that at the time I had never seen this work on negro sorcery."

"No," said Harley, dropping down upon the bed, "that is perfectly true, Knox. I am afraid I have a liver at times; a distinct Indian liver. Excuse me, old man, but to tell you the truth I feel strangely inclined to pack my bag and leave for London without a moment's delay."

"What!" I cried.

"Oh, I know you would be sorry to go, Knox," said Harley, smiling, "and so, for many reasons, should I. But I have the strongest possible objection to being trifled with."

"I am afraid I don't quite understand you, Harley."

"Well, just consider the matter for a moment. Do you suppose that Colonel Menendez is ignorant of the fact that his nearest neighbour is a recognized authority upon Voodoo and allied subjects?"

"You are speaking, of course, of Colin Camber?"

"Of none other."

"No," I replied, thoughtfully, "the Colonel must know, of course, that Camber resides in the neighbourhood."

"And that he knows something of the nature of Camber's studies his remarks sufficiently indicate," added Harley. "The whole theory to account for these attacks upon his life rests on the premise that agents of these Obeah people are established in England and America. Then, in spite of my direct questions, he leaves me to find out for myself that Colin Camber's property practically adjoins his own!"

"Really! Does he reside so near as that?"

"My dear fellow," cried Harley, "he lives at a place called the Guest House. You can see it from part of the grounds of Cray's Folly. We were looking at it to-day."

"What! the house on the hillside?"

"That's the Guest House! What do you make of it, Knox? That Menendez suspects this man is beyond doubt. Why should he hesitate to mention his name?"

"Well," I replied, slowly, "probably because to associate practical sorcery and assassination with such a character would be preposterous."

"But the man is admittedly a student of these things, Knox."

"He may be, and that he is a genius of some kind I am quite prepared to believe. But having had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Colin Camber, I am not prepared to believe him capable of murder."

I suppose I spoke with a certain air of triumph, for Paul Harley regarded me silently for a while.

"You seem to be taking this case out of my hands, Knox," he said. "Whilst I have been systematically at work racing about the county in quest of information you would appear to have blundered further into the labyrinth than all my industry has enabled me to do."

He remained in a very evil humour, and now the cause of this suddenly came to light.

"I have spent a thoroughly unpleasant afternoon," he continued, "interviewing an impossible country policeman who had never heard of my existence!"

This display of human resentment honestly delighted me. It was refreshing to know that the omniscient Paul Harley was capable of pique.

"One, Inspector Aylesbury," he went on, bitterly, "a large person bearing a really interesting resemblance to a walrus, but lacking that creature's intelligence. It was not until Superintendent East had spoken to him from Scotland Yard that he ceased to treat me as a suspect. But his new attitude was almost more provoking than the old one. He adopted the manner of a regimental sergeant-major reluctantly interviewing a private with a grievance. If matters should so develop that we are compelled to deal with that fish-faced idiot, God help us all!"

He burst out laughing, his good humour suddenly quite restored, and taking out his pipe began industriously to load it.

"I can smoke while I am changing," he said, "and you can sit there and tell me all about Colin Camber."

I did as he requested, and Harley, who could change quicker than any man I had ever known, had just finished tying his bow as I completed my story of the encounter at the Lavender Arms.

"Hm," he muttered, as I ceased speaking. "At every turn I realize that without you I should have been lost, Knox. I am afraid I shall have to change your duties to-morrow."

"Change my duties? What do you mean?"

"I warn you that the new ones will be less pleasant than the old! In other words, I must ask you to tear yourself away from Miss Val Beverley for an hour in the morning, and take advantage of Mr. Camber's invitation to call upon him."

"Frankly, I doubt if he would acknowledge me."

"Nevertheless, you have a better excuse than I. In the circumstances it is most important that we should get in touch with this man."

"Very well," I said, ruefully. "I will do my best. But you don't seriously think, Harley, that the danger comes from there?"

Paul Harley took his dinner jacket from the chair upon which the man had laid it out, and turned to me.

"My dear Knox," he said, "you may remember that I spoke, recently, of retiring from this profession?"

"You did."

"My retirement will not be voluntary, Knox. I shall be kicked out as an incompetent ass; for, respecting the connection, if any, between the narrative of Colonel Menendez, the bat wing nailed to the door of the house, and Mr. Colin Camber, I have not the foggiest notion. In this, at last, I have triumphed over Auguste Dupin. Auguste Dupin never confessed defeat."

X. THE NIGHT WALKER

If luncheon had seemed extravagant, dinner at Cray's Folly proved to be a veritable Roman banquet. To associate ideas of selfishness with Miss Beverley was hateful, but the more I learned of the luxurious life of this queer household hidden away in the Surrey Hills the less I wondered at any one's consenting to share such exile. I had hitherto counted an American freak dinner, organized by a lucky plunger and held at the Café de Paris, as the last word in extravagant feasting. But I learned now that what was caviare in Monte Carlo was ordinary fare at Cray's Folly.

Colonel Menendez was an epicure with an endless purse. The excellence of one of the courses upon which I had commented led to a curious incident.

"You approve of the efforts of my chef?" said the Colonel.

"He is worthy of his employer," I replied.

Colonel Menendez bowed in his cavalierly fashion and Madame de Stämer positively beamed upon me.

"You shall speak for him," said the Spaniard. "He was with me in Cuba, but has no reputation in London. There are hotels that would snap him up."

I looked at the speaker in surprise.

"Surely he is not leaving you?" I asked.

The Colonel exhibited a momentary embarrassment.

"No, no. No, no," he replied, waving his hand gracefully, "I was only thinking that he—" there was a scarcely perceptible pause—"might wish to better himself. You understand?"

I understood only too well; and recollecting the, words spoken by Paul Harley that afternoon, respecting the Colonel's will to live, I became

conscious of an uncomfortable sense of chill.

If I had doubted that in so speaking he had been contemplating his own death, the behaviour of Madame de Stämer must have convinced me. Her complexion was slightly but cleverly made up, with all the exquisite art of the Parisienne, but even through the artificial bloom I saw her cheeks blanch. Her face grew haggard and her eyes burned unnaturally. She turned quickly aside to address Paul Harley, but I knew that the significance of this slight episode had not escaped him.

He was by no means at ease. In the first place, he was badly puzzled; in the second place, he was angry. He felt it incumbent upon him to save this man from a menace which he, Paul Harley, evidently recognized to be real, although to me it appeared wildly chimerical, and the very person upon whose active coöperation he naturally counted not only seemed resigned to his fate, but by deliberate omission of important data added to Harley's difficulties.

How much of this secret drama proceeding in Cray's Folly was appreciated by Val Beverley I could not determine. On this occasion, I remember, she was simply but perfectly dressed and, in my eyes, seemed the most sweetly desirable woman I had ever known. Realizing that I had already revealed my interest in the girl, I was oddly self-conscious, and a hundred times during the progress of dinner I glanced across at Harley, expecting to detect his quizzical smile. He was very stern, however, and seemed more reserved than usual. He was uncertain of his ground, I could see. He resented the understanding which evidently existed between Colonel Menendez and Madame de Stämer, and to which, although his aid had been sought, he was not admitted.

It seemed to me, personally, that an almost palpable shadow lay upon the room. Although, save for this one lapse, our host throughout talked gaily and entertainingly, I was obsessed by a memory of the expression which I had detected upon his face that morning, the expression of a doomed man.

What, in Heaven's name, I asked myself, did it all mean? If ever I saw the fighting spirit looking out of any man's eyes, it looked out of the eyes of Don Juan Sarmiento Menendez. Why, then, did he lie down to the menace of this mysterious Bat Wing, and if he counted opposition futile, why had he summoned Paul Harley to Cray's Folly?

With the passing of every moment I sympathized more fully with the perplexity of my friend, and no longer wondered that even his highly specialized faculties had failed to detect an explanation.

Remembering Colin Camber as I had seen him at the Lavender Arms, it was simply impossible to suppose that such a man as Menendez could fear such a man as Camber. True, I had seen the latter at a disadvantage, and I knew well enough that many a genius has been also a drunkard. But although I was prepared to find that Colin Camber possessed genius, I found it hard to believe that this was of a criminal type. That such a character could be the representative of some remote negro society was an idea too grotesque to be entertained for a moment.

I was tempted to believe that his presence in the neighbourhood of this haunted Cuban was one of those strange coincidences which in criminal history have sometimes proved so tragic for their victims.

Madame de Stämer, avoiding the Colonel's glances, which were pathetically apologetic, gradually recovered herself, and:

"My dear," she said to Val Beverley, "you look perfectly sweet to-night. Don't you think she looks perfectly sweet, Mr. Knox?"

Ignoring a look of entreaty from the blue-gray eyes:

"Perfectly," I replied.

"Oh, Mr. Knox," cried the girl, "why do you encourage her? She says embarrassing things like that every time I put on a new dress."

Her reference to a new dress set me speculating again upon the apparent anomaly of her presence at Cray's Folly. That she was not a professional "companion" was clear enough. I assumed that her father had left her suitably provided for, since she wore such expensively simple gowns. She had a delightful trick of blushing when attention was focussed upon her, and said Madame de Stämer:

"To be able to blush like that I would give my string of pearls—no, half of it."

"My dear Marie," declared Colonel Menendez, "I have seen you blush perfectly."

"No, no," Madame disclaimed the suggestion with one of those Bernhardt gestures, "I blushed my last blush when my second husband introduced me to my first husband's wife."

"Madame!" exclaimed Val Beverley, "how can you say such things?" She turned to me. "Really, Mr. Knox, they are all fables."

"In fables we renew our youth," said Madame.

"Ah," sighed Colonel Menendez; "our youth, our youth."

"Why sigh, Juan, why regret?" cried Madame, immediately. "Old age is only tragic to those who have never been young."

She directed a glance toward him as she spoke those words, and as I had felt when I had seen his tragic face on the veranda that morning I felt again in detecting this look of Madame de Stämer's. The yearning yet selfless love which it expressed was not for my eyes to witness.

"Thank God, Marie," replied the Colonel, and gallantly kissed his hand to her, "we have both been young, gloriously young."

When, at the termination of this truly historic dinner, the ladies left us:

"Remember, Juan," said Madame, raising her white, jewelled hand, and holding the fingers characteristically curled, "no excitement, no billiards, no cards."

Colonel Menendez bowed deeply, as the invalid wheeled herself from the room, followed by Miss Beverley. My heart was beating delightfully, for in the moment of departure the latter had favoured me with a significant glance, which seemed to say, "I am looking forward to a chat with you presently."

"Ah," said Colonel Menendez, when we three men found ourselves alone, "truly I am blessed in the autumn of my life with such charming companionship. Beauty and wit, youth and discretion. Is he not a happy man who possesses all these?"

"He should be," said Harley, gravely.

The saturnine Pedro entered with some wonderful crusted port, and Colonel Menendez offered cigars.

"I believe you are a pipe-smoker," said our courteous host to Harley, "and if this is so, I know that you will prefer your favourite mixture to any cigar that ever was rolled."

"Many thanks," said Harley, to whom no more delicate compliment could have been paid.

He was indeed an inveterate pipe-smoker, and only rarely did he truly enjoy a cigar, however choice its pedigree. With a sigh of content he began to fill his briar. His mood was more restful, and covertly I watched him

studying our host. The night remained very warm and one of the two windows of the dining room, which was the most homely apartment in Cray's Folly, was wide open, offering a prospect of sweeping velvet lawns touched by the magic of the moonlight.

A short silence fell, to be broken by the Colonel.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I trust you do not regret your fishing excursion?"

"I could cheerfully pass the rest of my days in such ideal surroundings," replied Paul Harley.

I nodded in agreement.

"But," continued my friend, speaking very deliberately, "I have to remember that I am here upon business, and that my professional reputation is perhaps at stake."

He stared very hard at Colonel Menendez.

"I have spoken with your butler, known as Pedro, and with some of the other servants, and have learned all that there is to be learned about the person unknown who gained admittance to the house a month ago, and concerning the wing of a bat, found attached to the door more recently."

"And to what conclusion have you come?" asked Colonel Menendez, eagerly.

He bent forward, resting his elbows upon his knees, a pose which he frequently adopted. He was smoking a cigar, but his total absorption in the topic under discussion was revealed by the fact that from a pocket in his dinner jacket he had taken out a portion of tobacco, had laid it in a slip of rice paper, and was busily rolling one of his eternal cigarettes.

"I might be enabled to come to one," replied Harley, "if you would answer a very simple question."

"What is this question?"

"It is this—Have you any idea who nailed the bat's wing to your door?"

Colonel Menendez's eyes opened very widely, and his face became more aquiline than ever.

"You have heard my story, Mr. Harley," he replied, softly. "If I know the explanation, why do I come to you?"

Paul Harley puffed at his pipe. His expression did not alter in the slightest.

"I merely wondered if your suspicions tended in the direction of Mr. Colin Camber," he said.

"Colin Camber!"

As the Colonel spoke the name either I became victim of a strange delusion or his face was momentarily convulsed. If my senses served me aright then his pronouncing of the words "Colin Camber" occasioned him positive agony. He clutched the arms of his chair, striving, I thought, to retain composure, and in this he succeeded, for when he spoke again his voice was quite normal.

"Have you any particular reason for your remark, Mr. Harley?"

"I have a reason," replied Paul Harley, "but don't misunderstand me. I suggest nothing against Mr. Camber. I should be glad, however, to know if you are acquainted with him?"

"We have never met."

"You possibly know him by repute?"

"I have heard of him, Mr. Harley. But to be perfectly frank, I have little in common with citizens of the United States."

A note of arrogance, which at times crept into his high, thin voice, became perceptible now, and the aristocratic, aquiline face looked very supercilious.

How the conversation would have developed I know not, but at this moment Pedro entered and delivered a message in Spanish to the Colonel, whereupon the latter arose and with very profuse apologies begged permission to leave us for a few moments.

When he had retired:

"I am going upstairs to write a letter, Knox," said Paul Harley. "Carry on with your old duties to-day, your new ones do not commence until to-morrow."

With that he laughed and walked out of the dining room, leaving me wondering whether to be grateful or annoyed. However, it did not take me long to find my way to the drawing room where the two ladies were seated side by side upon a settee, Madame's chair having been wheeled into a corner.

"Ah, Mr. Knox," exclaimed Madame as I entered, "have the others deserted, then?"

"Scarcely deserted, I think. They are merely straggling."

"Absent without leave," murmured Val Beverley.

I laughed, and drew up a chair. Madame de Stämer was smoking, but Miss Beverley was not. Accordingly, I offered her a cigarette, which she accepted, and as I was lighting it with elaborate care, every moment finding a new beauty in her charming face, Pedro again appeared and addressed some remark in Spanish to Madame.

"My chair, Pedro," she said; "I will come at once."

The Spanish butler wheeled the chair across to the settee, and lifting her with an ease which spoke of long practice, placed her amidst the cushions where she spent so many hours of her life.

"I know you will excuse me, dear," she said to Val Beverley, "because I feel sure that Mr. Knox will do his very best to make up for my absence. Presently, I shall be back."

Pedro holding the door open, she went wheeling out, and I found myself alone with Val Beverley.

At the time I was much too delighted to question the circumstances which had led to this tête-à-tête, but had I cared to give the matter any consideration, it must have presented rather curious features. The call first of host and then of hostess was inconsistent with the courtesy of the master of Cray's Folly, which, like the appointments of his home and his mode of life, was elaborate. But these ideas did not trouble me at the moment.

Suddenly, however, indeed before I had time to speak, the girl started and laid her hand upon my arm.

"Did you hear something?" she whispered, "a queer sort of sound?"

"No," I replied, "what kind of sound?"

"An odd sort of sound, almost like—the flapping of wings."

I saw that she had turned pale, I saw the confirmation of something which I had only partly realised before: that her life at Cray's Folly was a constant fight against some haunting shadow. Her gaiety, her lightness, were but a mask. For now, in those wide-open eyes, I read absolute horror.

"Miss Beverley," I said, grasping her hand reassuringly, "you alarm me. What has made you so nervous to-night?"

"To-night!" she echoed, "to-night? It is every night. If you had not come —" she corrected herself—"if someone had not come, I don't think I could have stayed. I am sure I could not have stayed."

"Doubtless the attempted burglary alarmed you?" I suggested, intending to sooth her fears.

"Burglary?" She smiled unmirthfully. "It was no burglary."

"Why do you say so, Miss Beverley?"

"Do you think I don't know why Mr. Harley is here?" she challenged. "Oh, believe me, I know—I know. I, too, saw the bat's wing nailed to the door, Mr. Knox. You are surely not going to suggest that this was the work of a burglar?"

I seated myself beside her on the settee.

"You have great courage," I said. "Believe me, I quite understand all that you have suffered."

"Is my acting so poor?" she asked, with a pathetic smile.

"No, it is wonderful, but to a sympathetic observer only acting, nevertheless."

I noted that my presence reassured her, and was much comforted by this fact.

"Would you like to tell me all about it," I continued; "or would this merely renew your fears?"

"I should like to tell you," she replied in a low voice, glancing about her as if to make sure that we were alone. "Except for odd people, friends, I suppose, of the Colonel's, we have had so few visitors since we have been at Cray's Folly. Apart from all sorts of queer happenings which really"—she laughed nervously—"may have no significance whatever, the crowning mystery to my mind is why Colonel Menendez should have leased this huge house."

"He does not entertain very much, then?"

"Scarcely at all. The 'County'—do you know what I mean by the 'County?'—began by receiving him with open arms and ended by sending him to Coventry. His lavish style of entertainment they labelled 'swank'—horrible word but very expressive! They concluded that they did not understand him, and of everything they don't understand they disapprove. So after the first month or so it became very lonely at Cray's Folly. Our foreign servants—there are five of them altogether—got us a dreadfully bad name. Then, little by little, a sort of cloud seemed to settle on everything. The Colonel made two visits abroad, I don't know exactly where he went, but on his return from the first visit Madame de Stämer changed."

"Changed?—in what way?"

"I am afraid it would be hopeless to try to make you understand, Mr. Knox, but in some subtle way she changed. Underneath all her vivacity she is a tragic woman, and—oh, how can I explain?" Val Beverley made a little gesture of despair.

"Perhaps you mean," I suggested, "that she seemed to become even less happy than before?"

"Yes," she replied, looking at me eagerly. "Has Colonel Menendez told you anything to account for it?"

"Nothing," I said, "He has left us strangely in the dark. But you say he went abroad on a second and more recent occasion?"

"Yes, not much more than a month ago. And after that, somehow or other, matters seemed to come to a head. I confess I became horribly frightened, but to have left would have seemed like desertion, and Madame de Stämer has been so good to me."

"Did you actually witness any of the episodes which took place about a month ago?"

Val Beverley shook her head.

"I never saw anything really definite," she replied.

"Yet, evidently you either saw or heard something which alarmed you."

"Yes, that is true, but it is so difficult to explain."

"Could you try to explain?"

"I will try if you wish, for really I am longing to talk to someone about it. For instance, on several occasions I have heard footsteps in the corridor outside my room."

"At night?"

"Yes, at night."

"Strange footsteps?"

She nodded.

"That is the uncanny part of it. You know how familiar one grows with the footsteps of persons living in the same house? Well, these footsteps were quite unfamiliar to me."

"And you say they passed your door?"

"Yes. My rooms are almost directly overhead. And right at the end of the corridor, that is on the southeast corner of the building, is Colonel Menendez's bedroom, and facing it a sort of little smoke-room. It was in this direction that the footsteps went."

"To Colonel Menendez's room?"

"Yes. They were light, furtive footsteps."

"This took place late at night?"

"Quite late, long after everyone had retired."

She paused, staring at me with a sort of embarrassment, and presently:

"Were the footsteps those of a man or a woman?" I asked.

"Of a woman. Someone, Mr. Knox," she bent forward, and that look of fear began to creep into her eyes again, "with whose footsteps I was quite unfamiliar."

"You mean a stranger to the house?"

"Yes. Oh, it was uncanny." She shuddered. "The first time I heard it I had been lying awake listening. I was nervous. Madame de Stämer had told me that morning that the Colonel had seen someone lurking about the lawns on the previous night. Then, as I lay awake listening for the slightest sound, I suddenly detected these footsteps; and they paused—right outside my door."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed. "What did you do?"

"Frankly, I was too frightened to do anything. I just lay still with my heart beating horribly, and presently they passed on, and I heard them no more."

"Was your door locked?"

"No." She laughed nervously. "But it has been locked every night since then!"

"And these sounds were repeated on other nights?"

"Yes, I have often heard them, Mr. Knox. What makes it so strange is that all the servants sleep out in the west wing, as you know, and Pedro locks the communicating door every night before retiring."

"It is certainly strange," I muttered.

"It is horrible," declared the girl, almost in a whisper. "For what can it mean except that there is someone in Cray's Folly who is never seen during the daytime?"

"But that is incredible."

"It is not so incredible in a big house like this. Besides, what other explanation can there be?"

"There must be one," I said, reassuringly. "Have you spoken of this to Madame de Stämer?"

"Yes."

Val Beverley's expression grew troubled.

"Had she any explanation to offer?"

"None. Her attitude mystified me very much. Indeed, instead of reassuring me, she frightened me more than ever by her very silence. I grew to dread the coming of each night. Then—" she hesitated again, looking at me pathetically—"twice I have been awakened by a loud cry."

"What kind of cry?"

"I could not tell you, Mr. Knox. You see I have always been asleep when it has come, but I have sat up trembling and dimly aware that what had awakened me was a cry of some kind."

"You have no idea from whence it proceeded?"

"None whatever. Of course, all these things may seem trivial to you, and possibly they can be explained in quite a simple way. But this feeling of something I pending has grown almost unendurable. Then, I don't understand Madame and the Colonel at all."

She suddenly stopped speaking and flushed with embarrassment.

"If you mean that Madame de Stämer is in love with her cousin, I agree with you," I said, quietly.

"Oh, is it so evident as that?" murmured Val Beverley. She laughed to cover her confusion. "I wish I could understand what it all means."

At this point our tête-à-tête was interrupted by the return of Madame de Stämer.

"Oh, la la!" she cried, "the Colonel must have allowed himself to become too animated this evening. He is threatened with one of his attacks and I have insisted upon his immediate retirement. He makes his apologies, but knows you will understand."

I expressed my concern, and:

"I was unaware that Colonel Menendez's health was impaired," I said.

"Ah," Madame shrugged characteristically. "Juan has travelled too much of the road of life on top speed, Mr. Knox." She snapped her white fingers and grimaced significantly. "Excitement is bad for him."

She wheeled her chair up beside Val Beverley, and taking the girl's hand patted it affectionately.

"You look pale to-night, my dear," she said. "All this bogey business is getting on your nerves, eh?"

"Oh, not at all," declared the girl. "It is very mysterious and annoying, of course."

"But M. Paul Harley will presently tell us what it is all about," concluded Madame. "Yes, I trust so. We want no Cuban devils here at Cray's Folly."

I had hoped that she would speak further of the matter, but having thus apologized for our host's absence, she plunged into an amusing account of Parisian society, and of the changes which five years of war had brought about. Her comments, although brilliant, were superficial, the only point I recollect being her reference to a certain Baron Bergmann, a Swedish diplomat, who, according to Madame, had the longest nose and the shortest memory in Paris, so that in the cold weather, "he even sometimes forgot to blow his nose."

Her brightness I thought was almost feverish. She chattered and laughed and gesticulated, but on this occasion she was overacting. Underneath all her vivacity lay something cold and grim.

Harley rejoined us in half an hour or so, but I could see that he was as conscious of the air of tension as I was. All Madame's high spirits could not enable her to conceal the fact that she was anxious to retire. But Harley's evident desire to do likewise surprised me very greatly; for from the point of view of the investigation the day had been an unsatisfactory one. I knew that there must be a hundred and one things which my friend desired to know, questions which Madame de Stämer could have answered. Nevertheless, at about ten o'clock we separated for the night, and although I was intensely anxious to talk to Harley, his reticent mood had descended upon him again, and:

"Sleep well, Knox," he said, as he paused at my door. "I may be awakening you early."

With which cryptic remark and not another word he passed on and entered his own room.

XI. THE SHADOW ON THE BLIND

Perhaps it was childish on my part, but I accepted this curt dismissal very ill-humouredly. That Harley, for some reason of his own, wished to be

alone, was evident enough, but I resented being excluded from his confidence, even temporarily. It would seem that he had formed a theory in the prosecution of which my coöperation was not needed. And what with profitless conjectures concerning its nature, and memories of Val Beverley's pathetic parting glance as we had bade one another good-night, sleep seemed to be out of the question, and I stood for a long time staring out of the open window.

The weather remained almost tropically hot, and the moon floated in a cloudless sky. I looked down upon the closely matted leaves of the box hedge, which rose to within a few feet of my window, and to the left I could obtain a view of the close-hemmed courtyard before the doors of Cray's Folly. On the right the yews began, obstructing my view of the Tudor garden, but the night air was fragrant, and the outlook one of peace.

After a time, then, as no sound came from the adjoining room, I turned in, and despite all things was soon fast asleep.

Almost immediately, it seemed, I was awakened. In point of fact, nearly four hours had elapsed. A hand grasped my shoulder, and I sprang up in bed with a stifled cry, but:

"It's all right, Knox," came Harley's voice. "Don't make a noise."

"Harley!" I said. "Harley! what has happened?"

"Nothing, nothing. I am sorry to have to disturb your beauty sleep, but in the absence of Innes I am compelled to use you as a dictaphone, Knox. I like to record impressions while they are fresh, hence my having awakened you."

"But what has happened?" I asked again, for my brain was not yet fully alert.

"No, don't light up!" said Harley, grasping my wrist as I reached out toward the table-lamp.

His figure showed as a black silhouette against the dim square of the window.

"Why not?"

"Well, it's nearly two o'clock. The light might be observed."

"Two o'clock?" I exclaimed.

"Yes. I think we might smoke, though. Have you any cigarettes? I have left my pipe behind."

I managed to find my case, and in the dim light of the match which I presently struck I saw that Paul Harley's face was very fixed and grim. He seated himself on the edge of my bed, and:

"I have been guilty of a breach of hospitality, Knox," he began. "Not only have I secretly had my own car sent down here, but I have had something else sent, as well. I brought it in under my coat this evening."

"To what do you refer, Harley?"

"You remember the silken rope-ladder with bamboo rungs which I brought from Hongkong on one occasion?"

"Yes—"

"Well, I have it in my bag now."

"But, my dear fellow, what possible use can it be to you at Cray's Folly?"

"It has been of great use," he returned, shortly.

"It enabled me to descend from my window a couple of hours ago and to return again quite recently without disturbing the household. Don't reproach me, Knox. I know it is a breach of confidence, but so is the behaviour of Colonel Menendez."

"You refer to his reticence on certain points?"

"I do. I have a reputation to lose, Knox, and if an ingenious piece of Chinese workmanship can save it, it shall be saved."

"But, my dear Harley, why should you want to leave the house secretly at night?"

Paul Harley's cigarette glowed in the dark, then:

"My original object," he replied, "was to endeavour to learn if any one were really watching the place. For instance, I wanted to see if all lights were out at the Guest House."

"And were they?" I asked, eagerly.

"They were. Secondly," he continued, "I wanted to convince myself that there were no nocturnal prowlers from within or without."

"What do you mean by within or without?"

"Listen, Knox." He bent toward me in the dark, grasping my shoulder firmly. "One window in Cray's Folly was lighted up."

"At what hour?"

"The light is there yet."

That he was about to make some strange revelation I divined. I detected the fact, too, that he believed this revelation would be unpleasant to me; and

in this I found an explanation of his earlier behaviour. He had seemed distraught and ill at ease when he had joined Madame de Stämer, Miss Beverley, and myself in the drawing room. I could only suppose that this and the abrupt parting with me outside my door had been due to his holding a theory which he had proposed to put to the test before confiding it to me. I remember that I spoke very slowly as I asked him the question:

"Whose is the lighted window, Harley?"

"Has Colonel Menendez taken you into a little snuggery or smoke-room which faces his bedroom in the southeast corner of the house?"

"No, but Miss Beverley has mentioned the room."

"Ah. Well, there is a light in that room, Knox."

"Possibly the Colonel has not retired?"

"According to Madame de Stämer he went to bed several hours ago, you may remember."

"True," I murmured, fumbling for the significance of his words.

"The next point is this," he resumed. "You saw Madame retire to her own room, which, as you know, is on the ground floor, and I have satisfied myself that the door communicating with the servants' wing is locked."

"I see. But to what is all this leading, Harley?"

"To a very curious fact, and the fact is this: The Colonel is not alone."

I sat bolt upright.

"What?" I cried.

"Not so loud," warned Harley.

"But, Harley—"

"My dear fellow, we must face facts. I repeat, the Colonel is not alone."

"Why do you say so?"

"Twice I have seen a shadow on the blind of the smoke-room."

"His own shadow, probably."

Again Paul Harley's cigarette glowed in the darkness.

"I am prepared to swear," he replied, "that it was the shadow of a woman."

"Harley——"

"Don't get excited, Knox. I am dealing with the strangest case of my career, and I am jumping to no conclusions. But just let us look at the circumstances judicially. The whole of the domestic staff we may dismiss, with the one exception of Mrs. Fisher, who, so far as I can make out,

occupies the position of a sort of working housekeeper, and whose rooms are in the corner of the west wing immediately facing the kitchen garden. Possibly you have not met Mrs. Fisher, Knox, but I have made it my business to interview the whole of the staff and I may say that Mrs. Fisher is a short, stout old lady, a native of Kent, I believe, whose outline in no way corresponds to that which I saw upon the blind. Therefore, unless the door which communicates with the servants' quarters was unlocked again to-night—to what are we reduced in seeking to explain the presence of a woman in Colonel Menendez's room? Madame de Stämer, unassisted, could not possibly have mounted the stairs."

"Stop, Harley!" I said, sternly. "Stop."

He ceased speaking, and I watched the steady glow of his cigarette in the darkness. It lighted up his bronzed face and showed me the steely gleam of his eyes.

"You are counting too much on the locking of the door by Pedro," I continued, speaking very deliberately. "He is a man I would trust no farther than I could see him, and if there is anything dark underlying this matter you depend that he is involved in it. But the most natural explanation, and also the most simple, is this—Colonel Menendez has been taken seriously ill, and someone is in his room in the capacity of a nurse."

"Her behaviour was scarcely that of a nurse in a sick-room," murmured Harley.

"For God's sake tell me the truth," I said. "Tell me all you saw."

"I am quite prepared to do so, Knox. On three. occasions, then, I saw the figure of a woman, who wore some kind of loose robe, quite clearly silhouetted upon the linen blind. Her gestures strongly resembled those of despair."

"Of despair?"

"Exactly. I gathered that she was addressing someone, presumably Colonel Menendez, and I derived a strong impression that she was in a condition of abject despair."

"Harley," I said, "on your word of honour did you recognize anything in the movements, or in the outline of the figure, by which you could identify the woman?"

"I did not," he replied, shortly. "It was a woman who wore some kind of loose robe, possibly a kimono. Beyond that I could swear to nothing, except

that it was not Mrs. Fisher."

We fell silent for a while. What Paul Harley's thoughts may have been I know not, but my own were strange and troubled. Presently I found my voice again, and:

"I think, Harley," I said, "that I should report to you something which Miss Beverley told me this evening."

"Yes?" said he, eagerly. "I am anxious to hear anything which may be of the slightest assistance. You are no doubt wondering why I retired so abruptly to-night. My reason was this: I could see that you were full of some story which you had learned from Miss Beverley, and I was anxious to perform my tour of inspection with a perfectly unprejudiced mind."

"You mean that your suspicions rested upon an inmate of Cray's Folly?"

"Not upon any particular inmate, but I had early perceived a distinct possibility that these manifestations of which the Colonel complained might be due to the agency of someone inside the house. That this person might be no more than an accomplice of the prime mover I also recognized, of course. But what did you learn to-night, Knox?"

I repeated Val Beverley's story of the mysterious footsteps and of the cries which had twice awakened her in the night.

"Hm," muttered Harley, when I had ceased speaking. "Assuming her account to be true——"

"Why should you doubt it?" I interrupted, hotly.

"My dear Knox, it is my business to doubt everything until I have indisputable evidence of its truth. I say, assuming her story to be true, we find ourselves face to face with the fantastic theory that some woman unknown is living secretly in Cray's Folly."

"Perhaps in one of the tower rooms," I suggested, eagerly. "Why, Harley, that would account for the Colonel's marked unwillingness to talk about this part of the house."

My sight was now becoming used to the dusk, and I saw Harley vigorously shake his head.

"No, no," he replied; "I have seen all the tower rooms. I can swear that no one inhabits them. Besides, is it feasible?"

"Then whose were the footsteps that Miss Beverley heard?"

"Obviously those of the woman who, at this present moment, so far as I know, is in the smoking-room with Colonel Menendez."

I sighed wearily.

"This is a strange business, Harley. I begin to think that the mystery is darker than I ever supposed."

We fell silent again. The weird cry of a night hawk came from somewhere in the valley, but otherwise everything within and without the great house seemed strangely still. This stillness presently imposed its influence upon me, for when I spoke again, I spoke in a low voice.

"Harley," I said, "my imagination is playing me tricks. I thought I heard the fluttering of wings at that moment."

"Fortunately, my imagination remains under control," he replied, grimly; "therefore I am in a position to inform you that you did hear the fluttering of wings. An owl has just flown into one of the trees immediately outside the window."

"Oh," said I, and uttered a sigh of relief.

"It is extremely fortunate that my imagination is so carefully trained," continued Harley; "otherwise, when the woman whose shadow I saw upon the blind to-night raised her arms in a peculiar fashion, I could not well have failed to attach undue importance to the shape of the shadow thus created."

"What was the shape of the shadow, then?"

"Remarkably like that of a bat."

He spoke the words quietly, but in that still darkness, with dawn yet a long way off, they possessed the power which belongs to certain chords in music, and to certain lines in poetry. I was chilled unaccountably, and I peopled the empty corridors of Cray's Folly with I know not what uncanny creatures; nightmare fancies conjured up from memories of haunted manors.

Such was my mood, then, when suddenly Paul Harley stood up. My eyes were growing more and more used to the darkness, and from something strained in his attitude I detected the fact that he was listening intently.

He placed his cigarette on the table beside the bed and quietly crossed the room. I knew from his silent tread that he wore shoes with rubber soles. Very quietly he turned the handle and opened the door.

"What is it, Harley?" I whispered.

Dimly I saw him raise his hand. Inch by inch he opened the door. My nerves in a state of tension, I sat there watching him, when without a sound

he slipped out of the room and was gone. Thereupon I arose and followed as far as the doorway.

Harley was standing immediately outside in the corridor. Seeing me, he stepped back, and: "Don't move, Knox," he said, speaking very close to my ear. "There is someone downstairs in the hall. Wait for me here."

With that he moved stealthily off, and I stood there, my heart beating with unusual rapidity, listening—listening for a challenge, a cry, a scuffle—I knew not what to expect.

Cavernous and dimly lighted, the corridor stretched away to my left. On the right it branched sharply in the direction of the gallery overlooking the hall.

The seconds passed, but no sound rewarded my alert listening—until, very faintly, but echoing in a muffled, church-like fashion around that peculiar building, came a slight, almost sibilant sound, which I took to be the gentle closing of a distant door.

Whilst I was still wondering if I had really heard this sound or merely imagined it:

"Who goes there?" came sharply in Harley's voice.

I heard a faint click, and knew that he had shone the light of an electric torch down into the hall.

I hesitated no longer, but ran along to join him. As I came to the head of the main staircase, however, I saw him crossing the hall below. He was making in the direction of the door which shut off the servants' quarters. Here he paused, and I saw him trying the handle. Evidently the door was locked, for he turned and swept the white ray all about the place. He tried several other doors, but found them all to be locked, for presently he came upstairs again, smiling grimly when he saw me there awaiting him.

"Did you hear it, Knox?" he said.

"A sound like the closing of a door?"

Paul Harley nodded.

"It *was* the closing of a door," he replied; "but before that I had distinctly heard a stair creak. Someone crossed the hall then, Knox. Yet, as you perceive for yourself, it affords no hiding-place."

His glance met and challenged mine.

"The Colonel's visitor has left him," he murmured. "Unless something quite unforeseen occurs, I shall throw up the case to-morrow."

XII. MORNING MISTS

The man known as Manoel awakened me in the morning. Although characteristically Spanish, he belonged to a more sanguine type than the butler and spoke much better English than Pedro. He placed upon the table beside me a tray containing a small pot of China tea. an apple, a peach, and three slices of toast.

"How soon would you like your bath, sir?" he enquired.

"In about half an hour," I replied.

"Breakfast is served at 9.30 if you wish, sir," continued Manoel, "but the ladies rarely come down. Would you prefer to breakfast in your room?"

"What is Mr. Harley doing?"

"He tells me that he does not take breakfast, sir. Colonel Don Juan Menendez will be unable to ride with you this morning, but a groom will accompany you to the heath if you wish, which is the best place for a gallop. Breakfast on the south veranda is very pleasant, sir, if you are riding first."

"Good," I replied, for indeed I felt strangely heavy; "it shall be the heath, then, and breakfast on the veranda."

Having drunk a cup of tea and dressed I went into Harley's room, to find him propped up in bed reading the *Daily Telegraph* and smoking a cigarette.

"I am off for a ride," I said. "Won't you join me?"

He fixed his pillows more comfortably, and slowly shook his head.

"Not a bit of it, Knox," he replied, "I find exercise to be fatal to concentration."

"I know you have weird theories on the subject, but this is a beautiful morning."

"I grant you the beautiful morning, Knox, but here you will find me when you return."

I knew him too well to debate the point, and accordingly I left him to his newspaper and cigarette, and made my way downstairs. A housemaid was busy in the hall, and in the courtyard before the monastic porch a negro

groom awaited me with two fine mounts. He touched his hat and grinned expansively as I appeared. A spirited young chestnut was saddled for my use, and the groom, who informed me that his name was Jim, rode a smaller, Spanish horse, a beautiful but rather wicked-looking creature.

We proceeded down the drive. Pedro was standing at the door of the lodge, talking to his surly-looking daughter. He saluted me very ceremoniously as I passed.

Pursuing an easterly route for a quarter of a mile or so, we came to a narrow lane which branched off to the left in a tremendous declivity. Indeed it presented the appearance of the dry bed of a mountain torrent, and in wet weather a torrent this lane became, so I was informed by Jim. It was very rugged and dangerous, and here we dismounted, the groom leading the horses.

Then we were upon a well-laid main road, and along this we trotted on to a tempting stretch of heath-land. There was a heavy mist, but the scent of the heather in the early morning was delightful, and there was something exhilarating in the dull thud of the hoofs upon the springy turf. The negro was a natural horseman, and he seemed to enjoy the ride every bit as much as I did. For my own part I was sorry to return. But the vapours of the night had been effectively cleared from my mind, and when presently we headed again for the hills, I could think more coolly of those problems which overnight had seemed well-nigh insoluble.

We returned by a less direct route, but only at one point was the path so steep as that by which we had descended. This brought us out on a road above and about a mile to the south of Cray's Folly. At one point, through a gap in the trees, I found myself looking down at the gray stone building in its setting of velvet lawns and gaily patterned gardens. A faint mist hovered like smoke over the grass.

Five minutes later we passed a queer old Jacobean house, so deeply hidden amidst trees that the early morning sun had not yet penetrated to it, except for one upstanding gable which was bathed in golden light. I should never have recognized the place from that aspect, but because of its situation I knew that this must be the Guest House. It seemed very gloomy and dark, and remembering how I was pledged to call upon Mr. Colin Camber that day, I apprehended that my reception might be a cold one.

Presently we left the road and cantered across the valley meadows, in which I had walked on the previous day, reentering Cray's Folly on the south, although we had left it on the north. We dismounted in the stable-yard, and I noted two other saddle horses in the stalls, a pair of very clean-looking hunters, as well as two perfectly matched ponies, which, Jim informed me, Madame de Stämer sometimes drove in a chaise.

Feeling vastly improved by the exercise, I walked around to the veranda, and through the drawing room to the hall. Manoel was standing there, and:

"Your bath is ready, sir," he said.

I nodded and went upstairs. It seemed to me that life at Cray's Folly was quite agreeable, and such was my mood that the shadowy Bat Wing menace found no place in it save as the chimera of a sick man's imagination. One thing only troubled me: the identity of the woman who had been with Colonel Menendez on the previous night.

However, such unconscious sun worshippers are we all that in the glory of that summer morning I realized that life was good, and I resolutely put behind me the dark suspicions of the night.

I looked into Harley's room ere descending, and, as he had assured me would be the case, there he was, propped up in bed, the *Daily Telegraph* upon the floor beside him and the *Times* now open upon the coverlet.

"I am ravenously hungry," I said, maliciously, "and am going down to eat a hearty breakfast."

"Good," he returned, treating me to one of his quizzical smiles. "It is delightful to know that someone is happy."

Manoel had removed my unopened newspapers from the bedroom, placing them on the breakfast table on the south veranda; and I had propped the *Mail* up before me and had commenced to explore a juicy grapefruit when something, perhaps a faint breath of perfume, a slight rustle of draperies, or merely that indefinable aura which belongs to the presence of a woman, drew my glance upward and to the left. And there was Val Beverley smiling down at me.

"Good morning, Mr. Knox," she said. "Oh, please don't interrupt your breakfast. May I sit down and talk to you?"

"I should be most annoyed if you refused."

She was dressed in a simple summery frock which left her round, sun-browned arms bare above the elbow, and she laid a huge bunch of roses

upon the table beside my tray.

"I am the florist of the establishment," she explained. "These will delight your eyes at luncheon. Don't you think we are a lot of barbarians here, Mr. Knox?"

"Why?"

"Well, if I had not taken pity upon you, here you would have bat over a lonely breakfast just as though you were staying at a hotel."

"Delightful," I replied, "now that you are here."

"Ah," said she, and smiled roguishly, "that afterthought just saved you."

"But honestly," I continued, "the hospitality of Colonel Menendez is true hospitality. To expect one's guests to perform their parlour tricks around a breakfast table in the morning is, on the other hand, true barbarism."

"I quite agree with you," she said, quietly. "There is a perfectly delightful freedom about the Colonel's way of living. Only some horrid old Victorian prude could possibly take exception to it. Did you enjoy your ride?"

"Immensely," I replied, watching her delightedly as she arranged the roses in carefully blended groups.

Her fingers were very delicate and tactile, and such is the character which resides in the human hand, that whereas the gestures of Madame de Stämer were curiously stimulating, there was something in the movement of Val Beverley's pretty fingers amidst the blooms which I found most soothing.

"I passed the Guest House on my return," I continued. "Do you know Mr. Camber?"

She looked at me in a startled way.

"No," she replied, "I don't. Do you?"

"I met him by chance yesterday."

"Really? I thought he was quite unapproachable; a sort of ogre."

"On the contrary, he is a man of great charm."

"Oh," said Val Beverley, "well, since you have said so, I might as well admit that he has always seemed a charming man to me. I have never spoken to him, but he looks as though he could be very fascinating. Have you met his wife?"

"No. Is she also American?"

My companion shook her head.

"I have no idea," she replied. "I have seen her several times of course, and she is one of the daintiest creatures imaginable, but I know nothing

about her nationality."

"She is young, then?"

"Very young, I should say. She looks quite a child."

"The reason of my interest," I replied, "is that Mr. Camber asked me to call upon him, and I propose to do so later this morning."

"Really?"

Again I detected the startled expression upon Val Beverley's face.

"That is rather curious, since you are staying here."

"Why?"

"Well," she looked about her nervously, "I don't know the reason, but the name of Mr. Camber is anathema in Cray's Folly."

"Colonel Menendez told me last night that he had never met Mr. Camber."

Val Beverley shrugged her shoulders, a habit which it was easy to see she had acquired from Madame de Stämer.

"Perhaps not," she replied, "but I am certain he hates him."

"Hates Mr. Camber?"

"Yes." Her expression grew troubled. "It is another of those mysteries which seem to be part of Colonel Menendez's normal existence."

"And is this dislike mutual?"

"That I cannot say, since I have never met Mr. Camber."

"And Madame de Stämer, does she share it?"

"Fully, I think. But don't ask me what it means, because I don't know."

She dismissed the subject with a light gesture and poured me out a second cup of coffee.

"I am going to leave you now," she said. "I have to justify my existence in my own eyes."

"Must you really go?"

"I must really."

"Then tell me something before you go."

She gathered up the bunches of roses and looked down at me with a wistful expression.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Did you detect those mysterious footsteps again last night?"

The look of wistfulness changed to another which I hated to see in her eyes, an expression of repressed fear,

"No," she replied in a very low voice, "but why do you ask the question?"

Doubt of her had been far enough from my mind, but that something in the tone of my voice had put her on her guard I could see.

"I am naturally curious," I replied, gravely.

"No," she repeated, "I have not heard the sound for some time now. Perhaps, after all, my fears were imaginary."

There was a constraint in her manner which was all too obvious, and when presently, laden with the spoil of the rose garden, she gave me a parting smile and hurried into the house, I sat there very still for a while, and something of the brightness had faded from the coming, nor did life seem so glad a business as I had thought it quite recently.

XIII. AT THE GUEST HOUSE

I presented myself at the Guest House at half-past eleven. My mental state was troubled and indescribably complex. Perhaps my own uneasy, thoughts were responsible for the idea, but it seemed to me that the atmosphere of Cray's Folly had changed yet again. Never before had I experienced a sense of foreboding like that which had possessed me throughout the hours of this bright summer's morning.

Colonel Menendez had appeared about nine o'clock. He exhibiting no traces of illness that were perceptible to me. But this subtle change which I had detected, or thought I had detected, was more marked in Madame Stämer than in any one. In her strange, still eyes I had read what I can only describe as a stricken look. It had none of the heroic resignation and acceptance of the inevitable which had so startled me in the face of the Colonel on the previous day. There was a bitterness in it, as of one who has made a great but unwilling sacrifice, and again I had found myself questing that faint but fugitive memory, conjured up by the eyes of Madame de Stämer.

Never had the shadow lain so darkly upon the house as it lay this morning with the sun blazing gladly out of a serene sky. The birds, the flowers, and Mother Earth herself bespoke the joy of summer. But beneath the roof of Cray's Folly dwelt a spirit of unrest, of apprehension. I thought

of that queer lull which comes before a tropical storm, and I thought I read a knowledge of pending evil even in the glances of the servants.

I had spoken to Harley of this fear. He had smiled and nodded grimly, saying:

"Evidently, Knox, you have forgotten that to-night is the night of the full moon."

It was in no easy state of mind, then, that I opened the gate and walked up to the porch of the Guest House. That the solution of the grand mystery of Cray's Folly would automatically resolve these lesser mysteries I felt assured, and I was supported by the idea that a clue might lie here.

The house, which from the roadway had an air of neglect, proved on close inspection to be well tended, but of an unprosperous aspect. The brass knocker, door knob, and letter box were brilliantly polished, whilst the windows and the window curtains were spotlessly clean. But the place cried aloud for the service of the decorator, and it did not need the deductive powers of a Paul Harley to determine that Mr. Colin Camber was in straitened circumstances.

In response to my ringing the door was presently opened by Ah Tsong. His yellow face exhibited no trace of emotion whatever. He merely opened the door and stood there looking at me.

"Is Mr. Camber at home?" I enquired.

"Master no got," crooned Ah Tsong.

He proceeded quietly to close the door again.

"One moment," I said, "one moment. I wish, at any rate, to leave my card."

Ah Tsong allowed the door to remain open, but:

"No usee palaber so fashion," he said. "No feller comee here. Sabby?"

"I savvy, right enough," said I, "but all the same you have got to take my card in to Mr. Camber."

I handed him a card as I spoke, and suddenly addressing him in "pidgin," of which, fortunately, I had a smattering:

"Belong very quick, Ah Tsong," I said, sharply, "or plenty big trouble, savvy?"

"Sabby, sabby," he muttered, nodding his head; and leaving me standing in the porch he retired along the sparsely carpeted hall.

This hall was very gloomily lighted, but I could see several pieces of massive old furniture and a number of bookcases, all looking incredibly untidy.

Rather less than a minute elapsed, I suppose, when from some place at the farther end of the hallway Mr, Camber appeared in person. He wore a threadbare dressing gown, the silken collar and cuffs of which were very badly frayed. His hair was dishevelled and palpably he had not shaved this morning.

He was smoking a corncob pipe, and he slowly approached, glancing from the card which he held in his hand in my direction, and then back again at the card, with a curious sort of hesitancy. In spite of his untidy appearance I could not fail to mark the dignity of his bearing, and the almost arrogant angle at which he held his head.

"Mr—er—Malcolm Knox?" he began, fixing his large eyes upon me with a look in which I could detect no sign of recognition. "I am advised that you desire to see me?"

"That is so, Mr. Camber," I replied, cheerily. "I fear I have interrupted your work, but as no other opportunity may occur of renewing an acquaintance which for my part I found extremely pleasant—"

"Of renewing an acquaintance, you say, Mr. Knox?"

"Yes."

"Quite." He looked me up and down critically. "To be sure, we have met before, I understand?"

"We met yesterday, Mr. Camber, you may recall. Having chanced to come across a contribution of yours of the *Occult Review*, I have availed myself of your invitation to drop in for a chat."

His expression changed immediately and the sombre eyes lighted up.

"Ah, of course," he cried, "you are a student of the transcendental. Forgive my seeming rudeness, Mr. Knox, but indeed my memory is of the poorest. Pray come in, sir; your visit is very welcome."

He held the door wide open, and inclined his head in a gesture of curious old-world courtesy which was strange in so young a man. And congratulating myself Upon the happy thought which had enabled me to win such instant favour, I presently found myself in a study which I despair of describing.

In some respects it resembled the lumber room of an antiquary, whilst in many particulars it corresponded to the interior of one of those second-hand bookshops which abound in the neighbourhood of Charing Cross Road. The shelves with which it was lined literally bulged with books, and there were books on the floor, books on the mantelpiece, and books, some open and some shut, some handsomely bound, and some having the covers torn off, upon every table and nearly every chair in the place.

Volume seven of Burton's monumental "Thousand Nights and a Night" lay upon a littered desk before which I presumed Mr. Camber had been seated at the time of my arrival. Some wet vessel, probably a cup of tea or coffee, had at some time been set down upon the page at which this volume was open, for it was marked with a dark brown ring. A volume of Fraser's "Golden Bough" had been used as an ash tray, apparently, since the binding was burned in several places where cigarettes had been laid upon it.

In this interesting, indeed unique apartment, East met West, unabashed by Kipling's dictum. Roman tear-vases and Egyptian tomb-offerings stood upon the same shelf as empty Bass bottles; and a hideous wooden idol from the South Sea Islands leered on eternally, unmoved by the presence upon his distorted head of a soft felt hat made, I believe, in Philadelphia.

Strange implements from early British barrows found themselves in the company of *Thugee* daggers There were carved mammals' tusks and snake emblems from Yucatan; against a Chinese ivory model of the Temple of Ten Thousand Buddhas rested a Coptic crucifix made from a twig of the Holy Rose Tree. Across an ancient Spanish coffer was thrown a Persian rug into which had been woven the monogram of Shah-Jehan and a text from the Koran. It was easy to see that Mr. Colin Camber's studies must have imposed a severe strain upon his purse.

"Sit down, Mr. Knox, sit down," he said, sweeping a vellum-bound volume of Eliphas Levi from a chair, and pushing the chair forward. "The visit of a fellow-student is a rare pleasure for me. And you find me, sir," he seated himself in a curious, carved chair which stood before the desk, "you find me engaged upon enquiries, the result of which will constitute chapter forty-two of my present book. Pray glance at the contents of this little box."

He placed in my hands a small box of dark wood, evidently of great age. It contained what looked like a number of shrivelled beans.

Having glanced at it curiously I returned it to him, shaking my head blankly.

"You are puzzled?" he said, with a kind of boyish triumph, which lighted up his face, which rejuvenated him and gave me a glimpse of another man. "These, sir," he touched the shrivelled objects with a long, delicate forefinger "are seeds of the sacred lotus of Ancient Egypt. They were found in the tomb of a priest."

"And in what way do they bear upon the enquiry to which you referred, Mr. Camber?"

"In this way," he replied, drawing toward him a piece of newspaper upon which rested a mound of coarse shag. "I maintain that the vital principle survives within them. Now, I propose to cultivate these seeds, Mr. Knox. Do you grasp the significance, of this experiment?"

He knocked out the corn-cob upon the heel of his slipper and began to refill the hot bowl with shag from the newspaper at his elbow.

"From a physical point of view, yes," I replied, slowly. "But I should not have supposed such an experiment to come within the scope of your own particular activities, Mr. Camber."

"Ah," he returned, triumphantly, at the same time stuffing tobacco into the bowl of the corn-cob, "it is for this very reason that chapter forty-two of my book must prove to be the hub of the whole, and the whole, Mr. Knox, I am egotist enough to believe, shall establish a new focus for thought, an intellectual Rome bestriding and uniting the Seven Hills of Unbelief."

He lighted his pipe and stared at me complacently.

Whilst I had greatly revised my first estimate of the man, my revisions had been all in his favour. Respecting his genius my first impression was confirmed. That he was ahead of his generation, perhaps a new Galileo, I was prepared to believe. He had a pride of bearing which I think was partly racial, but which in part, too, was the insignia of intellectual superiority. He stood above the commonplace, caring little for the views of those around and beneath him. From vanity he was utterly free. His was strangely like the egotism of true genius.

"Now, sir," he continued, puffing furiously at his corn-cob, "I observed you glancing a moment ago at this volume of the 'Golden Bough.'" He pointed to the scarred book which I have already mentioned. "It is a work of profound scholarship. But having perused its hundreds of pages, what has

the student learned? Does he know why the twenty-sixth chapter of the 'Book of the dead' was written upon lapis-lazuli, the twenty-seventh upon green felspar, the twenty-ninth upon cornelian, and the thirtieth upon serpentine? He does not. Having studied Part Four, has he learned the secret of why Osiris was a black god, although he typified the Sun? Has he learned why modern Christianity is losing its hold upon the nations, whilst Buddhism, so called, counts its disciples by millions? He has not. This is because the scholar is rarely the seer."

"I quite agree with you," I said, thinking that I detected the drift of his argument.

"Very well," said he. "I am an American citizen, Mr. Knox, which is tantamount to stating that I belong to the greatest community of traders which has appeared since the Phoenicians overran the then known world. America has not produced the mystic, yet Judæa produced the founder of Christianity, and Gautama Buddha, born of a royal line, established the creed of human equity. In what way did these magicians, for a miracle-worker is nothing but a magician, differ from ordinary men? In one respect only: They had learned to control that force which we have to-day termed Will."

As he spoke those words Colin Camber directed upon me a glance from his luminous eyes which frankly thrilled me. The bemused figure of the Lavender Arms was forgotten. I perceived before me a man of power, a man of extraordinary knowledge and intellectual daring. His voice, which was very beautiful, together with his glance, held me enthralled.

"What we call Will," he continued, "is what the Ancient Egyptians called *Khu*. It is not mental: it is a property of the soul. At this point, Mr. Knox, I depart from the laws generally accepted by my contemporaries. I shall presently propose to you that the eye of the Divine Architect literally watches every creature upon the earth."

"Literally?"

"Literally, Mr. Knox. We need no images, no idols, no paintings. All power, all light comes from one source. That source is the sun! The sun controls Will, and the Will is the soul. If there were a cavern in the earth so deep that the sun could never reach it, and if it were possible for a child to be born in that cavern, do you know what that child would be?"

"Almost certainly blind," I replied; "beyond which my imagination fails me."

"Then I will inform you, Mr. Knox. It would be a demon."

"What!" I cried, and was momentarily touched with the fear that this was a brilliant madman.

"Listen," he said, and pointed with the stem of his pipe. "Why, in all ancient creeds, is Hades depicted as below? For the simple reason that could such a spot exist and be inhabited, it must be *sunless*, when it could only be inhabited by devils; and what are devils but creatures without souls?"

"You mean that a child born beyond reach of the sun's influence would have no soul?"

"Such is my meaning, Mr. Knox. Do you begin to see the importance of my experiment with the lotus seeds?"

I shook my head slowly. Whereupon, laying his corn-cob upon the desk, Colin Camber burst into a fit of boyish laughter, which seemed to rejuvenate him again, which wiped out the image of the magus completely, and only left before me a very human student of strange subjects, and withal a fascinating companion.

"I fear, sir," he said, presently, "that my steps have led me farther into the wilderness than it has been your fate to penetrate. The whole secret of the universe is contained in the words Day and Night, Darkness and Light. I have studied both the light and the darkness, deliberately and without fear. A new age is about to dawn, sir, and a new age requires new beliefs, new truths. Were you ever in the country of the Hill Dyaks?"

This abrupt question rather startled me, but:

"You refer to the Borneo hill-country?"

"Precisely."

"No, I was never there."

"Then this little magical implement will be new to you," said he.

Standing up, he crossed to a cabinet littered untidily with all sorts of strange-looking objects, carved bones, queer little inlaid boxes, images, untidy manuscripts, and what-not.

He took up what looked like a very ungainly tobacco-pipe, made of some rich brown wood, and, handing it to me:

"Examine this, Mr. Knox," he said, the boyish smile of triumph returning again to his face.

I did as he requested and made no discovery of note. The thing clearly was not intended for a pipe. The stem was solid and, moreover, there was carving inside the bowl. So that presently I returned it to him, shaking my head.

"Unless one should be informed of the properties of this little instrument," he declared, "discovery by experiment is improbable. Now, note."

He struck the hollow of the bowl upon the palm of his hand, and it delivered a high, bell-like note which lingered curiously. Then:

"Note again."

He made a short striking motion with the thing, similar to that which one would employ who had designed to jerk something out of the bowl. And at the very spot on the floor where any object contained in the bowl would have fallen, came a reprise of the bell note! Clearly, from almost at my feet, it sounded, a high, metallic ring.

He struck upward, and the bell-note sounded on the ceiling; to the right, and it came from the window; in my direction, and the tiny bell seemed to ring beside my ear! I will honestly admit that I was startled, but:

"Dyak magic," said Colin Camber; "one of nature's secrets not yet discovered by conventional Western science. It was known to the Egyptian priesthood, of course; hence the Vocal Memnon. It was known to Madame Blavatsky, who employed an 'astral bell'; and it is known to me."

He returned the little instrument to its place upon the cabinet.

"I wonder if the fact will strike you as significant," said he, "that the note which you have just heard can only be produced between sunrise and sunset?"

Without giving me time to reply:

"The most notable survival of black magic—that is, the scientific employment of darkness against light—is to be met with in Haiti and other islands of the West Indies."

"You are referring to Voodooism?" I said, slowly.

He nodded, replacing his pipe between his teeth.

"A subject, Mr. Knox, which I investigated exhaustively some years ago."

I was watching him closely as he spoke, and a shadow, a strange shadow, crept over his face, a look almost of exaltation—of mingled sorrow and gladness which I find myself quite unable to describe.

"In the West Indies, Mr. Knox," he continued, in a strangely altered voice, "I lost all and found all. Have you ever realized, sir, that sorrow is the price we must pay for joy?"

I did not understand his question, and was still wondering about it when I heard a gentle knock, the door opened, and a woman came in.

XIV. YSOLA CAMBER

I find it difficult, now, to recapture my first impression of that meeting. About the woman, hesitating before me, there was something unexpected, something wholly unfamiliar. She belonged to a type with which I was not acquainted. Nor was it wonderful that she should strike me in this fashion, since my wanderings, although fairly extensive, had never included the West Indies, nor had I been to Spain; and this girl—I could have sworn that she was under twenty—was one of those rare beauties, a golden Spaniard.

That she was not purely Spanish I learned later.

She was small, and girlishly slight, with slender ankles and exquisite little feet; indeed I think she had the tiniest feet of any woman I had ever met. She wore a sort of white pinafore over her dress, and her arms, which were bare because of the short sleeves of her frock, were of a child-like roundness, whilst her creamy skin was touched with a faint tinge of bronze, as though, I remember thinking, it had absorbed and retained something of the Southern sunshine. She had the swaying carriage which usually belongs to a tall woman, and her head and neck were Grecian in poise.

Her hair, which was of a curious dull gold colour, presented a mass of thick, tight curls, and her beauty was of that unusual character which makes a Cleopatra a subject of deathless debate. What I mean to say is this: whilst no man could have denied, for instance, that Val Beverley was a charmingly pretty woman, nine critics out of ten must have failed to classify this golden Spaniard correctly or justly. Her complexion was peach-like in the Oriental

sense, that strange hint of gold underlying the delicate skin, and her dark blue eyes were shaded by really wonderful silken lashes.

Emotion had the effect of enlarging the pupils, a phenomenon rarely met with, so that now as she entered the room and found a stranger present they seemed to be rather black than blue.

Her embarrassment was acute, and I think she would have retired without speaking, but:

"Ysola," said Colin Camber, regarding her with a look curiously compounded of sorrow and pride, "allow me to present Mr. Malcolm Knox, who has honoured us with a visit."

He turned to me.

"Mr. Knox," he said, "it gives me great pleasure that you should meet my wife."

Perhaps I had expected this, indeed, subconsciously, I think I had. Nevertheless, at the words "my wife" I felt that I started. The analogy with Edgar Allan Poe was complete.

As Mrs. Camber extended her hand with a sort of appealing timidity, it appeared to me that she felt herself to be intruding. The expression in her beautiful eyes when she glanced at her husband could only be described as one of adoration; and whilst it was impossible to doubt his love for her, I wondered if his colossal egotism were capable of stooping to affection. I wondered if he knew how to tend and protect this delicate Southern girl wife of his.

Remembering the episode of the Lavender Arms, I felt justified in doubting her happiness, and in this I saw an explanation of the mingled sorrow and pride with which Colin Camber regarded her. It might betoken recognition of his own shortcomings as a husband.

"How nice of you to come and see us. Mr. Knox," she said.

She spoke in a faintly husky manner which was curiously attractive, although lacking the deep, vibrant tones of Madame de Stämer's memorable voice. Her English was imperfect, but her accent good.

"Your husband has been carrying me to enchanted lands, Mrs. Camber," I replied. "I have never known a morning to pass so quickly."

"Oh," she replied, and laughed with a childish glee which I was glad to witness. "Did he tell you all about the book which is going to make the world good? Did he tell you it will make us rich as well?"

"Rich?" said Camber, frowning slightly. "Nature's riches are health and love. If we hold these the rest will come. Now that you have joined us, Ysola, I shall beg Mr. Knox, in honour of this occasion, to drink a glass of wine and break a biscuit as a pledge of future meetings."

I watched him as he spoke, a lean, unkempt figure invested with a curious dignity, and I found it almost impossible to believe that this was the same man who had sat in the bar of the Lavender Arms, sipping whisky and water. The resemblance to the portrait in Harley's office became more marked than ever. There was an air of high breeding about the delicate features which, curiously enough, was accentuated by the unshaven chin. I recognized that refusal would be regarded as a rebuff, and therefore:

"You are very kind," I said.

Colin Camber inclined his head gravely and courteously.

"We are very glad to have you with us, Mr. Knox," he replied.

He clapped his hands, and, silent as a shadow, Ah Tsong appeared. I noted that although it was Camber who had summoned him, it was to Mrs. Camber that the Chinaman turned for orders. I had thought his yellow face incapable of expression, but as his oblique eyes turned in the direction of the girl I read in them a sort of dumb worship, such as one sees in the eyes of a dog.

She spoke to him rapidly in Chinese.

"Hoi, hoi," he muttered, "hoi, hoi," nodded his head, and went out.

I saw that Colin Camber had detected my interest, for:

"Ah Tsong is really my wife's servant," he explained.

"Oh," she said in a low voice, and looked at me earnestly, "Ah Tsong nursed me when I was a little baby so high." She held her hand about four feet from the floor and laughed gleefully. "Can you imagine what a funny little thing I was?"

"You must have been a wonder-child, Mrs. Camber," I replied with sincerity; "and Ah Tsong has remained with you ever since?"

"Ever since," she echoed, shaking her head in a vaguely pathetic way. "He will never leave me, do you think, Colin?"

"Never," replied her husband; "you are all he loves in the world. A case, Mr. Knox," he turned to me, "of deathless fidelity rarely met with nowadays and only possible, perhaps, in its true form in an Oriental."

Mrs. Camber having seated herself upon one of the few chairs which was not piled with books, her husband had resumed his place by the writing desk, and I sought in vain to interpret the glances which passed between them.

The fact that these two were lovers none could have mistaken. But here again, as at Cray's Folly, I detected a shadow. I felt that something had struck at the very root of their happiness, in fact, I wondered if they had been parted, and were but newly reunited for there was a sort of constraint between them, the more marked on the woman's side than on the man's. I wondered how long they had been married, but felt that it would have been indiscreet to ask.

Even as the idea occurred to me, however, an opportunity arose of learning what I wished to know. I heard a bell ring, and:

"There is someone at the door, Colin," said Mrs. Camber.

"I will go," he replied. "Ah Tsong has enough to do."

Without another word he stood up and walked out of the room.

"You see," said Mrs. Camber, smiling in her naive way, "we only have one servant, except Ah Tsong, her name is Mrs. Powis. She is visiting her daughter who is married. We made the poor old lady take a holiday."

"It is difficult to imagine you burdened with household responsibilities, Mrs. Camber," I replied. "Please forgive me but I cannot help wondering how long you have been married?"

"For nearly four years."

"Really?" I exclaimed. "You must have been married very young?"

"I was twenty. Do I look so young?"

I gazed at her in amazement.

"You astonish me," I declared, which was quite true and no mere compliment. "I had guessed your age to be eighteen."

"Oh," she laughed, and resting her hands upon the settee leaned forward with sparkling eyes, "how funny. Sometimes I wish I looked older. It is dreadful in this place, although we have been so happy here. At all the shops they look at me so funny, so I always send Mrs. Powis now."

"You are really quite wonderful," I said. "You are Spanish, are you not, Mrs. Camber?"

She slightly shook her head, and I saw the pupils begin to dilate.

"Not really Spanish," she replied, haltingly. "I was born in Cuba."

"In Cuba?"

She nodded.

"Then it was in Cuba that you met Mr. Camber?"

She nodded again, watching me intently.

"It is strange that a Virginian should settle in Surrey."

"Yes?" she murmured, "you think so? But really it is not strange at all. Colin's people are so proud, so proud. Do you know what they are like, those Virginians? Oh! I hate them."

"You hate them?"

"No, I cannot hate them, for he is one. But he will never go back."

"Why should he never go back, Mrs. Camber?"

"Because of me."

"You mean that you do not wish to settle in America?"

"I could not—not where he comes from. They would not have me."

Her eyes grew misty, and she quickly lowered her lashes.

"Would not have you?" I exclaimed. "I don't understand."

"No?" she said, and smiled up at me very gravely. "It is simple. I am a Cuban, one, as they say, of an inferior race—and of mixed blood."

She shook her golden head as if to dismiss the subject, and stood up, as Camber entered, followed by Ah Tsong bearing a tray of refreshments.

Of the ensuing conversation I remember nothing. My mind was focussed upon the one vital fact that Mrs. Camber was a Cuban Creole. Dimly I felt that here was the missing link for which Paul Harley was groping. For it was in Cuba that Colin Camber had met his wife, it was from Cuba that the menace of Bat Wing came.

What could it mean? Surely it was more than a coincidence that these two families, both associated with the West Indies, should reside within sight of one another in the Surrey Hills. Yet, if it were the result of design, the design must be on the part of Colonel Menendez, since the Cambers had occupied the Guest House before he had leased Cray's Folly.

I know not if I betrayed my absentmindedness during the time that I was struggling vainly with these maddening problems, but presently, Mrs. Camber having departed about her household duties, I found myself walking down the garden with her husband.

"This is the summer house of which I was speaking, Mr. Knox," he said, and I regret to state that I retained no impression of his having previously

mentioned the subject. "During the time that Sir James Appleton resided at Cray's Folly, I worked here regularly in the summer months. It was Sir James, of course, who laid out the greater part of the gardens and who rescued the property from the state of decay into which it had fallen."

I aroused myself from the profitless reverie in which I had become lost. We were standing before a sort of arbour which marked the end of the grounds of the Guest House. It overhung the edge of a miniature ravine, in which, over a pebbly course, a little stream pursued its way down the valley to feed the lake in the grounds of Cray's Folly.

From this point of vantage I could see the greater part of Colonel Menendez's residence. I had an unobstructed view of the tower and of the Tudor garden.

"I abandoned my work-shop," pursued Colin Camber, "when the—er—the new tenant took up his residence. I work now in the room in which you found me this morning."

He sighed, and turning abruptly, led the way back to the house, holding himself very erect, and presenting a queer figure in his threadbare dressing gown.

It was now a perfect summer's day, and I commented upon the beauty of the old garden, which in places was bordered by a crumbling wall.

"Yes, a quaint old spot," said Camber. "I thought at one time, because of the name of the house, that it might have been part of a monastery or convent. This was not the case, however. It derives its name from a certain Sir Jaspar Guest, who flourished, I believe, under King Charles of merry memory."

"Nevertheless," I added, "the Guest House is a charming survival of more spacious days."

"True," returned Colin Camber, gravely. "Here it is possible to lead one's own life, away from the noisy world," he sighed again wearily. "Yes, I shall regret leaving the Guest House."

"What! You are leaving?"

"I am leaving as soon as I can find another residence, suited both to my requirements and to my slender purse. But these domestic affairs can be of no possible interest to you. I take it, Mr. Knox, that you will grant my wife and myself the pleasure of your company at lunch?"

"Many thanks," I replied, "but really I must return to Cray's Folly."

As I spoke the words I had moved a little ahead at a point where the path was overgrown by a rose bush, for the garden was somewhat neglected.

"You will quite understand," I said, and turned.

Never can I forget the spectacle which I beheld.

Colin Camber's peculiarly pale complexion had assumed a truly ghastly pallor, and he stood with tightly clenched hands, glaring at me almost insanely.

"Mr. Camber," I cried, with concern, "are you unwell?"

He moistened his dry lips, and:

"You are returning—to Cray's Folly?" he said, speaking, it seemed, with difficulty.

"I am, sir. I am staying with Colonel Menendez."

"Ah!"

He clutched the collar of his pyjama jacket and wrenched so strongly that the button was torn off. His passion was incredible, insane. The power of speech had almost left him.

"You are a guest of—of Devil Menendez," he whispered, and the speaking of the name seemed almost to choke him. "Of—Devil Menendez. You—you—are a spy. You have stolen my hospitality—you have obtained access to my house under false pretences. God! if I had known!"

"Mr. Camber," I said, sternly, and realized that I, too, had clenched my fists, for the man's language was grossly insulting, "you forget yourself."

"Perhaps I do," he muttered, thickly; "and therefore"—he raised a quivering forefinger—"go! If you have any spark of compassion in your breast, go! Leave my house."

Nostrils dilated, he stood with that quivering finger outstretched, and now having become as speechless as he, I turned and walked rapidly up to the house.

"Ah Tsong! Ah Tsong!" came a cry from behind me in tones which I can only describe as hysterical—"Mr. Knox's hat and stick. Quickly."

As I walked in past the study door the Chinaman came to meet me, holding my hat and cane. I took them from him without a word, and, the door being held open by Ah Tsong, walked out on to the road.

My heart was beating rapidly. I did not know what to think nor what to do. This ignominious dismissal afforded an experience new to me. I was humiliated, mortified, but above all, wildly angry.

How far I had gone on my homeward journey I cannot say, when the sound of quickly pattering footsteps intruded upon my wild reverie. I stopped, turned, and there was Ah Tsong almost at my heels.

"Blinga chit flom lilly missee," he said, and held the note toward me.

I hesitated, glaring at him in a way that must have been very unpleasant; but recovering myself I tore open the envelope, and read the following note, written in pencil and very shakily:

MR. KNOX. Please forgive him. If you knew what we have suffered from Senor Don Juan Menendez, I know you would forgive him. Please, for my sake.

YSOLA CAMBER.

The Chinaman was watching me, that strangely pathetic expression in his eyes, and:

"Tell your mistress that I quite understand and will write to her," I said.

"Hoi, hoi."

Ah Tsong turned, and ran swiftly off, as I pursued my way back to Cray's Folly in a mood which I shall not attempt to describe.

XV. UNREST

I sat in Paul Harley's room. Luncheon was over, and although, as on the previous day, it had been a perfect repast, perfectly served, the sense of tension which I had experienced throughout the meal had made me horribly ill at ease.

That shadow of which I have spoken elsewhere seemed to have become almost palpable. In vain I had ascribed it to a morbid imagination: persistently it lingered.

Madame de Stämer's gaiety rang more false than ever. She twirled the rings upon her slender fingers and shot little enquiring glances all around the table. This spirit of unrest, from wherever it arose, had communicated itself to everybody. Madame's several bon mots one and all were failures. She delivered them without conviction like an amateur repeating lines

learned by heart. The Colonel was unusually silent, eating little but drinking much. There was something unreal, almost ghastly, about the whole affair; and when at last Madame de Stämer retired, bearing Val Beverley with her, I felt certain that the Colonel would make some communication to us. If ever knowledge of portentous evil were written upon a man's face it was written upon his, as he sat there at the head of the table, staring straightly before him. However:

"Gentlemen," he said, "if your enquiries here have led to no result of, shall I say, a tangible character, at least I feel sure that you must have realized one thing."

Harley stared at him sternly.

"I have realized, Colonel Menendez," he replied, "that something is pending."

"Ah!" murmured the Colonel, and he clutched the edge of the table with his strong brown hands.

"But," continued my friend, "I have realized something more. You have asked for my aid, and I am here. Now you have deliberately tied my hands."

"What do you mean, sir?" asked the other, softly.

"I will speak plainly. I mean that you know more about the nature of this danger than you have ever communicated to me. Allow me to proceed, if you please, Colonel Menendez. For your delightful hospitality I thank you. As your guest I could be happy, but as a professional investigator whose services have been called upon under most unusual circumstances, I cannot be happy and I do not thank you."

Their glances met. Both were angry, wilful, and self-confident. Following a few moments of silence:

"Perhaps, Mr. Harley," said the Colonel, "you have something further to say?"

"I have this to say," was the answer: "I esteem your friendship, but I fear I must return to town without delay."

The Colonel's jaws were clenched so tightly that I could see the muscles protruding. He was fighting an inward battle; then:

"What!" he said, "you would desert me?"

"I never deserted any man who sought my aid."

"I have sought your aid."

"Then accept it!" cried Harley. "This, or allow me to retire from the case. You ask me to find an enemy who threatens you, and you withhold every clue which could aid me in my search."

"What clue have I withheld?"

Paul Harley stood up.

"It is useless to discuss the matter further, Colonel Menendez," he said, coldly.

The Colonel rose also, and:

"Mr. Harley," he replied, and his high voice was ill-controlled, "if I give you my word of honour that I dare not tell you more, and if, having done so, I beg of you to remain at least another night, can you refuse me?"

Harley stood at the end of the table watching him.

"Colonel Menendez," he said, "this would appear to be a game in which my handicap rests on the fact that I do not know against whom I am pitted. Very well. You leave me no alternative but to reply that I will stay."

"I thank you, Mr. Harley. As I fear I am far from well, dare I hope to be excused if I retire to my room for an hour's rest?"

Harley and I bowed, and the Colonel, returning our salutations, walked slowly out, his bearing one of grace and dignity. So that memorable luncheon terminated, and now we found ourselves alone and faced with a problem which, from whatever point one viewed it, offered no single opening whereby one might hope to penetrate to the truth.

Paul Harley was pacing up and down the room in a state of such nervous irritability as I never remembered to have witnessed in him before.

I had just finished an account of my visit to the Guest House and of the indignity which had been put upon me, and:

"Conundrums! conundrums!" my friend exclaimed. "This quest of Bat Wing is like the quest of heaven, Knox. A hundred open doors invite us, each one promising to lead to the light, and if we enter where do they lead? —to mystification. For instance, Colonel Menendez has broadly hinted that he looks upon Colin Camber as an enemy. Judging from your reception at the Guest House to-day, such an enmity, and a deadly enmity, actually exists. But whereas Camber has resided here for three years, the Colonel is a newcomer. We are, therefore, offered the spectacle of a trembling victim seeking the sacrifice. Bah! it is preposterous."

"If you had seen Colin Camber's face to-day, you might not have thought it so preposterous."

"But I should, Knox! I should! It is impossible to suppose that Colonel Menendez was unaware when he leased Cray's Folly that Camber occupied the Guest House."

"And Mrs. Camber is a Cuban," I murmured.

"Don't, Knox!" my friend implored. "This case is driving me mad. I have a conviction that it is going to prove my Waterloo."

"My dear fellow," I said, "this mood is new to you."

"Why don't you advise me to remember Auguste Dupin?" asked Harley, bitterly. "That great man, preserving his philosophical calm, doubtless by this time would have pieced together these disjointed clues, and have produced an elegant pattern ready to be framed and exhibited to the admiring public."

He dropped down upon the bed, and taking his briar from his pocket, began to load it in a manner which was almost vicious. I stood watching him and offered no remark, until, having lighted the pipe, he began to smoke. I knew that these "Indian moods" were of short duration, and, sure enough, presently:

"God bless us all, Knox," he said, breaking into an amused smile, "how we bristle when someone tries to prove that we are not infallible! How human we are, Knox, but how fortunate that we can laugh at ourselves."

I sighed with relief, for Harley at these times imposed a severe strain even upon my easy-going disposition.

"Let us go down to the billiard room," he continued. "I will play you a hundred up. I have arrived at a point where my ideas persistently work in circles. The best cure is golf; failing golf, billiards."

The billiard room was immediately beneath us, adjoining the last apartment in the east wing, and there we made our way. Harley played keenly, deliberately, concentrating upon the game. I was less successful, for I found myself alternately glancing toward the door and the open window, in the hope that Val Beverley would join us. I was disappointed, however. We saw no more of the ladies until tea-time, and if a spirit of constraint had prevailed throughout luncheon, a veritable demon of unrest presided upon the terrace during tea.

Madame de Stämer made apologies on behalf of the Colonel. He was prolonging his siesta, but he hoped to join us at dinner.

"Is the Colonel's heart affected?" Harley asked.

Madame de Stämer shrugged her shoulders and shook her head, blankly.

"It is mysterious, the state of his health," she replied. "An old trouble, which began years and years ago in Cuba."

Harley nodded sympathetically, but I could see that he was not satisfied. Yet, although he might doubt her explanation, he had noted, and so had I, that Madame de Stämer's concern was very real. Her slender hands were strangely unsteady; indeed her condition bordered on one of distraction.

Harley concealed his thoughts, whatever they may have been, beneath that mask of reserve which I knew so well, whilst I endeavoured in vain to draw Val Beverley into conversation with me.

I gathered that Madame de Stämer had been to visit the invalid, and that she was all anxiety to return was a fact she was wholly unable to conceal. There was a tired look in her still eyes, as though she had undertaken a task beyond her powers to perform, and, so unnatural a quartette were we, that when presently she withdrew I was glad, although she took Val Beverley with her.

Paul Harley resumed his seat, staring at me with unseeing eyes. A sound reached us through the drawing room which told us that Madame de Stämer's chair was being taken upstairs, a task always performed when Madame desired to visit the upper floors by Manoel and Pedro's daughter, Nita, who acted as Madame's maid. These sounds died away, and I thought how silent everything had become. Even the birds were still, and presently, my eye being attracted to a black speck in the sky above, I learned why the feathered choir was mute. A hawk was hovering loftily overhead.

Noting my upward glance, Paul Harley also raised his eyes.

"Ah," he murmured, "a hawk. All the birds are cowering in their nests. Nature is a cruel mistress, Knox."

XVI. RED EVE

Over the remainder of that afternoon I will pass in silence. Indeed, looking backward now, I cannot recollect that it afforded one incident worthy of record. But because great things overshadow small, so it may be that whereas my recollections of quite trivial episodes are sharp enough up to a point, my memories from this point onward to the horrible and tragic happening which I have set myself to relate are hazy and indistinct. I was troubled by the continued absence of Val Beverley. I thought that she was avoiding me by design, and in Harley's gloomy reticence I could find no shadow of comfort.

We wandered aimlessly about the grounds, Harley staring up in a vague fashion at the windows of Cray's Folly; and presently, when I stopped to inspect a very perfect rose bush, he left me without a word, and I found myself alone.

Later, as I sauntered toward the Tudor garden, where I had hoped to encounter Miss Beverley, I heard the clicking of billiard balls; and there was Harley at the table, practising fancy shots.

He glanced up at me as I paused by the open window, stopped to relight his pipe, and then bent over the table again.

"Leave me alone, Knox," he muttered; "I am not fit for human society."

Understanding his moods as well as I did, I merely laughed and withdrew.

I strolled around into the library and inspected scores of books without forming any definite impression of the contents of any of them. Manoel came in whilst I was there and I was strongly tempted to send a message to Miss Beverley, but common sense overcame the inclination.

When at last my watch told me that the hour for dressing was arrived, I heaved a sigh of relief. I cannot say that I was bored, my ill-temper sprang from a deeper source than this. The mysterious disappearance of the inmates of Cray's Folly, and a sort of brooding stillness which lay over the great house, had utterly oppressed me.

As I passed along the terrace I paused to admire the spectacle afforded by the setting sun. The horizon was on fire from north to south and the countryside was stained with that mystic radiance which is sometimes called the Blood of Apollo. Turning, I saw the disk of the moon coldly rising in the heavens. I thought of the silent birds and the hovering hawk,

and I began my preparations for dinner mechanically, dressing as an automaton might dress.

Paul Harley's personality was never more marked than in his evil moods. His power to fascinate was only equalled by his power to repel. Thus, although there was a light in his room and I could hear him moving about, I did not join him when I had finished dressing, but lighting a cigarette walked downstairs.

The beauty of the night called to me, although as I stepped out upon the terrace I realized with a sort of shock that the gathering dusk held a menace, so that I found myself questioning the shadows and doubting the rustle of every leaf. Something invisible, intangible yet potent, brooded over Cray's Folly. I began to think more kindly of the disappearance of Val Beverley during the afternoon. Doubtless she, too, had been touched by this spirit of unrest and in solitude had sought to dispel it.

So thinking, I walked on in the direction of the Tudor garden. The place was bathed in a sort of purple half-light, lending it a fairy air of unreality, as though banished sun and rising moon yet disputed for mastery over earth. This idea set me thinking of Colin Camber, of Osiris, whom he had described as a black god, and of Isis, whose silver disk now held undisputed sovereignty of the evening sky.

Resentment of the treatment which I had received at the Guest House still burned hotly within me, but the mystery of it all had taken the keen edge off my wrath, and I think a sort of melancholy was the keynote of my reflections as, descending the steps to the sunken garden, I saw Val Beverley, in a delicate blue gown, coming toward me. She was the spirit of my dreams, and the embodiment of my mood. When she lowered her eyes at my approach, I knew by virtue of a sort of inspiration that she had been avoiding me.

"Miss Beverley," I said, "I have been looking for you all the afternoon."

"Have you? I have been in my room writing letters."

I paced slowly along beside her.

"I wish you would be very frank with me," I said.

She glanced up swiftly, and as swiftly lowered her lashes again.

"Do you think I am not frank?"

"I do think so. I understand why."

"Do you really understand?"

"I think I do. Your woman's intuition has told you that there is something wrong."

"In what way?"

"You are afraid of your thoughts. You can see that Madame de Stämer and Colonel Menendez are deliberately concealing something from Paul Harley, and you don't know where your duty lies. Am I right?"

She met my glance for a moment in a startled way, then: "Yes," she said, softly; "you are quite right. How have you guessed?"

"I have tried very hard to understand you," I replied, "and so perhaps up to a point I have succeeded."

"Oh, Mr. Knox." She suddenly laid her hand upon my arm. "I am oppressed with such a dreadful foreboding, yet I don't know how to explain it to you."

"I understand. I, too, have felt it."

"You have?" She paused, and looked at me eagerly. "Then it is not just morbid imagination on my part. If only I knew what to do, what to believe. Really, I am bewildered. I have just left Madame de Stämer—"

"Yes?" I said, for she had paused in evident doubt.

"Well, she has utterly broken down."

"Broken down?"

"She came to my room and sobbed hysterically for nearly an hour this afternoon."

"But what was the cause of her grief?"

"I simply cannot understand."

"Is it possible that Colonel Menendez is dangerously ill?"

"It may be so, Mr. Knox, but in that event why have they not sent for a physician?"

"True," I murmured; "and no one has been sent for?"

"No one."

"Have you seen Colonel Menendez?"

"Not since lunch-time."

"Have you ever known him to suffer in this way before?"

"Never. It is utterly unaccountable. Certainly during the last few months he has given up riding practically altogether, and in other ways has changed his former habits, but I have never known him to exhibit traces of any real illness."

"Has any medical man attended him?"

"Not that I know of. Oh, there is something uncanny about it all. Whatever should I do if you were not here?"

She had spoken on impulse, and seeing her swift embarrassment:

"Miss Beverley," I said, "I am delighted to know that my company cheers you."

Truth to tell my heart was beating rapidly, and, so selfish is the nature of man, I was more glad to learn that my company was acceptable to Val Beverley than I should have been to have had the riddle of Cray's Folly laid bare before me.

Those sweetly indiscreet words, however, had raised a momentary barrier between us, and we walked on silently to the house, and entered the brightly lighted hall.

The silver peal of a Chinese tubular gong rang out just when we reached the veranda, and as Val Beverley and I walked in from the garden, Madame de Stämer came wheeling through the doorway, closely followed by Paul Harley. In her the art of the toilette amounted almost to genius, and she had so successfully concealed all traces of her recent grief that I wondered if this could have been real.

"My dear Mr. Knox," she cried, "I seem to be fated always to apologize for other people. The Colonel is truly desolate, but he cannot join us for dinner. I have already explained to Mr. Harley."

Harley inclined his head sympathetically, and assisted to arrange Madame in her place.

"The Colonel requests us to smoke a cigar with him after dinner, Knox," he said, glancing across to me. "It would seem that troubles never come singly."

"Ah," Madame shrugged her shoulders, which her low gown left daringly bare, "they come in flocks, or not at all. But I suppose we should feel lonely in the world without a few little sorrows, eh, Mr. Harley?"

I loved her unquenchable spirit, and I have wondered often enough what I should have thought of her if I had known the truth. France has bred some wonderful women, both good and bad, but none I think more wonderful than Marie de Stämer.

If such a thing were possible, we dined more extravagantly than on the previous night. Madame's wit was at its keenest; she was truly brilliant.

Pedro, from the big bouffet at the end of the room, supervised this feast of Lucullus, and except for odd moments of silence in which Madame seemed to be listening for some distant sound, there was nothing, I think, which could have told a casual observer that a black cloud rested upon the house.

Once, interrupting a tête-à-tête between Val Beverley and Paul Harley:

"Do not encourage her, Mr. Harley," said Madame, "she is a desperate flirt."

"Oh, Madame," cried Val Beverley and blushed deeply.

"You know you are, my dear, and you are very wise. Flirt all your life, but never fall in love. It is fatal, don't you think so, Mr. Knox?"—turning to me in her rapid manner.

I looked into her still eyes, which concealed so much.

"Say, rather, that it is Fate," I murmured.

"Yes, that is more pretty, but not so true. If I could live my life again, M. Knox," she said, for she sometimes used the French and sometimes the English mode of address, "I should build a stone wall around my heart. It could peep over, but no one could ever reach it."

Oddly enough, then, as it seems to me now, the spirit of unrest seemed almost to depart for awhile, and in the company of the vivacious Frenchwoman time passed very quickly up to the moment when Harley and I walked slowly upstairs to join the Colonel.

During the latter part of dinner an idea had presented itself to me which I was anxious to mention to Harley, and:

"Harley," I said, "an explanation of the Colonel's absence has occurred to me."

"Really!" he replied; "possibly the same one that has occurred to me."

"What is that?"

Paul Harley paused on the stairs, turning to me.

"You are thinking that he has taken cover from the danger which he believes particularly to threaten him to-night?"

"Exactly."

"You may be right," he murmured, proceeding upstairs.

He led the way to a little smoke-room which hitherto I had never visited, and in response to his knock:

"Come in," cried the high voice of Colonel Menendez.

We entered to find ourselves in a small and very cosy room. There was a handsome oak bureau against one wall, which was littered with papers of various kinds, and there was also a large bookcase occupied almost exclusively by French novels. It occurred to me that the Colonel spent a greater part of his time in this little snuggery than in the more formal study below. At the moment of our arrival he was stretched upon a settee near which stood a little table; and on this table I observed the remains of what appeared to me to have been a fairly substantial repast. For some reason which I did not pause to analyze at the moment I noted with disfavour the presence of a bowl of roses upon the silver tray.

Colonel Menendez was smoking a cigarette, and Manoel was in the act of removing the tray.

"Gentlemen," said the Colonel, "I have no words in which to express my sorrow. Manoel, pull up those armchairs. Help yourself to port, Mr. Harley, and fill Mr. Knox's glass. I can recommend the cigars in the long box."

As we seated ourselves:

"I am extremely sorry to find you indisposed, sir," said Harley.

He was watching the dark face keenly, and probably thinking, as I was thinking, that it exhibited no trace of illness.

Colonel Menendez waved his cigarette gracefully, settling himself amid the cushions.

"An old trouble, Mr. Harley," he replied, lightly; "a legacy from ancestors who drank too deep of the wine of life."

"You are surely taking medical advice?"

Colonel Menendez shrugged slightly.

"There is no doctor in England who would understand the case," he replied. "Besides, there is nothing for it but rest and avoidance of excitement."

"In that event, Colonel," said Harley, "we will not disturb you for long. Indeed, I should not have consented to disturb you at all, if I had not thought that you might have some request to make upon this important night."

"Ah!" Colonel Menendez shot a swift glance in his direction. "You have remembered about to-night?"

"Naturally."

"Your interest comforts me very greatly, gentlemen, and I am only sorry that my uncertain health has made me so poor a host. Nothing has occurred since your arrival to help you, I am aware. Not that I am anxious for any new activity on the part of my enemies. But almost anything which should end this deathly suspense would be welcome."

He spoke the final words with a peculiar intonation. I saw Harley watching him closely.

"However," he continued, "everything is in the hands of Fate, and if your visit should prove futile, I can only apologize for having interrupted your original plans. Respecting to-night"—he shrugged—"what can I say?"

"Nothing has occurred," asked Harley, slowly, "nothing fresh, I mean, to indicate that the danger which you apprehend may really culminate to-night?"

"Nothing fresh, Mr. Harley, unless you yourself have observed anything."

"Ah," murmured Paul Harley, "let us hope that the threat will never be fulfilled."

Colonel Menendez inclined his head gravely.

"Let us hope so," he said.

On the whole, he was curiously subdued. He was most solicitous for our comfort and his exquisite courtesy had never been more marked. I often think of him now—his big but graceful figure reclining upon the settee, whilst he skilfully rolled his eternal cigarettes and chatted in that peculiar, light voice. Before the memory of Colonel Don Juan Sarmiento Menendez I sometimes stand appalled. If his Maker had but endowed him with other qualities of mind and heart equal to his magnificent courage, then truly he had been a great man.

XVII. NIGHT OF THE FULL MOON

I stood at Harley's open window—looking down in the Tudor garden. The moon, like a silver mirror, hung in a cloudless sky. Over an hour had elapsed since I had heard Pedro making his nightly rounds. Nothing whatever of an unusual nature had occurred, and although Harley and I had listened for any sound of nocturnal footsteps, our vigilance had passed

unrewarded. Harley, unrolling the Chinese ladder, had set out upon a secret tour of the grounds, warning me that it must be a long business, since the brilliance of the moonlight rendered it necessary that he should make a wide detour, in order to avoid possible observation from the windows. I had wished to join him, but:

"I count it most important that one of us should remain in the house," he had replied.

As a result, here was I at the open window, questioning the shadows to right and left of me, and every moment expecting to see Harley reappear. I wondered what discoveries he would make. It would not have surprised me to learn that there were lights in many windows of Cray's Folly to-night.

Although, when we had rejoined the ladies for half an hour, after leaving Colonel Menendez's room, there had been no overt reference to the menace overhanging the house, yet, as we separated for the night, I had detected again in Val Beverley's eyes that look of repressed fear.

I wondered now, as I gazed down into the moon-bathed gardens, if Harley and I were the only wakeful members of the household at that hour. I should have been prepared to wager that there were others. I thought of the strange footsteps which so often passed Miss Beverley's room, and I discovered this thought to be an uncomfortable one.

Normally, I was sceptical enough, but on this night of the full moon as I stood there at the window, the horrors which Colonel Menendez had related to us grew very real in my eyes, and I thought that the mysteries of Voodoo might conceal strange and ghastly truths, "The scientific employment of darkness against light." Colin Camber's words leapt unbidden to my mind; and, such is the magic of moonlight, they became invested with a new and a deeper significance. Strange, that theories which one rejects whilst the sun is shining should assume a spectral shape in the light of the moon.

Such were my musings, when suddenly I heard a faint sound as of footsteps crunching upon gravel. I leaned farther out of the window, listening intently. I could not believe that Harley would be guilty of such an indiscretion as this, yet who else could be walking upon the path below?

As I watched, craning from the window, a tall figure appeared, and, slowly crossing the gravel path, descended the moss-grown steps to the Tudor garden.

It was Colonel Menendez!

He was bare-headed, but fully dressed as I had seen him in the smoking-room; and not yet grasping the portent of his appearance at that hour, but merely wondering why he had not yet retired, I continued to watch him. As I did so, something in his gait, something unnatural in his movements, caught hold of my mind with a sudden great conviction. He had reached the path which led to the sun-dial, and with short, queer, ataxic steps was proceeding in its direction, a striking figure in the brilliant moonlight which touched his gray hair with a silvery sheen.

His unnatural, automatic movements told their own story. He was walking in his sleep! Could it be in obedience to the call of M'kombo?

My throat grew dry and I knew not how to act. Unwillingly it seemed, with ever-halting steps, the figure moved onward. I could see that his fists were tightly clenched and that he held his head rigidly upright. All horrors, real and imaginary, which I had ever experienced, culminated in the moment when I saw this man of inflexible character, I could have sworn of indomitable will, moving like a puppet under the influence of some unnameable force.

He was almost come to the sun-dial when I determined to cry out. Then, remembering the shock experienced by a suddenly awakened somnambulist, and remembering that the Chinese ladder hung from the window at my feet, I changed my mind. Checking the cry upon my lips, I got astride of the window ledge, and began to grope for the bamboo rungs beneath me. I had found the first of these, and, turning, had begun to descend, when:

"Knox! Knox!" came softly from the opening in the box hedge, "what the devil are you about?"

It was Paul Harley returned from his tour of the building.

"Harley!" I whispered, descending, "quick! the Colonel has just gone into the Tudor garden!"

"What!" There was a note of absolute horror in the exclamation. "You should have stopped him, Knox, you should have stopped him!" cried Harley, and with that he ran off in the same direction.

Disentangling my foot from the rungs of the ladder which lay upon the ground, I was about to follow, when it happened—that strange and ghastly thing toward which, secretly, darkly, events had been tending.

The crack of a rifle sounded sharply in the stillness, echoing and re-echoing from wing to wing of Cray's Folly and then, more dimly, up the wooded slopes beyond! Somewhere ahead of me I heard Harley cry out:

"My God, I am too late! They have got him!"

Then, hotfoot, I was making for the entrance to the garden. Just as I came to it and raced down the steps I heard another sound the memory of which haunts me to this day.

Where it came from I had no idea. Perhaps I was too confused to judge accurately. It might have come from the house, or from the slopes beyond the house, But it was a sort of shrill, choking laugh, and it set the ultimate touch of horror upon a *scène macabre* which, even as I write of it, seems unreal to me.

I ran up the path to where Harley was kneeling beside the sun-dial. Analysis of my emotions at this moment were futile; I can only say that I had come to a state of stupefaction. Face downward on the grass, arms outstretched and fists clenched, lay Colonel Menendez. I think I saw him move convulsively, but as I gained his side Harley looked up at me, and beneath the tan which he never lost his face had grown pale. He spoke through clenched teeth.

"Merciful God," he said, "he is shot through the head."

One glance I gave at the ghastly wound in the base of the Colonel's skull, and then swayed backward in a sort of nausea. To see a man die in the heat of battle, a man one has known and called friend, is strange and terrible. Here in this moon-bathed Tudor garden it was a horror almost beyond my powers to endure.

Paul Harley, without touching the prone figure, stood up. Indeed no examination of the victim was necessary. A rifle bullet had pierced his brain, and he lay there dead with his head toward the hills.

I clutched at Harley's shoulder, but he stood rigidly, staring up the slope past the angle of the tower, to where a gable of the Guest House jutted out from the trees.

"Did you hear—that cry?" I whispered, "immediately after the shot?"

"I heard it."

A moment longer he stood fixedly watching, and then:

"Not a wisp of smoke," he said. "You note the direction in which he was facing when he fell?"

He spoke in a stern and unnatural voice.

"I do. He must have turned half right when he came to the sun-dial."

"Where were you when the shot was fired?"

"Running in this direction."

"You saw no flash?"

"None."

"Neither did I," groaned Harley; "neither did I. And short of throwing a cordon round the hills what can be done? How can I move?"

He had somewhat relaxed, but now as I continued to clutch his arm, I felt the muscles grow rigid again.

"Look, Knox!" he whispered—"look!"

I followed the direction of his fixed stare, and through the trees on the hillside a dim light shone out. Someone had lighted a lamp in the Guest House.

A faint, sibilant sound drew my glance upward, and there overhead a bat circled—circled—dipped—and flew off toward the distant woods. So still was the night that I could distinguish the babble of the little stream which ran down into the lake. Then, suddenly, came a loud flapping of wings. The swans had been awakened by the sound of the shot. Others had been awakened, too, for now distant voices became audible, and then a muffled scream from somewhere within Cray's Folly.

"Back to the house, Knox," said Harley, hoarsely. "For God's sake keep the women away. Get Pedro, and send Manoel for the nearest doctor. It's useless but usual. Let no one deface his footprints. My worst anticipations have come true. The local police must be informed."

Throughout the time that he spoke he continued to search the moon-bathed landscape with feverish eagerness, but except for a faint movement of birds in the trees, for they, like the swans on the lake, had been alarmed by the shot, nothing stirred.

"It came from the hillside," he muttered. "Off you go, Knox."

And even as I started on my unpleasant errand, he had set out running toward the gate in the southern corner of the garden.

For my part I scrambled unceremoniously up the bank, and emerged where the yews stood sentinel beside the path. I ran through the gap in the box hedge just as the main doors were thrown open by Pedro.

He started back as he saw me.

"Pedro! Pedro!" I cried, "have the ladies been awakened?"

"Yes, yes! there is terrible trouble, sir. What has happened? What has happened?"

"A tragedy," I said, shortly. "Pull yourself together. Where is Madame de Stämer?"

Pedro uttered some exclamation in Spanish and stood, pale-faced, swaying before me, a dishevelled figure in a dressing gown. And now in the background Mrs. Fisher appeared. One frightened glance she cast in my direction, and would have hurried across the hall but I intercepted her.

"Where are you going, Mrs. Fisher?" I demanded. "What has happened here?"

"To Madame, to Madame," she sobbed, pointing toward the corridor which communicated with Madame de Stämer's bedchamber.

I heard a frightened cry proceeding from that direction, and recognized the voice of Nita, the girl who acted as Madame's maid. Then I heard Val Beverley.

"Go and fetch Mrs. Fisher, Nita, at once—and try to behave yourself. I have trouble enough."

I entered the corridor and pulled up short. Val Beverley, fully dressed, was kneeling beside Madame de Stämer, who wore a kimono over her night-robe, and who lay huddled on the floor immediately outside the door of her room!

"Oh, Mr. Knox!" cried the girl, pitifully, and raised frightened eyes to me. "For God's sake, what has happened?"

Nita, the Spanish girl, who was sobbing hysterically, ran along to join Mrs. Fisher.

"I will tell you in a moment," I said, quietly, rendered cool, as one always is, by the need of others. "But first tell me—how did Madame de Stämer get here?"

"I don't know, I don't know! I was startled by the shot. It has awakened everybody. And just as I opened my door to listen, I heard Madame cry out in the hall below. I ran down, turned on the light, and found her lying here. She, too, had been awakened, I suppose, and was endeavouring to drag herself from her room when her strength failed her and she swooned. She is too heavy for me to lift," added the girl, pathetically, "and Pedro is out of

his senses, and Nita, who was the first of the servants to come, is simply hysterical, as you can see."

I nodded reassuringly, and stooping, lifted the swooning woman. She was much heavier than I should have supposed, but, Val Beverley leading the way, I carried her into her apartment and placed her upon the bed.

"I will leave her to you," I said. "You have courage, and so I will tell you what has happened."

"Yes, tell me, oh, tell me!"

She laid her hands upon my shoulders appealingly, and looked up into my eyes in a way that made me long I to take her in my arms and comfort her, an insane longing which I only crushed with difficulty.

"Someone has shot Colonel Menendez," I said, in a low voice, for Mrs. Fisher had just entered.

"You mean—"

I nodded.

"Oh!"

Val Beverley opened and closed her eyes, clutching at me dizzily for a moment, then:

"I think," she whispered, "she must have known, and that was why she swooned. Oh, my God! how horrible."

I made her sit down in an armchair, and watched her anxiously, but although every speck of colour had faded from her cheeks, she was splendidly courageous, and almost immediately she smiled up at me, very wanly, but confidently.

"I will look after her," she said. "Mr. Harley will need your assistance."

When I returned to the hall I found it already filled with a number of servants incongruously attired. Carter the chauffeur, who lived at the lodge, was just coming in at the door, and:

"Carter," I said, "get a car out quickly, and bring the nearest doctor. If there is another man who can drive, send him for the police. Your master has been shot."

XVIII. INSPECTOR AYLESBURY OF MARKET HILTON

"Now, gentlemen," said Inspector Aylesbury, "I will take evidence."

Dawn was creeping grayly over the hills, and the view from the library windows resembled a study by Bastien-Lepage. The lamps burned yellowly, and the exotic appointments of the library viewed in that cold light for some reason reminded me of a stage set seen in daylight. The Velasquez portrait mentally translated me to the billiard room where something lay upon the settee with a white sheet drawn over it; and I wondered if my own face looked as wan and comfortless as did the faces of my companions, that is, of two of them, for I must except Inspector Aylesbury.

Squarely before the oaken mantel he stood, a large, pompous man, but in this hour I could find no humour in Paul Harley's description of him as resembling a walrus. He had a large auburn moustache tinged with gray, and prominent brown eyes, but the lower part of his face, which terminated in a big double chin, was ill-balanced by his small forehead. He was bulkily built, and I had conceived an unreasonable distaste for his puffy hands. His official air and oratorical manner were provoking.

Harley sat in the chair which he had occupied during our last interview with Colonel Menendez in the library, and I had realized—a realization which had made me uncomfortable—that I was seated upon the couch on which the Colonel had reclined. Only one other was present, Dr. Rolleston of Mid-Hatton, a slight, fair man with a brisk, military manner, acquired perhaps during six years of war service. He was standing beside me smoking a cigarette.

"I have taken all the necessary particulars concerning the position of the body," continued the Inspector, "the nature of the wound, contents of pockets, etc., and I now turn to you, Mr. Harley, as the first person to discover the murdered man."

Paul Harley lay back in the armchair watching the speaker.

"Before we come to what happened here to-night I should like to be quite clear about your own position in the matter, Mr. Harley. Now"—Inspector Aylesbury raised one finger in forensic manner—"now, you visited me yesterday afternoon, Mr. Harley, and asked for certain information regarding the neighbourhood."

"I did," said Harley, shortly.

"The questions which you asked me were," continued the Inspector, slowly and impressively, "did I know of any negro or coloured people living in, or about, Mid-Hatton, and could I give you a list of the residents within a two-mile radius of Cray's Folly. I gave you the information which you required, and now it is your turn to give me some. Why did you ask those questions?"

"For this reason," was the reply—"I had been requested by Colonel Menendez to visit Cray's Folly, accompanied by my friend, Mr. Knox, in order that I might investigate certain occurrences which had taken place here."

"Oh," said the Inspector, raising his eyebrows, "I see. You were here to make investigations?"

"Yes."

"And these occurrences, will you tell me what they were?"

"Simple enough in themselves," replied Harley. "Someone broke into the house one night."

"Broke into the house?"

"Undoubtedly."

"But this was never reported to us."

"Possibly not, but someone broke in, nevertheless. Secondly, Colonel Menendez had detected someone lurking about the lawns, and thirdly, the wing of a bat was nailed to the main door."

Inspector Aylesbury lowered his eyebrows and concentrated a frowning glance upon the speaker.

"Of course, sir," he said, "I don't want to jump to conclusions, but you are not by any chance trying to be funny at a time like this?"

"My sense of humour has failed me entirely," replied Harley. "I am merely stating bald facts in reply to your questions."

"Oh, I see."

The Inspector cleared his throat.

"Someone broke into Cray's Folly, then, a fact which was not reported to me, a suspicious loiterer was seen in the grounds, again not reported, and someone played a silly practical joke by nailing the wing of a bat, you say, to the door. Might I ask, Mr. Harley, why you mention this matter? The other things are serious, but why you should mention the trick of some mischievous boy at a time like this I can't imagine."

"No," said Harley, wearily, "it does sound absurd, Inspector; I quite appreciate the fact. But, you see, Colonel Menendez regarded it as the most significant episode of them all."

"What! The bat wing nailed on the door?"

"The bat wing, decidedly. He believed it to be the token of a negro secret society which had determined upon his death, hence my enquiries regarding coloured men in the neighbourhood. Do you understand, Inspector?"

Inspector Aylesbury took a large handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. Replacing the handkerchief he cleared his throat, and:

"Am I to understand," he enquired, "that the late Colonel Menendez had expected to be attacked?"

"You may understand that," replied Harley. "It explains my presence in the house."

"Oh," said the Inspector, "I see. It looks as though he might have done better if he had applied to me."

Paul Harley glanced across in my direction and smiled grimly.

"As I had predicted, Knox," he murmured, "my Waterloo."

"What's that you say about Waterloo, Mr. Harley?" demanded the Inspector.

"Nothing germaine to the case," replied Harley. "It was a reference to a battle, not to a railway station."

Inspector Aylesbury stared at him dully.

"You quite understand that you are giving evidence?" he said.

"It were impossible not to appreciate the fact." "Very well, then. The late Colonel Menendez thought he was in danger from negroes. Why did he think that?"

"He was a retired West Indian planter," replied Harley, patiently, "and he was under the impression that he had offended a powerful native society, and that for many years their vengeance had pursued him. Attempts to assassinate him had already taken place in Cuba and in the United States."

"What sort of attempts?"

"He was shot at, several times, and once, in Washington, was attacked by a man with a knife. He maintained in my presence and in the presence of my friend, Mr. Knox, here, that these various attempts were due to members of a sect or religion known as Voodoo."

"Voodoo?"

"Voodoo, Inspector, also known as Obeah, a cult which has spread from the West Coast of Africa throughout the West Indies and to parts of the United States. The bat wing is said to be a sign used by these people."

Inspector Aylesbury scratched his chin.

"Now let me get this thing clear," said he: "Colonel Menendez believed that people called Voodoos wanted to kill him? Before we go any farther, why?"

"Twenty years ago in the West Indies he had shot an important member of this sect."

"Twenty years ago?"

"According to a statement which he made to me, yes."

"I see. Then for twenty years these Voodoos have been trying to kill him? Then he comes and settles here in Surrey and someone nails a bat wing to his door? Did you see this bat wing?"

"I did. I have it upstairs in my bag if you would care to examine it."

"Oh," said the Inspector, "I see. And thinking he had been followed to England he came to you to see if you could save him?"

Paul Harley nodded grimly.

"Why did he go to you in preference to the local police, the proper authorities?" demanded the Inspector.

"He was advised to do so by the Spanish ambassador, or so he informed me."

"Is that so? Well, I suppose it had to be. Coming from foreign parts. I expect he didn't know what our police are for." He cleared his throat. "Very well, I understand now what you were doing here, Mr. Harley. The next thing is, what were you doing tonight, as I see that both you and Mr. Knox are still in evening dress?"

"We were keeping watch," I replied.

Inspector Aylesbury turned to me ponderously, raising a fat hand. "One moment, Mr. Knox, one moment," he protested. "The evidence of one witness at a time."

"We were keeping watch," said Harley, deliberately echoing my words.

"Why?"

"More or less we were here for that purpose. You see, on the night of the full moon, according to Colonel Menendez, Obeah people become particularly active."

"Why on the night of the full moon?"

"This I cannot tell you."

"Oh, I see. You were keeping watch. Where were you keeping watch?"

"In my room."

"In which part of the house is your room?"

"Northeast. It overlooks the Tudor garden."

"At what time did you retire?"

"About half-past ten."

"Did you leave the Colonel well?"

"No, he had been unwell all day. He had remained in his room."

"Had he asked you to sit up?"

"Not at all; our vigil was quite voluntary."

"Very well, then, you were in your room when the shot was fired?"

"On the contrary, I was on the path in front of the house."

"Oh, I see. The front door was open, then?"

"Not at all. Pedro had locked up for the night."

"And locked you out?"

"No; I descended from my window by means of a ladder which I had brought with me for the purpose."

"With a ladder? That's rather extraordinary, Mr Harley."

"It is extraordinary. I have strange habits."

Inspector Aylesbury cleared his throat again and looked frowningly across at my friend.

"What part of the grounds were you in when the shot was fired?" he demanded.

"Halfway along the north side."

"What were you doing?"

"I was running."

"Running?"

"You see, Inspector, I regarded it as my duty to patrol the grounds of the house at nightfall, since, for all I knew to the contrary, some of the servants might be responsible for the attempts of which the Colonel complained. I had descended from the window of my room, had passed entirely around the house east to west, and had returned to my starting-point when Mr. Knox, who was looking out of the window, observed Colonel Menendez entering the Tudor garden."

"Oh. Colonel Menendez was not visible to you?"

"Not from my position below, but being informed by my friend, who was hurriedly descending the ladder, that the Colonel had entered the garden, I set off running to intercept him."

"Why?"

"He had acquired a habit of walking in his sleep, and I presumed that he was doing so on this occasion."

"Oh, I see. So being told by the gentleman at the window that Colonel Menendez was in the garden, you started to run toward him. While you were running you heard a shot?"

"I did."

"Where do you think it came from?"

"Nothing is more difficult to judge, Inspector, especially when one is near to a large building surrounded by trees."

"Nevertheless," said the Inspector, again raising his finger and frowning at Harley, "you cannot tell me that you formed no impression on the point. For instance, was it near, or a long way off?"

"It was fairly near."

"Ten yards, twenty yards, a hundred yards, a mile?"

"Within a hundred yards. I cannot be more exact."

"Within a hundred yards, and you have no idea from which direction the shot was fired?"

"From the sound I could form none."

"Oh, I see. And what did you do?"

"I ran on and down into the sunken garden. I saw Colonel Menendez lying upon his face near the sun-dial. He was moving convulsively. Running up to him, I that he had been shot through the head."

"What steps did you take?"

"My friend, Mr. Knox, had joined me, and I sent him for assistance,"

"But what steps did you take to apprehend the murderer?"

Paul Harley looked at him quietly.

"What steps should you have taken?" he asked.

Inspector Aylesbury cleared his throat again, and:

"I don't think I should have let my man slip through my fingers like that," he replied. "Why! by now he may be out of the county."

"Your theory is quite feasible," said Harley, tonelessly.

"You were actually on the spot when the shot was fired, you admit that it was fired within a hundred yards, yet you did nothing to apprehend the murderer."

"No," replied Harley, "I was ridiculously inactive. You see, I am a mere amateur, Inspector. For my future guidance I should be glad to know what the correct procedure would have been."

Inspector Aylesbury blew his nose.

"I know my job," he said. "If I had been called in there might have been a different tale to tell. But he was a foreigner, and he paid for his ignorance, poor fellow."

Paul Harley took out his pipe and began to load it in a deliberate and lazy manner.

Inspector Aylesbury turned his prominent eyes in my direction.

XIX. COMPLICATIONS

I am afraid of this man Aylesbury," said Paul Harley. We sat in the deserted dining room. I had contributed my account of the evening's happenings, Dr. Rolleston had made his report, and Inspector Aylesbury was now examining the servants in the library. Harley and I had obtained his official permission to withdraw, and the physician was visiting Madame de Stämer, who lay in a state of utter prostration.

"What do you mean, Harley?"

"I mean that he will presently make some tragic blunder. Good God, Knox, to think that this man had sought my aid, and that I stood by idly whilst he walked out to his death. I shall never forgive myself." He banged the table with his fist. "Even now that these unknown fiends have achieved their object, I am helpless, helpless. There was not a wisp of smoke to guide me, Knox, and one man cannot search a county."

I sighed wearily.

"Do you know, Harley," I said, "I am thinking of a verse of Kipling's."

"I know!" he interrupted, almost savagely.

"A Snider squibbed in the jungle.

Somebody laughed and fled—"

"Oh, I know, Knox. I heard that damnable laughter, too."

"My God," I whispered, "who was it? What was it? Where did it come from?"

"As well ask where the shot came from, Knox. Out amongst all those trees, with a house that might have been built for a sounding-board, who could presume to say where either came from? One thing we know, that the shot came from the south."

He leaned upon a corner of the table, staring at me intently.

"From the south?" I echoed.

Harley glanced in the direction of the open door.

"Presently," he said, "we shall have to tell Aylesbury everything that we know. After all, he represents the law; but unless we can get Inspector Wessex down from Scotland Yard, I foresee a miscarriage of justice. Colonel Menendez lay on his face, and the line made by his recumbent body pointed almost directly toward—"

I nodded, watching him.

"I know, Harley—toward the Guest House."

Paul Harley inclined his head, grimly.

"The first light which we saw," he continued, "was in a window of the Guest House. It may have had no significance. Awakened by the sound of a rifle-shot near by, any one would naturally get up."

"And having decided to come downstairs and investigate," I continued, "would naturally light a lamp."

"Quite so." He stared at me very hard. "Yet," he said, "unless Mr. Colin Camber can produce an alibi I foresee a very stormy time for him."

"So do I, Harley. A deadly hatred existed between these two men, and probably this horrible deed was done on the spur of the moment. It is of his poor little girl-wife that I am thinking. As though her troubles were not heavy enough already."

"Yes," he agreed. "I am almost tempted to hold my tongue, Knox, until I have personally interviewed these people. But of course if our blundering friend directly questions me, I shall have no alternative. I shall have to answer him. His talent for examination, however, scarcely amounts to

genius, so that we may not be called upon for further details at the moment. I wonder how I can induce him to requisition Scotland Yard?"

He rested his chin in his hand and stared down reflectively at the carpet. I thought that he looked very haggard, as he sat there in the early morning light, dressed as for dinner. There was something pathetic in the pose of his bowed head.

Leaning across, I placed my hand on his shoulder.

"Don't get despondent, old chap," I said. "You have not failed yet."

"Oh, but I have, Knox!" he cried, fiercely, "I have! He came to me for protection. Now he lies dead in his own house. Failed? I have failed utterly, miserably."

I turned aside as the door opened and Dr. Rolleston came in.

"Ah, gentlemen," he said, "I wanted to see you before leaving. I have just been to visit Madame de Stämer again."

"Yes," said Harley, eagerly; "how is she?"

Dr. Rolleston lighted a cigarette, frowning perplexedly the while.

"To be honest," he replied, "her condition puzzles me."

He walked across to the fireplace and dropped the match, staring at Harley with a curious expression.

"Has any one told her the truth?" he asked.

"You mean that Colonel Menendez is dead?"

"Yes," replied Dr. Rolleston. "I understood that no one had told her?"

"No one has done so to my knowledge," said Harley.

"Then the sympathy between them must have been very acute," murmured the physician, "for she certainly knows!"

"Do you really think she knows?" I asked.

"I am certain of it. She must have had knowledge of a danger to be apprehended, and being awakened by the sound of the rifle shot, have realized by a sort of intuition that the expected tragedy had happened. I should say, from the presence of a small bruise which I found upon her forehead, that she had actually walked out into the corridor."

"Walked?" I cried.

"Yes," said the physician. "She is a shell-shock case, of course, and we sometimes find that a second shock counteracts the effect of the first. This, temporarily at any rate, seems to have happened to-night. She is now in a

very curious state: a form of hysteria, no doubt, but very curious all the same."

"Miss Beverley is with her?" I asked.

Dr. Rolleston nodded affirmatively.

"Yes, a very capable nurse. I am glad to know that Madame de Stämer is in such good hands. I am calling again early in the morning, and I have told Mrs. Fisher to see that nothing is said within hearing of the room which could enable Madame de Stämer to obtain confirmation of the idea, which she evidently entertains, that Colonel Menendez is dead."

"Does she actually assert that he is dead?" asked Harley.

"My dear sir," replied Dr. Rolleston, "she asserts nothing. She sits there like Niobe changed to stone, staring straight before her. She seems to be unaware of the presence of everyone except Miss Beverley. The only words she has spoken since recovering consciousness have been, 'Don't leave me!'"

"Hm," muttered Harley. "You have not attended Madame de Stämer before, doctor?"

"No," was the reply, "this is the first time I have entered Cray's Folly since it was occupied by Sir James Appleton."

He was about to take his departure when the door opened and Inspector Aylesbury walked in.

"Ah," said he, "I have two more witnesses to interview: Madame de Stämer and Miss Beverley. From these witnesses I hope to get particulars of the dead man's life which may throw some light upon the identity of his murderer."

"It is impossible to see either of them at present," replied Dr. Rolleston briskly.

"What's that, doctor?" asked the Inspector. "Are they hysterical, or something?"

"As a result of the shock, Madame de Stämer is dangerously ill," replied the physician, "and Miss Beverley is remaining with her."

"Oh, I see. But Miss Beverley could come out for a few minutes?"

"She could," admitted the physician, sharply, "but I don't wish her to do so."

"Oh, but the law must be served, doctor."

"Quite so, but not at the expense of my patient's reason."

He was a resolute man, this country practitioner, and I saw Harley smiling in grim approval.

"I have expressed my opinion," he said, finally, walking out of the room; "I shall leave the responsibility to you, Inspector Aylesbury. Good morning, gentlemen."

Inspector Aylesbury scratched his chin.

"That's awkward," he muttered. "The evidence of this woman is highly important."

He turned toward us, doubtingly, whereupon Harley stood up, yawning.

"If I can be of any further assistance to you, Inspector," said my friend, "command me. Otherwise, I feel sure you will appreciate the fact that both Mr. Knox and myself are extremely tired, and have passed through a very trying ordeal."

"Yes," replied Inspector Aylesbury, "that's all very well, but I find myself at a deadlock."

"You surprise me," declared Harley.

"I can see nothing to be surprised about," cried the Inspector. "When I was called in it was already too late."

"Most unfortunate," murmured Harley, disagreeably. "Come along, Knox, you look tired to death."

"One moment, gentlemen," the Inspector insisted, as I stood up. "One moment. There is a little point which you may be able to clear up."

Harley paused, his hand on the door knob, and turned.

"The point is this," continued the Inspector, frowning portentously and lowering his chin so that it almost disappeared into the folds of his neck, "I have now interviewed all the inmates of Cray's Folly except the ladies. It appears to me that four people had not gone to bed. There are you two gentlemen, who have explained why I found you in evening dress, Colonel Menendez, who can never explain, and there is one other."

He paused, looking from Harley to myself.

It had come, the question which I had dreaded, the question which I had been asking myself ever since I had seen Val Beverley kneeling in the corridor, dressed as she had been when we had parted for the night.

"I refer to Miss Val Beverley," the police-court voice proceeded. "This lady had evidently not retired, and neither, it would appear, had the Colonel."

"Neither had I," murmured Harley, "and neither had Mr. Knox."

"Your reason I understand," said the Inspector, "or at least your explanation is a possible one. But if the party broke up, as you say it did, somewhere about half-past ten o'clock, and if Madame de Stämer had gone to bed, why should Miss Beverley have remained up?" He paused significantly. "As well as Colonel Menendez?" he added.

"Look here, Inspector Aylesbury," I interrupted, I speaking in a very quiet tone, I remember, "your insinuations annoy me."

"Oh," said he, turning his prominent eyes in my direction, "I see. They annoy you? If they annoy you, sir, perhaps you can explain this point which is puzzling me?"

"I cannot explain it, but doubtless Miss Beverley can do so when you ask her."

"I should like to have asked her now, and I can't make out why she refuses to see me."

"She has not refused to see you," replied Harley, smoothly, "She is probably unaware of the fact that you wish to see her."

"I don't know so much," muttered the Inspector. "In my opinion I am being deliberately baffled on all sides. You can throw no light on this matter, then?"

"None," I answered, shortly, and Paul Harley shook his head.

"But you must remember, Inspector," he explained, "that the entire household was in a state of unrest."

"In other words, everybody was waiting for this very thing to happen?"

"Consciously, or subconsciously, everybody was."

"What do you mean by consciously or subconsciously?"

"I mean that those of us who were aware of the previous attempts on the life of the Colonel apprehended this danger. And I believe that something of this apprehension had extended even to the servants."

"Oh, to the servants? Now, I have seen all the servants, except the chef, who lives at a house on the outskirts of Mid-Hatton, as you may know. Can you give me any information about this man?"

"I have seen him," replied Harley, "and have congratulated him upon his culinary art. His name, I believe, is Deronne. He is a Spaniard, and a little fat man. Quite an amiable creature," he added.

"Hm." The Inspector cleared his throat noisily.

"If that is all," said Harley, "I should welcome an opportunity of a few hours' sleep."

"Oh," said the Inspector. "Well, I suppose that is quite natural, but I shall probably have a lot more questions to ask you later."

"Quite," muttered Harley, "quite. Come on, Knox. Good-night, Inspector Aylesbury."

"Good-night."

Harley walked out of the dining room and across the deserted hall. He slowly mounted the stairs and I followed him into his room. It was now quite light, and as my friend dropped down upon the bed I thought that he looked very tired and haggard.

"Knox," he said, "shut the door."

I closed the door and turned to him.

"You heard that question about Miss Beverley?" I began.

"I heard it, and I am wondering what her answer will be when the Inspector puts it to her personally."

"Surely it is obvious?" I cried. "A cloud of apprehension had settled on the house last night, Harley, which was like the darkness of Egypt. The poor girl was afraid to go to bed. She was probably sitting up reading."

"Hm," said Harley, drumming his feet upon the carpet. "Of course you realize that there is one person in Cray's Folly who holds the clue to the heart of the mystery?"

"Madame de Stämer?"

He nodded grimly.

"When the rifle cracked out, Knox, she knew! Remember, no one had told her the truth. Yet can you doubt that she knows?"

"I don't doubt it."

"Neither do I." He clenched his teeth tightly and beat his fists upon the coverlet. "I was dreading that our friend the Inspector would ask a question which to my mind was very obvious."

"You mean?—" "Well, what investigator whose skull contained anything more useful than bubbles would have failed to ask if Colonel Menendez had an enemy in the neighbourhood?"

"No one," I admitted; "but I fear the poor man is sadly out of his depth."

"He is wading hopelessly, Knox, but even he cannot fail to learn about Camber to-morrow."

He stared at me in a curiously significant manner.

"Do you mean, Harley," I began, "that you really think——"

"My dear Knox," he interrupted, "forgetting, if you like, all that preceded the tragedy, with what facts are we left? That Colonel Menendez, at the moment when the bullet entered his brain, must have been standing facing directly toward the Guest House. Now, you have seen the direction of the wound?"

"He was shot squarely between the eyes. A piece of wonderful marksmanship."

"Quite," Harley nodded his head. "But the bullet came out just at the vertex of the spine."

He paused, as if waiting for some comment, and:

"You mean that the shot came from above?" I said, slowly.

"Obviously it came from above, Knox. Keep these two points in your mind, and then consider the fact that someone lighted a lamp in the Guest House only a few moments after the shot had been fired."

"I remember. I saw it."

"So did I," said Harley, grimly, "and I saw something else."

"What was that?"

"When you went off to summon assistance I ran across the lawn, scrambled through the bushes, and succeeded in climbing down into the little gully in which the stream runs, and up on the other side. I had proceeded practically in a straight line from the sun-dial, and do you know where I found myself?"

"I can guess," I replied.

"Of course you can. You have visited the place. I came out immediately beside a little hut, Knox, which stands at the end of the garden of the Guest House. Ahead of me, visible through a tangle of bushes in the neglected garden, a lamp was burning. I crept cautiously forward, and presently obtained a view of the interior of a kitchen. Just as I arrived at this point of vantage the lamp was extinguished, but not before I had had a glimpse of the only occupant of the room—the man who had extinguished the lamp."

"Who was it?" I asked, in a low voice.

"It was a Chinaman."

"Ah Tsong!" I cried.

"Doubtless."

"Good heavens, Harley, do you think—"

"I don't know what to think, Knox. A possible explanation is that the household had been aroused by the sound of the shot, and that Ah Tsong had been directed to go out and see if he could learn what had happened. At any rate, I waited no longer, but returned by the same route. If our portly friend from Market Hilton had possessed the eyes of an Auguste Dupin, he could not have failed to note that my dress boots were caked with light yellow clay; which also, by the way, besmears my trousers."

He stooped and examined the garments as he spoke.

"A number of thorns are also present," he continued. "In short, from the point of view of an investigation, I am a most provoking object."

He sighed wearily, and stared out of the window in the direction of the Tudor garden. There was a slight chilliness in the air, which, or perhaps a sudden memory of that which lay in the billiard room beneath us, may have accounted for the fact that I shivered violently.

Harley glanced up with a rather sad smile.

"The morning after Waterloo," he said. "Sleep well, Knox."

XX. A SPANISH CIGARETTE

Sleep was not for me, despite Harley's injunction, and although I was early afoot, the big house was already astir with significant movements which set the imagination on fire, to conjure up again the moonlight scene in the garden, making mock of the song of the birds and of the glory of the morning.

Manoel replied to my ring, and prepared my bath, but it was easy to see that he had not slept.

No sound came from Harley's room, therefore I did not disturb him, but proceeded downstairs in the hope of finding Miss Beverley about. Pedro was in the hall, talking to Mrs. Fisher, and:

"Is Inspector Aylesbury here?" I asked.

"No, sir, but he will be returning at about half-past eight, so he said."

"How is Madame de Stämer, Mrs. Fisher?" I enquired.

"Oh, poor, poor Madame," said the old lady, "she is asleep, thank God. But I am dreading her awakening."

"The blow is a dreadful one," I admitted; "and Miss Beverley?"

"She didn't go to her room until after four o'clock, sir, but Nita tells me that she will be down any moment now."

"Ah," said I, and lighting a cigarette, I walked out of the open doors into the courtyard.

I dreaded all the ghastly official formalities which the day would bring, since I realized that the brunt of the trouble must fall upon the shoulders of Miss Beverley in the absence of Madame de Stämer.

I wandered about restlessly, awaiting the girl's appearance. A little two seater was drawn up in the courtyard, but I had not paid much attention to it, until, wandering through the opening in the box hedge and on along the gravel path, I saw unfamiliar figures moving in the billiard room, and turned, hastily retracing my steps. Officialdom was at work already, and I knew that there would be no rest for any of us from that hour onward.

As I reëntered the hall I saw Val Beverley coming down the staircase. She looked pale, but seemed to be in better spirits than I could have hoped for, although there were dark shadows under her eyes.

"Good morning, Miss Beverley," I said.

"Good morning, Mr. Knox. It was good of you to come down so early."

"I had hoped for a chat with you before Inspector Aylesbury returned," I explained.

She looked at me pathetically.

"I suppose he will want me to give evidence?"

"He will. We had great difficulty in persuading him not to demand your presence last night."

"It was impossible," she protested. "It would have been cruel to make me leave Madame in the circumstances."

"We realized this, Miss Beverley, but you will have to face the ordeal this morning."

We walked through into the library, where a maid white-faced and frightened looking, was dusting in a desultory fashion. She went out as we entered, and Val Beverley stood looking from the open window out into the rose garden bathed in the morning sunlight.

"Oh, Heavens," she said, clenching her hands desperately, "even now I cannot realize that the horrible thing is true." She turned to me. "Who can possibly have committed this cold-blooded crime?" she said in a low voice. "What does Mr. Harley think? Has he any idea, any idea whatever?"

"Not that he has confided to me," I said, watching her intently. "But tell me, does Madame de Stämer know yet?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean has she been told the truth?"

The girl shook her head.

"No," she replied; "I am positive that no one has told her. I was with her all the time, up to the very moment that she fell asleep. Yet—"

She hesitated.

"Yes?"

"She knows! Oh, Mr. Knox! to me that is the most horrible thing of all: that she knows, that she must have known all along—that the mere sound of the shot told her everything!"

"You realize, now," I said, quietly, "that she had anticipated the end?"

"Yes, yes. This was the meaning of the sorrow which I had seen so often in her eyes, the meaning of so much that puzzled me in her words, the explanation of lots of little things which have made me wonder in the past."

I was silent for a while, then:

"If she was so certain that no one could save him," I said, "she must have had information which neither he nor she ever imparted to us."

"I am sure she had," declared Val Beverley.

"But can you think of any reason why she should not have confided in Paul Harley?"

"I cannot, I cannot—unless—"

"Yes?"

"Unless, Mr. Knox," she looked at me strangely, "they were both under some vow of silence. Oh! it sounds ridiculous, wildly ridiculous, but what other explanation can there be?"

"What other, indeed? And now, Miss Beverley, I know one of the questions Inspector Aylesbury will ask you."

"What is it?"

"He has learned, from one of the servants I presume, as he did not see you, that you had not retired last night at the time of the tragedy."

"I had not," said Val Beverley, quietly, "Is that so singular?"

"To me it is no more than natural."

"I have never been so frightened in all my life as I was last night. Sleep was utterly out of the question. There was mystery in the very air. I knew, oh, Mr. Knox, in some way I knew that a tragedy was going to happen."

"I believe I knew, too," I said. "Good God, to think that we might have saved him!"

"Do you think—" began Val Beverley, and then paused.

"Yes?" I prompted.

"Oh, I was going to say a strange thing that suddenly occurred to me, but it is utterly foolish, I suppose. Inspector Aylesbury is coming back at nine o'clock, is he not?"

"At half-past eight, so I understand."

"I am afraid I have very little to tell him. I was sitting in my room in an appalling state of nerves when the shot was fired. I was not even reading; I was just waiting, waiting, for something to happen."

"I understand. My own experience was nearly identical."

"Then," continued the girl, "as I unlocked my door and peeped out, feeling too frightened to venture farther in the darkness, I heard Madame's voice in the hall below."

"Crying for help?"

"No," replied the girl, a puzzled frown appearing between her brows. "She cried out something in French. The intonation told me that it was French, although I could not detect a single word. Then I thought I heard a moan."

"And you ran down?"

"Yes. I summoned up enough courage to turn on the light in the corridor and to run down to the hall. And there she was lying just outside the door of her room."

"Was her room in darkness?"

"Yes. I turned on the light and succeeded in partly raising her, but she was too heavy for me to lift. I was still trying to revive her when Pedro opened the door of the servants' quarters. Oh," she closed her eyes wearily, "I shall never forget it."

I took her hand and pressed it reassuringly.

"Your courage has been wonderful throughout," I declared, "and I hope it will remain so to the end."

She smiled, and flushed slightly, as I released her hand again.

"I must go and take a peep at Madame now," she said, "but of course I shall not disturb her if she is still sleeping."

We turned and walked slowly back to the hall, and there just entering from the courtyard was Inspector Aylesbury.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "good morning, Mr. Knox. This is Miss Beverley, I presume?"

"Yes, Inspector," replied the girl. "I understand that you wish to speak to me?"

"I do, Miss, but I shall not detain you for many minutes."

"Very well," she said, and as she turned and retraced her steps, he followed her back into the library.

I walked out to the courtyard, and avoiding the Tudor garden and the billiard room, turned in the other direction, passing the stables where Jim, the negro groom, saluted me very sadly, and proceeded round to the south side of the house.

Inspector Aylesbury, I perceived, had wasted no time. I counted no fewer than four men, two of them in uniform, searching the lawns and the slopes beyond, although what they were looking for I could not imagine.

Giving the library a wide berth, I walked along the second terrace, and presently came in sight of the east wing and the tower. There, apparently engaged in studying the rhododendrons, I saw Paul Harley.

He signalled to me, and. crossing the lawn, I joined him where he stood.

Without any word of greeting:

"You see, Knox," he said, speaking in the eager manner which betokened a rapidly working brain, "this is the path which the Colonel must have followed last night. Yonder is the door by which, according to his own account, he came out on a previous occasion, walking in his sleep. Do you remember?"

"I remember," I replied.

"Well, Pedro found it unlocked this morning. You see it faces practically due south, and the Colonel's bedroom is immediately above us where we stand." He stared at me queerly. "I must have passed this door last night only a few moments before the Colonel came out, for I was just crossing the

courtyard and could see you at my window at the moment when you saw poor Menendez enter the Tudor garden. He must have actually been walking around the east wing at the same time that I was walking around the west. Now, I am going to show you something, Knox, something which I have just discovered."

From his waistcoat pocket he took out a half-smoked cigarette. I stared at it uncomprehendingly.

"Of course," he continued, "the weather has been bone dry for more than a week now, and it may have lain there for a long time, but to me, Knox, to me it looks suspiciously fresh."

"What is the point?" I asked, perplexedly.

"The point is that it is a hand-made cigarette, one of the Colonel's. Don't you recognize it?"

"Good heavens!" I said; "yes, of course it is."

He returned it to his pocket without another word.

"It may mean nothing," he murmured, "or it may mean everything. And now, Knox, we are going to escape."

"To escape?" I cried.

"Precisely. We are going to anticipate the probable movements of our blundering Aylesbury. In short, I wish you to present me to Mr. Colin Camber."

"What?" I exclaimed, staring at him incredulously.

"I am going to ask you," he began, and then, breaking off: "Quick, Knox, run!" he said.

And thereupon, to my amazement, he set off through the rhododendron bushes in the direction of the tower!

Utterly unable to grasp the meaning of his behaviour, I followed, nevertheless, and as we rounded the corner of the tower Harley pulled up short, and:

"I am not mad," he explained rather breathlessly, "but I wanted to avoid being seen by that constable who is prowling about at the bottom of the lawn making signals in the direction of the library. Presumably he is replying to Inspector Aylesbury who wants to talk to us. I am determined to interview Camber before submitting to further official interrogation. It must be a cross-country journey, Knox. I am afraid we shall be a very muddy pair, but great issues may hang upon the success of our expedition."

He set off briskly toward a belt of shrubbery which marked the edge of the little stream. Appreciating something of his intentions, I followed his lead unquestioningly; and, scrambling through the bushes:

"This was the point at which I descended last night," he said. "You will have to wade, Knox, but the water is hardly above one's ankles."

He dropped into the brook, waded across, and began to climb up the opposite bank. I imitated his movements, and presently, having scrambled up on the farther side, we found ourselves standing on a narrow bank immediately under that summer house which Colin Camber had told me he had formerly used as a study.

"We can scarcely present ourselves at the kitchen door," murmured Harley; "therefore we must try to find a way round to the front. There is barbed wire here. Be careful."

I had now entered with zest into the business, and so the pair of us waded through rank grass which in places was waist high, and on through a perfect wilderness of weeds in which nettles dominated. Presently we came to a dry ditch, which we negotiated successfully, to find ourselves upon the high road some hundred yards to the west of the Guest House.

"I predict an unfriendly reception," I said, panting from my exertions, and surveying my friend, who was a mockery of his ordinarily spruce self.

"We must face it," he replied, grimly. "He has everything to gain by being civil to us."

We proceeded along the dusty high road, almost overarched by trees.

"Harley," I said, "this is going to be a highly unpleasant ordeal for me."

Harley stopped short, staring at me sternly.

"I know, Knox," he replied; "but I suppose you realize that a man's life is at stake."

"You mean—?"

"I mean that when we are both compelled to tell all we know, I doubt if there is a counsel in the land who would undertake the defence of Mr. Colin Camber."

"Good God! then you think he is guilty?"

"Did I say so?" asked Harley, continuing on his way. "I don't recollect saying so, Knox; but I do say that it will be a giant's task to prove him innocent."

"Then you believe him to be innocent?" I cried, eagerly.

"My dear fellow," he replied, somewhat irritably, "I have not yet met Mr. Colin Camber. I will answer your question at the conclusion of the interview."

XXI. THE WING OF A BAT

For a long time our knocking and ringing elicited no response. The brilliant state of the door-brass afforded evidence of the fact that Ah Tsong had arisen, even if the other members of the household were still sleeping, and Harley, growing irritable, executed a loud tattoo upon the knocker. This had its effect. The door opened and Ah Tsong looked out.

"Tell your master that Mr. Paul Harley has called to see him upon urgent business."

"Master no got," replied Ah Tsong, and proceeded to close the door.

Paul Harley thrust his hand against it and addressed the man rapidly in Chinese. I could not have supposed the face of Ah Tsong capable of expressing so much animation. At the sound of his native tongue his eyes lighted up, and:

"*Tchée, tchée,*" he said, turned, and disappeared.

Although he had studiously avoided looking at me, that Ah Tsong would inform his master of the identity of his second visitor I did not doubt. If I had doubted I should promptly have been disillusioned, for:

"Tell them to go away!" came a muffled cry from somewhere within. "No spy of Devil Menendez shall ever pass my doors again!"

The Chinaman, on retiring, had left the door wide open, and I could see right to the end of the gloomy hall. Ah Tsong presently re-appeared, shuffling along in our direction. Unemotionally:

"Master no got," he repeated.

Paul Harley stamped his foot irritably.

"Good God, Knox," he said, "this unreasonable fool almost exhausts my patience."

Again he addressed Ah Tsong in Chinese, and although the man's wrinkled ivory face exhibited no trace of emotion, a deep understanding was to be read in those oblique eyes; and a second time Ah Tsong turned

and trotted back to the study. I could hear a muttered colloquy in progress, and suddenly the gaunt figure of Colin Camber burst into view.

He was shaved this morning, but arrayed as I had last seen him. Whilst he was not in that state of incoherent anger which I remembered and still resented, he was nevertheless in an evil temper.

He strode along the hallway, his large eyes widely opened, and fixing a cold stare upon the face of Harley.

"I learn that your name is Mr. Paul Harley," he said, entirely ignoring my presence, "and you send me a very strange message. I am used to the ways of Señor Menendez, therefore your message does not deceive me. The gateway, sir, is directly behind you."

Harley clenched his teeth, then:

"The scaffold, Mr. Camber," he replied, "is directly in front of you."

"What do you mean, sir?" demanded the other, and despite my resentment of the treatment which I had received at his hands, I could only admire the lofty disdain of his manner.

"I mean, Mr. Camber, that the police are close upon my heels."

"The police? Of what interest can this be to me?"

Harley's keen eyes were searching the pale face of the man before him.

"Mr. Camber," he said, "the shot was a good one."

Not a muscle of Colin Camber's face moved, but slowly he looked Paul Harley up and down, then:

"I have been called a hasty man," he replied, coldly, "but I can scarcely be accused of leaping to a conclusion when I say that I believe you to be mad. You have interrupted me, sir. Good morning."

He stepped back, and would have closed the door, but:

"Mr. Camber," said Paul Harley, and the tone of his voice was arresting.

Colin Camber paused.

"My name is evidently unfamiliar to you," Harley continued. "You regard myself and Mr. Knox as friends of the late Colonel Menendez—"

At that Colin Camber started forward.

"The *late* Colonel Menendez?" he echoed, speaking almost in a whisper.

But as if he had not heard him Harley continued:

"As a matter of fact, I am a criminal investigator, and Mr. Knox is assisting me in my present case."

Colin Camber clenched his hands and seemed to be fighting with some emotion which possessed him, then:

"Do you mean," he said, hoarsely—"do you mean that Menendez is—dead?"

"I do," replied Harley. "May I request the privilege of ten minutes' private conversation with you?"

Colin Camber stood aside, holding the door open, and inclining his head in that grave salutation which I knew, but on this occasion, I think, principally with intent to hide his emotion.

Not another word did he speak until the three of us stood in the strange study where East grimaced at West, and emblems of remote devil-worship jostled the cross of the Holy Rose. The place was laden with tobacco smoke, and scattered on the carpet about the feet of the writing table lay twenty or more pages of closely written manuscript. Although this was a brilliant summer's morning, an old-fashioned reading lamp, called, I believe, a Victoria, having a nickel receptacle for oil at one side of the standard and a burner with a green glass shade upon the other, still shed its light upon the desk. It was only reasonable to suppose that Colin Camber had been at work all night.

He placed chairs for us, clearing them of the open volumes which they bore, and, seating himself at the desk:

"Mr. Knox," he began, slowly, paused, and then stood up, "I accused you of something when you last visited my house, something of which I would not lightly accuse any man. If I was wrong, I wish to apologize."

"Only a matter of the utmost urgency could have induced me to cross your threshold again," I replied, coldly. "Your behaviour, sir, was inexcusable."

He rested his long white hands upon the desk, looking across at me.

"Whatever I did and whatever I said," he continued, "one insult I laid upon you more deadly than the rest: I accused you of friendship with Juan Menendez. Was I unjust?"

He paused for a moment.

"I had been retained professionally by Colonel Menendez," replied Harley without hesitation, "and Mr. Knox kindly consented to accompany me."

Colin Camber looked very hard at the speaker, and then equally hard at me.

"Was it at behest of Colonel Menendez that you called upon me, Mr. Knox?"

"It was not," said Harley, tersely; "it was at mine. And he is here now at my request. Come, sir, we are wasting time. At any moment—"

Colin Camber held up his hand, interrupting him.

"By your leave, Mr. Harley," he said, and there was something compelling in voice and gesture, "I must first perform my duty as a gentleman."

He stepped forward in my direction.

"Mr. Knox, I have grossly insulted you. Yet if you knew what had inspired my behaviour I believe you could find it in your heart to forgive me. I do not ask you to do so, however; I accept the humiliation of knowing that I have mortally offended a guest."

He bowed to me formally, and would have returned to his seat, but:

"Pray say no more," I said, standing up and extending my hand. Indeed, so impressive was the man's strange personality that I felt rather as one receiving a royal pardon than as an offended party being offered an apology. "It was a misunderstanding. Let us forget it."

His eyes gleamed, and he seized my hand in a warm grip.

"You are generous, Mr. Knox, you are generous. And now, sir," he inclined his head in Paul Harley's direction, and resumed his seat.

Harley had suffered this odd little interlude in silence but now:

"Mr. Camber," he said, rapidly, "I sent you a message by your Chinese servant to the effect that the police would be here within ten minutes to arrest you."

"You did, sir," replied Colin Camber, drawing toward him a piece of newspaper upon which rested a dwindling mound of shag. "This is most disturbing, of course. But since I have not rendered myself amenable to the law, it leaves me moderately unmoved. Upon your second point, Mr. Harley, I shall beg you, to enlarge. You tell me that Don Juan Menendez is dead?"

He had begun to fill his corn-cob as he spoke the words, but from where I sat I could just see his face, so that although his voice was well controlled, the gleam in his eyes was unmistakable.

"He was shot through the head shortly after midnight."

"What?"

Colin Camber dropped the corn-cob and stood up again, the light of a dawning comprehension in his eyes.

"Do you mean that he was murdered?"

"I do."

"Good God," whispered Camber, "at last I understand."

"That is why we are here, Mr. Camber, and that is why the police will be here at any moment."

Colin Camber stood erect, one hand resting upon the desk.

"So this was the meaning of the shot which we heard in the night," he said, slowly.

Crossing the room, he closed and locked the study door, then, returning, he sat down once more, entirely, master of himself. Frowning slightly he looked from Harley in my direction, and then back again at Harley.

"Gentlemen," he resumed, "I appreciate the urgency of my danger. Preposterous though I know it to be, nevertheless it is perhaps no more than natural that suspicion should fall upon me."

He was evidently thinking rapidly. His manner had grown quite cool, and I could see that he had focussed his keen brain upon the abyss which he perceived to lie in his path.

"Before I commit myself to any statements which might be used as evidence," he said, "doubtless, Mr. Harley, you will inform me of your exact standpoint in this matter. Do you represent the late Colonel Menendez, do you represent the law, or may I regard you as a perfectly impartial enquirer?"

"You may regard me, Mr. Camber, as one to whom nothing but the truth is of the slightest interest. I was requested by the late Colonel Menendez to visit Cray's Folly."

"Professionally?"

"To endeavour to trace the origin of certain occurrences which had led him to believe his life to be in danger."

Harley paused, staring hard at Colin Camber.

"Since I recognize myself to be standing in the position of a suspect," said the latter, "it is perhaps unfair to request you to acquaint me with the nature of these occurrences?"

"The one, sir," replied Paul Harley, "which most intimately concerns yourself is this: Almost exactly a month ago the wing of a bat was nailed to the door of Cray's Folly."

"What?" exclaimed Colin Camber, leaning forward eagerly—"the wing of a bat? What kind of bat?"

"Of a South American Vampire Bat."

The effect of those words was curious. If any doubt respecting Camber's innocence had remained with me at this time I think his expression as he leaned forward across the desk must certainly have removed it. That the man was intellectually unusual, and intensely difficult to understand, must have been apparent to the most superficial observer, but I found it hard to believe that these moods of his were simulated. At the words "A South American Vampire Bat" the enthusiasm of the specialist leapt into his eyes. Personal danger was forgotten. Harley had trenched upon his particular territory, and I knew that if Colin Camber had actually killed Colonel Menendez, then it had been the act of a maniac. No man newly come from so bloody a deed could have acted as Camber acted now.

"It is the death-sign of Voodoo!" he exclaimed, excitedly.

Yet again he arose, and crossing to one of the many cabinets which were in the room, he pulled open a drawer and took out a shallow tray.

My friend was watching him intently, and from the expression upon his bronzed face I could deduce the fact that in Colin Camber he had met the supreme puzzle of his career. As Camber stood there, holding up an object which he had taken from the tray, whilst Paul Harley sat staring at him, I thought the scene was one transcending the grotesque. Here was the suspected man triumphantly producing evidence to hang himself.

Between his finger and thumb Camber held the wing of a bat!

XXII. COLIN CAMBER'S SECRET

"I brought this bat wing from Haiti," he explained, replacing it in the tray. "It was found beneath the pillow of a negro missionary who had died mysteriously during the night."

He returned the tray to the drawer, closed the latter, and, standing erect, raised clenched hands above his head.

"With no thought of blasphemy," he said, "but with reverence, I thank God from the bottom of my heart that Juan Menendez is dead."

He reseated himself, whilst Harley regarded him silently, then:

"'The evil that men do lives after them,'" he murmured. He rested his chin upon his hand. "A bat wing," he continued, musingly, "a bat wing was nailed to Menendez's door." He stared across at Harley. "Am I to believe, sir, that this was the clue which led you to the Guest House?"

Paul Harley nodded.

"It was."

"I understand. I must therefore take no more excursions into my special subject, but must endeavour to regard the matter from the point of view of the enquiry. Am I to assume that Menendez was acquainted with the significance of this token?"

"He had seen it employed in the West Indies."

"Ah, the black-hearted devil! But I fear I am involving myself more deeply in suspicion. Perhaps, Mr. Harley, the ends of justice would be better served if you were to question me, and I to confine myself to answering you."

"Very well," Harley agreed: "when and where did you meet the late Colonel Menendez?"

"I never met him in my life."

"Do you mean that you had never spoken to him?"

"Never."

"Hm. Tell me, Mr. Camber, where were you at twelve o'clock last night?"

"Here, writing."

"And where was Ah Tsong?"

"Ah Tsong?" Colin Camber stared uncomprehendingly. "Ah Tsong was in bed."

"Oh, Did anything disturb you?"

"Yes, the sound of a rifle shot."

"You knew it for a rifle shot?"

"It was unmistakable."

"What did you do?"

"I was in the midst of a most important passage, and I should probably have taken no steps in the matter but that Ah Tsong knocked upon the study door, to inform me that my wife had been awakened by the sound of the shot. She is somewhat nervous and had rung for Ah Tsong, asking him to see if all were well with me."

"Do I understand that she imagined the sound to have come from this room?"

"When we are newly awakened from sleep, Mr. Harley, we retain only an imperfect impression of that which awakened us."

"True," replied Paul Harley; "and did Ah Tsong return to his room?"

"Not immediately. Permit me to say, Mr. Harley, that the nature of your questions surprises me. At the moment I fail to see their bearing upon the main issue. He returned and reported to my wife that I was writing, and she then requested him to bring her a glass of milk. Accordingly, he came down again, and going out into the kitchen, executed this order."

"Ah. He would have to light a candle for that purpose, I suppose?"

"A candle, or a lamp," replied Colin Camber, staring at Paul Harley. Then, his expression altering: "Of course!" he cried. "You saw the light from Cray's Folly? I understand at last."

We were silent for a while, until:

"How long a time elapsed between the firing of the shot and Ah Tsong's knocking at the study door?" asked Harley.

"I could not answer definitely. I was absorbed in my work. But probably only a minute or two."

"Was the sound a loud one?"

"Fairly loud. And very startling, of course, in the silence of the night."

"The shot, then, was fired from somewhere quite near the house?"

"I presume so."

"But you thought no more about the matter?"

"Frankly, I had forgotten it. You see, the neighbourhood is rich with game; it might have been a poacher."

"Quite," murmured Harley, but his face was very stern. "I wonder if you fully realize the danger of your position, Mr. Camber?"

"Believe me," was the reply," I can anticipate almost every question which I shall be called upon to answer."

Paul Harley stared at him in a way which told me that he was comparing his features line for line with the etching of Edgar Alien Poe which hung in his office in Chancery Lane, and:

"I do believe you," he replied, "and I am wondering if you are in a position to clear yourself?"

"On the contrary," Camber assured him, "I am only waiting to hear that Juan Menendez was shot in the grounds of Cray's Folly, and not within the house, to propose to you that unless the real assassin be discovered, I shall quite possibly pay the penalty of his crime."

"He was shot in the Tudor garden," replied Harley, "within sight of your windows."

"Ah!" Colin Camber resumed the task of stuffing shag into his corn-cob. "Then if it would interest you, Mr. Harley, I will briefly outline the case against myself. I had never troubled to disguise the fact that I hated Menendez. Many witnesses can be called to testify to this. He was in Cuba when I was in Cuba, and evidence is doubtless obtainable to show that we stayed at the same hotels in various cities of the United States prior to my coming to England and leasing the Guest House. Finally, he became my neighbour in Surrey."

He carefully lighted his pipe, whilst Harley and I watched him silently, then:

"Menendez had the bat wing nailed to the door of his house," he continued. "He believed himself to be in danger, and associated this sign with the source of his danger. Excepting himself and possibly certain other members of his household it is improbable that any one else in Surrey understands the significance of the token save myself. The unholy rites of Voodoo are a closed book to the Western nations. I have opened that book, Mr. Harley. The powers of the Obeah man, and especially of the arch-magician known and dreaded by every negro as 'Bat Wing,' are familiar to me. Since I was alone at the time that the shot was fired, and for some few minutes afterward, and since the Tudor garden of Cray's Folly is within easy range of the Guest House, to fail to place me under arrest would be an act of sheer stupidity."

He spoke the words with a sort of triumph. Like the fakir, he possessed the art of spiritual detachment, which is an attribute of genius. From an

intellectual eminence he was surveying his own peril. Colin Camber in the flesh had ceased to exist; he was merely a pawn in a fascinating game.

Paul Harley glanced at his watch.

"Mr. Camber," he said, "I have just sustained the most crushing defeat of my career. The man who had summoned me to his aid was killed almost before my eyes. One thing I must do or accept professional oblivion."

"I understand." Colin Camber nodded. "Apprehend his murderer?"

"Ultimately, yes. But, firstly, I must see that to the assassination of Colonel Menendez a judicial murder is not added." "You mean—?" asked Camber, eagerly.

"I mean that if you killed Menendez, you are a madman, and I have formed the opinion during our brief conversation that you are brilliantly sane."

Colin Camber rose and bowed in that old-world fashion which was his.

"I am obliged to you, Mr. Harley," he replied. "But has Mr. Knox informed you of my bibulous habits?"

Paul Harley nodded.

"They will, of course, be ascribed,' continued Camber, "and there are many suitable analogies, to deliberate contemplation of a murderous deed. I would remind you that chronic alcoholism is a recognized form, of insanity.'

His mood changed again, and sighing wearily, he lay back in the chair. Over his pale face crept an expression which I knew, instinctively, to mean that he was thinking of his wife.

"Mr. Harley," he said, speaking in a very low tone which scorned to accentuate the beauty of his voice, "I have suffered much in the quest of truth. Suffering is the gate beyond which we find compassion. Perhaps you have thought my foregoing remarks frivolous, in view of the fact that last night a soul was sent to its reckoning almost at my doors. I revere the truth, however, above all lesser laws and above all expediency. I do not, and I cannot, regret the end of the man Menendez. But for three reasons I should regret to pay the penalty of a crime which I did not commit, These reasons are—one," he ticked them off upon his delicate fingers—"It would be bitter to know that Devil Menendez even in death had injured me; two—My work in the world, which is unfinished; and, three—My wife."

I watched and listened, almost awed by the strangeness of the man who sat before me. His three reasons were illuminating. A casual observer might

have regarded Colin Camber as a monument of selfishness. But it was evident to me, and I knew it must be evident to Paul Harley, that his egotism was quite selfless. To a natural human resentment and a pathetic love for his wife he had added, as an equal clause, the claim of the world upon his genius.

"I have heard you," said Paul Harley, quietly, "and you have led me to the most important point of all."

"What point is that, Mr. Harley?"

"You have referred to your recent lapse from abstemiousness. Excuse me if I discuss personal matters. This you ascribed to domestic troubles, or so Mr. Knox has informed me. You have also referred to your undisguised hatred of the late Colonel Juan Menendez. I am going to ask you, Mr. Camber, to tell me quite frankly what was the nature of those domestic troubles, and what had caused this hatred which survives even the death of its object?"

Colin Camber stood up, angular, untidy, but a figure of great dignity.

"Mr. Harley," he replied, "I cannot answer your questions."

Paul Harley inclined his head gravely.

"May I suggest," he said, "that you will be called upon to do so under circumstances which will brook no denial."

Colin Camber watched him unflinchingly.

"'The fate of every man is hung around his neck,'" he replied.

"Yet, in this secret history which you refuse to divulge, and which therefore must count against you, the truth may lie which exculpates you."

"It may be so. But my determination remains unaltered."

"Very well," answered Paul Harley, quietly, but I could see that he was exercising a tremendous restraint upon himself. "I respect your decision, but you have given me a giant's task, and for this I cannot thank you, Mr. Camber."

I heard a car pulled up in the road outside the Guest House. Colin Camber clenched his hands and sat down again in the carved chair.

"The opportunity has passed," said Harley. "The police are here."

XXIII. INSPECTOR AYLESBURY CROSS-EXAMINES

"Oh, I see," said Inspector Aylesbury, "a little private confab, eh?"

He sank his chin into its enveloping folds, treating Harley and myself each to a stare of disapproval.

"These gentlemen very kindly called to advise me of the tragic occurrence at Cray's Folly," explained Colin Camber. "Won't you be seated, Inspector?"

"Thanks, but I can conduct my examination better standing."

He turned to Paul Harley.

"Might I ask, Mr. Harley," he said, "what concern this is of yours?"

"I am naturally interested in anything appertaining to the death of a client, Inspector Aylesbury."

"Oh, so you slip in ahead of me, having deliberately withheld information from the police, and think you are going to get all the credit. Is that it?"

"That is it, Inspector," replied Harley, smiling. "An instance of professional jealousy."

"Professional jealousy?" cried the Inspector. "Allow me to remind you that you have no official standing in this case whatever. You are merely a member of the public, nothing more, nothing less."

"I am happy to be recognized as a member of that much-misunderstood body."

"Ah, well, we shall see. Now, Mr. Camber, your attention, please."

He raised his finger impressively.

"I am informed by Miss Beverley that the late Colonel Menendez looked upon you as a dangerous enemy."

"Were those her exact words?" I murmured.

"Mr. Knox!"

The inspector turned rapidly, confronting me. "I have already warned your friend. But if I have any interruptions from you, I will have you removed."

He continued to glare at me for some moments, and then, turning again to Colin Camber:

"I say, I have information that Colonel Menendez looked upon you as a dangerous neighbour."

"In that event," replied Colin Camber, "why did he lease an adjoining property?"

"That's an evasion, sir. Answer my first question, if you please."

"You have asked me no question, Inspector."

"Oh, I see. That's your attitude, is it? Very well, then. Were you, or were you not, an enemy of the late Colonel Menendez?"

"I was."

"What's that?"

"I say I was. I hated him, and I hate him no less in death than I hated him living."

I think that I had never seen a man so taken aback, Inspector Aylesbury, drawing out a large handkerchief blew his nose. Replacing the handkerchief, he produced a note-book.

"I am placing that statement on record, sir," he said.

He made an entry in the book, and then:

"Where did you first meet Colonel Menendez?" he asked.

"I never met him in my life."

"What's that?"

Colin Camber merely shrugged his shoulders.

"I will repeat my question," said the Inspector, pompously. "Where did you first meet Colonel Juan Menendez?"

"I have answered you. Inspector."

"Oh, I see. You decline to answer that question. Very well, I will make a note of this." He did so. "And now," said he, "what were you doing at midnight last night?"

"I was writing.'

"Where?"

"Here."

"What happened?"

Very succinctly Colin Camber repeated the statement which he had already made to Paul Harley, and, at its conclusion:

"Send for the man, Ah Tsong," directed Inspector Aylesbury.

Colin Camber inclined his head, clapped his bands, and silently Ah Tsong entered.

The Inspector stared at him for several moments as a visitor to the Zoo might stare at some rare animal; then:

"Your name is Ah Tsong?" he began.

"Ah Tsong," murmured the Chinaman.

"I am going to ask you to give an exact account of your movements last night."

"No sabby."

Inspector Aylesbury cleared his throat.

"I say I wish to know exactly what you did last night. Answer me."

Ah Tseng's face remained quite expressionless, and:

"No sabby," he repeated.

"Oh, I see," said the Inspector, "This witness refuses to answer at all." "You are wrong," explained Colin Camber, quietly. "Ah Tsong is a Chinaman, and his knowledge of English is very limited. He does not understand you."

"He understood my first question. You can't draw wool over my eyes. He knows well enough. Are you going to answer me?" he demanded, angrily, of the Chinaman.

"No sabby, master," he said, glancing aside at Colin Camber. "Number-one p'licee-man gotchee no pidgin."

Paul Harley was leisurely filling his pipe, and:

"If you think the evidence of Ah Tsong important, Inspector," he said, "I will interpret if you wish."

"You will do what?"

"I will act as interpreter."

"Do you want me to believe that you speak Chinese?"

"Your beliefs do not concern me, Inspector; I am merely offering my services."

"Thanks," said the Inspector, dryly, "but I won't trouble you. I should like a few words with Mrs. Camber."

"Very good."

Colin Camber bent his head gravely, and gave an order to Ah Tsong, who turned and went out.

"And what firearms have you in the house?" asked Inspector Aylesbury.

"An early Dutch arquebus, which you see in the corner," was the reply.

"That doesn't interest me. I mean up-to-date weapons."

"And a Colt revolver which I have in a drawer here."

As he spoke, Colin Camber opened a drawer in his desk and took out a heavy revolver of the American Army Service pattern.

"I should like to examine it, if you please."

Camber passed it to the Inspector, and the latter, having satisfied himself that none of the chambers were loaded, peered down the barrel, and smelled at the weapon suspiciously.

"If it has been recently used it has been well cleaned," he said, and placed it on a cabinet beside him. "Anything else?"

"Nothing."

"No sporting rifles?"

"None. I never shoot."

"Oh, I see."

The door opened and Mrs. Camber came in. She was very simply dressed, and looked even more child-like than she had seemed before. I think Ah Tsong had warned her of the nature of the ordeal which she was to expect, but her wide-eyed timidity was nevertheless pathetic to witness.

She glanced at me with a ghost of a smile, and:

"Ysola," said Colin Camber, inclining his head toward me in a grave gesture of courtesy, "Mr. Knox has generously forgiven me a breach of good manners for which I shall never forgive myself. I beg you to thank him, as I have done."

"It is so good of you," she said, sweetly, and held out her hand. "But I knew you would understand that it was just a great mistake."

"Mr. Paul Harley," Camber continued, "my wife welcomes you; and this, Ysola, is Inspector Aylesbury, who desires a few moments' conversation upon a rather painful matter."

"I have heard, I have heard," she whispered. "Ah Tsong has told me."

The pupils of her eyes dilated, as she fixed an appealing glance upon the Inspector.

In justice to the latter he was palpably abashed by the delicate beauty of the girl who stood before him, by her naivete, and by that childishness of appearance and manner which must have awakened the latent chivalry in almost any man's heart.

"I am sorry to have to trouble you with this disagreeable business, Mrs. Camber," he began; "but I believe you were awakened last night by the sound of a shot."

"Yes," she replied, watching him intently, "that is so."

"May I ask at what time this was heard?"

"Ah Tsong told me it was after twelve o'clock."

"Was the sound a loud one?"

"Yes. It must have been to have awakened me."

"I see. Did you think it was in the house?"

"Oh, no."

"In the garden?"

"I really could not say, but I think that it was farther away than that."

"And what did you do?"

"I rang the bell for Ah Tsong."

"Did he come immediately?"

"Almost immediately."

"He was dressed, then?"

"No, I don't think he was. He had quickly put on an overcoat. He usually answers at once, when I ring for him, you see."

"I see. What did you do then?"

"Well, I was frightened, you understand, and I told him to find out if all was well with my husband. He came back and told me that Colin was writing. But the sound had alarmed me very much."

"Oh, and now perhaps *you* will tell me, Mrs. Camber, when and where your husband first met Colonel Menendez?"

Every vestige of colour fled from the girl's face.

"So far as I know—they never met," she replied, haltingly.

"Could you swear to that?"

"Yes."

I think that hitherto she had not fully realized the nature of the situation; but now something in the Inspector's voice, or perhaps in our glances, told her the truth. She moved to where Colin Camber was sitting, looking down at him questioningly, pitifully. He put his arm about her and drew her close.

Inspector Aylesbury cleared his throat and returned his note-book to his pocket.

"I am going to take a look around the garden," he announced.

My respect for him increased slightly, and Harley and I followed him out of the study. A police sergeant was sitting in the hall, and Ah Tsong was standing just outside the door.

"Show me the way to the garden," directed the Inspector.

Ah Tsong stared stupidly, whereupon Paul Harley addressed him in his native language, rapidly and in a low voice, in order, as I divined, that the Inspector should not hear him.

"I feel dreadfully guilty, Knox," he confessed, in a murmured aside. "For any Englishman, fictitious characters excepted, to possess a knowledge of Chinese is almost indecent."

Presently, then, I found myself once more in that unkempt garden of which I retained such unpleasant memories.

Inspector Aylesbury stared all about and up at the back of the house, humming to himself and generally behaving as though he were alone. Before the little summer study he stood still, and:

"Oh, I see," he muttered.

What he had seen was painfully evident. The right-hand window, beneath which there was a permanent wooden seat, commanded an unobstructed view of the Tudor garden in the grounds of Cray's Folly. Clearly I could detect the speck of high-light upon the top of the sun-dial.

The Inspector stepped into the hut. It contained a bookshelf upon which a number of books remained, a table and a chair, with some few other dilapidated appointments. I glanced at Harley and saw that he was staring as if hypnotized at the prospect in the valley below. I observed a constable on duty at the top of the steps which led down into the Tudor garden, but I could see nothing to account for Harley's fixed regard, until:

"Pardon me one moment, Inspector," he muttered, brusquely.

Brushing past the indignant Aylesbury, who was examining the contents of the shelves in the hut, he knelt upon the wooden seat and stared intently through the open window.

"One-two-three-four-five-six-*seven*," he chanted. "Good! That will settle it."

"Oh, I see," said Inspector Aylesbury, standing strictly upright, his prominent eyes turned in the direction of the kneeling Harley. "One, two, three, four, and so on will settle it, eh? If you don't mind me saying so, it was settled already."

"Yes?" replied Harley, standing up, and I saw that his eyes were very bright and that his face was slightly flushed. "You think the case is so simple as that?"

"Simple?" exclaimed the Inspector. "It's the most cunning thing that was ever planned, but I flatter myself that I have a good straight eye which can see a fairly long way."

"Excellent," murmured Harley. "I congratulate you. Myopia is so common in the present generation. You have decided, of course, that the murder was committed by Ah Tsong?"

Inspector Aylesbury's eyes seemed to protrude extraordinarily.

"Ah Tsong!" he exclaimed. "Ah Tsong!"

"Surely it is palpable," continued Harley, "that of the three people residing in the Guest House, Ah Tsong is the only one who could possibly have done the deed."

"Who could possibly—who could possibly——" stuttered the Inspector, then paused because of sheer lack of words.

"Review the evidence," continued Harley, coolly. "Mrs. Camber was awakened by the sound of a shot. She immediately rang for Ah Tsong. There was a short interval before Ah Tsong appeared—and when he did appear he was wearing an overcoat. Note this point, Inspector: wearing an overcoat. He descended to the study and found Mr. Camber writing. Now, Ah Tsong sleeps in a room adjoining the kitchen on the ground floor. We passed his quarters on our way to the garden a moment ago. Of course, you had noted this? Mr. Camber is therefore eliminated from our list of suspects."

The Inspector was growing very red, but ere he had time to speak Harley continued:

"The first of these three persons to have heard a shot fired at the end of the garden would have been Ah Tsong, and not Mrs. Camber, whose room is upstairs and in the front of the house. If it had been fired by Mr. Camber from the spot upon which we now stand, he would still have been in the garden at the moment when Mrs. Camber was ringing the bell for Ah Tsong. Mr. Camber must therefore have returned from the end of the garden to the study, and have passed Ah Tsong's room—unheard by the occupant—between the time that the bell rang and the time that Ah Tsong went upstairs. This I submit to be impossible. There is an alternative: it is that he slipped in whilst Ah Tsong, standing on the landing above, was receiving his mistress's orders. I submit that the alternative is also impossible. We thus eliminate Mr. Camber from the case, as I have already mentioned."

"Eliminate—eliminate!" cried the Inspector, beginning to recover power of speech. "Do you think you can fuddle me with a mass of words, Mr. Harley? Allow me to point out to you, sir, that you are in no way officially associated with this matter."

"You have already drawn my attention to the fact, Inspector, but it can do no harm to jog my memory."

Harley spoke entirely without bitterness, and I, who knew his every mood, realized that he was thoroughly enjoying himself. Therefore I knew that at last he had found a clue.

"I may add, Inspector," said he, "that upon further reflection I have also eliminated Ah Tsong from the case. I forgot to mention that he lacks the first and second fingers of his right hand; and I have yet to meet the marksman who can shoot a man squarely between the eyes, by moonlight, at a hundred yards, employing his third finger as trigger-finger. There are other points, but these will be sufficient to show you that this case is more complicated than you had assumed it to be."

Inspector Aylesbury did not deign to reply, or could not trust himself to do so. He turned and made his way back to the house.

XXIV. AN OFFICIAL MOVE

We reëntered the study to find Mrs. Camber sitting in a chair very close to her husband. Inspector Aylesbury stood in the open doorway for a moment, and then, stepping back into the hall:

"Sergeant Butler," he said, addressing the man who waited there.

"Yes, sir."

"Go out to the gate and get Edson to relieve you. I shall want you to go back to headquarters in a few minutes."

"Very good, sir."

I scented what was coming, and as Inspector Aylesbury reentered the room:

"I should like to make a statement," announced Paul Harley, quietly.

The Inspector frowned, and lowering his chin, regarded him with little favour.

"I have not invited any statement from you, Mr. Harley," said he.

"Quite," returned Harley. "I am volunteering it. It is this: I gather that you are about to take an important step officially. Having in view certain steps which I, also, am about to take, I would ask you to defer action, purely in your own interests, for at least twenty-four hours."

"I hear you." said the Inspector, sarcastically.

"Very well, Inspector. You have come newly into this case, and I assure you that its apparent simplicity is illusive. As new facts come into your possession you will realize that what I say is perfectly true, and if you act now you will be acting hastily. All that I have learned I am prepared to place at your disposal. But I predict that the interference of Scotland Yard will be necessary before this enquiry is concluded. Therefore I suggest, since you have rejected my cooperation, that you obtain that of Detective Inspector Wessex, of the Criminal Investigation Department. In short, this is no one-man job. You will do yourself harm by jumping to conclusions, and cause unnecessary trouble to perfectly innocent people."

"Is your statement concluded?" asked the Inspector.

"For the moment I have nothing to add."

"Oh, I see. Very good. Then we can now get to business. Always with your permission, Mr. Harley."

He took his stand before the fireplace, very erect, and invested with his most official manner. Mrs. Camber watched him in a way that was pathetic. Camber seemed to be quite composed, although his face was unusually pale.

"Now, Mr. Camber," said the Inspector, "I find your answers to the questions which I have put to you very unsatisfactory."

"I am sorry," said Colin Camber, quietly.

"One moment, Inspector," interrupted Paul Harley, "you have not warned Mr. Camber."

Thereupon the long-repressed wrath of Inspector Aylesbury burst forth.

"Then I will warn *you*, sir!" he shouted. "One more word and you leave this house."

"Yet I am going to venture on one more word," continued Harley, unperturbed. He turned to Colin Camber. "I happen to be a member of the Bar, Mr. Camber," he said, "although I rarely accept a brief. Have I your authority to act for you?"

"I am grateful, Mr. Harley, and I leave this unpleasant affair in your hands with every confidence."

Camber stood up, bowing formally.

The expression upon the inflamed face of Inspector Aylesbury was really indescribable, and recognizing his mental limitations, I was almost tempted to feel sorry for him. However, he did not lack self-confidence, and:

"I suppose you have scored, Mr. Harley," he said, a certain hoarseness perceptible in his voice, "but I know my duty and I am not afraid to perform it. Now, Mr. Camber, did you, or did you not, at about twelve o'clock last night——"

"Warn the accused," murmured Harley.

Inspector Aylesbury uttered a choking sound, but:

"I have to warn you," he said, "that your answers may be used as evidence. I will repeat: Did you, or did you not, at about twelve o'clock last night, shoot, with intent to murder, Colonel Juan Menendez?"

Ysola Camber leapt up, clutching at her husband's arm as if to hold him back.

"I did not," he replied, quietly. "Nevertheless," continued the Inspector, looking aggressively at Paul Harley whilst he spoke, "I am going to detain you pending further enquiries."

Colin Camber inclined his head.

"Very well," he said; "you only do your duty."

The little fingers clutching his sleeve slowly relaxed, and Mrs. Camber, uttering a long sigh, sank in a swoon at his feet.

"Ysola! Ysola!" he muttered. Stooping he raised the child-like figure. "If you will kindly open the door, Mr. Knox," he said, "I will carry my wife to her room."

I sprang to the door and held it widely open.

Colin Camber, deadly pale, but holding his head very erect, walked in the direction of the hallway with his pathetic burden. Mis-reading the purpose written upon the stern white face, Inspector Aylesbury stepped forward.

"Let someone else attend to Mrs. Camber," he cried, sharply. "I wish you to remain here."

His detaining hand was already upon Camber's shoulder when Harley's arm shot out like a barrier across the Inspector's chest, and Colin Camber

proceeded on his way. Momentarily, he glanced aside, and I saw that his eyes were unnaturally bright.

"Thank you, Mr. Harley," he said, and carried his wife from the room.

Harley dropped his arm, and crossing, stood staring out of the window. Inspector Aylesbury ran heavily to the door.

"Sergeant!" he called, "Sergeant! keep that man in sight. He must return here immediately."

I heard the sound of heavy footsteps following Camber's up the stairs, then Inspector Aylesbury turned, a bulky figure in the open doorway, and:

"Now, Mr. Harley," said he, entering and reclosing the door, "you are a barrister, I understand. Very well, then, I suppose you are aware that you have resisted and obstructed an officer of the law in the execution of his duty."

Paul Harley spun round upon his heel.

"Is that a charge," he inquired, "or merely a warning?"

The two glared at one another for a moment, then:

"From now onward," continued the Inspector, "I am going to have no more trouble with you, Mr. Harley. In the first place, I'll have you looked up in the Law List; in the second place, I shall ask you to stick to your proper duties, and leave me to look after mine."

"I have endeavoured from the outset," replied Harley, his good humour quite restored, "to assist you in every way in my power. You have declined all my offers, and finally, upon the most flimsy evidence, you have detained a perfectly innocent man."

"Oh, I see. A perfectly innocent man, eh?"

"Perfectly innocent, Inspector. There are so many points that you have overlooked. For instance, do you seriously suppose that Mr. Camber had been waiting up here night after night on the off-chance that Colonel Menendez would appear in the grounds of Cray's Folly?"

"No, I don't. I have got that worked out."

"Indeed? You interest me."

"Mr. Camber has an accomplice at Cray's Folly."

"What?" exclaimed Harley, and into his keen grey eyes crept a look of real interest.

"He has an accomplice," repeated the Inspector. "A certain witness was strangely reluctant to mention Mr. Camber's name. It was only after very

keen examination that I got it at last. Now, Colonel Menendez had not retired last night, neither had a certain other party. That other party, sir, knows why Colonel Menendez was wandering about the garden at midnight."

At first, I think, this astonishing innuendo did not fully penetrate to my mind, but when it did so, it seemed to galvanize me. Springing up from the chair in which I had been seated:

"You preposterous fool!" I exclaimed, hotly.

It was the last straw. Inspector Aylesbury strode to the door and throwing it open once more, turned to me:

"Be good enough to leave the house, Mr. Knox," he said. "I am about to have it officially searched, and I will have no strangers present."

I think I could have strangled him with pleasure, but even in my rage I was not foolhardy enough to lay myself open to that of which the Inspector was quite capable at this moment.

Without another word I walked out of the study, took my hat and stick, and opening the front door, quitted the Guest House, from which I had thus a second time been dismissed ignominiously.

Appreciation of this fact, which came to me as I stepped into the porch, awakened my sense of humour—a gift truly divine which has saved many a man from desperation or worse. I felt like a schoolboy who had been turned out of a class-room, and I was glad that I could laugh at myself.

A constable was standing in the porch, and he looked at me suspiciously. No doubt he perceived something very sardonic in my merriment.

I walked out of the gate, before which a car was standing, and as I paused to light a cigarette I heard the door of the Guest House open and close. I glanced back, and there was Paul Harley coming to join me.

"Now, Knox," he said, briskly, "we have got our hands full."

"My dear Harley, I am both angry and bewildered. Too angry and too bewildered to think clearly." "I can quite understand it. I should become homicidal if I were forced to submit for long to the company of Inspector Aylesbury. Of course, I had anticipated the arrest of Colin Camber, and I fear there is worse to come."

"What do you mean, Harley?"

"I mean that failing the apprehension of the real murderer, I cannot see, at the moment, upon what the case for the defence is to rest."

"But surely you demonstrated out there in the garden that he could not possibly have fired the shot?"

"Words, Knox, words. I could pick a dozen loopholes in my own argument. I had only hoped to defer the inevitable. I tell you, there is worse to come. Two things we must do at once."

"What are they?"

"We must persuade the man on duty to allow us to examine the Tudor garden, and we must see the Chief Constable, whoever he may be, and prevail upon him to requisition the assistance of Scotland Yard. With Wessex in charge of the case I might have a chance. Whilst this disastrous man Aylesbury holds the keys there is none."

"You heard what he said about Miss Beverley?"

We were now walking rapidly along the high road, and Harley nodded.

"I did," he said. "I had expected it. He was inspired with this brilliant idea last night, and his ideas are too few to be lightly scrapped. If the Chief Constable is anything like the Inspector, what we are going to do heaven only knows."

"I take it, Harley, that you are convinced of Colin Camber's innocence?"

Harley did not answer for a moment, whereupon I glanced at him anxiously, then:

"Colin Camber," he replied, "is of so peculiar a type that I could not presume to say of what he is capable or is not capable. The most significant point in his favour is this: He is a man of unusual intellect. The planning of this cunning crime to such a man would have been child's play—child's play, Knox. But is it possible to believe that his genius would have failed him upon the most essential detail of all, namely, an alibi?"

"It is not."

"Of course it is not. Which, continuing to regard Camber as an assassin, reduces us to the theory that the crime was committed in a moment of passion. This I maintain to be also impossible. It was no deed of impulse."

"I agree with you."

"Now, I believe that the enquiry is going to turn upon a very delicate point. If I am wrong in this, then perhaps I am wrong in my whole conception of the case. But have you considered the mass of evidence against Colin Camber?"

"I have, Harley," I replied, sadly, "I have."

"Think of all that we know, and which the Inspector does not know. Every single datum points in the same direction. No prosecution could ask for a more perfect case. Upon this fact I pin my hopes. Where an Aylesbury rushes in I fear to tread. The analogy with an angel was accidental, Knox!" he added, smilingly. "In other words, it is all too obvious. Yet I have failed once, Knox, failed disastrously, and it may be that in my anxiety to justify myself I am seeking for subtlety where no subtlety exists."

XXV. AYLESBURY'S THEORY

There were strangers about Cray's Folly and a sort of furtive activity, horribly suggestive. We had not pursued the circular route by the high road which would have brought us to the lodge, but had turned aside where the swing-gate opened upon a footpath into the meadows. It was the path which I had pursued upon the day of my visit to the Lavender Arms. A second private gate here gave access to the grounds at a point directly opposite the lake; and as we crossed the valley, making for the terraced lawns, I saw unfamiliar figures upon the veranda, and knew that the cumbersome processes of the law were already in motion.

I was longing to speak to Val Beverley and to learn what had taken place during her interview with Inspector Aylesbury, but Harley led the way toward the tower wing, and by a tortuous path through the rhododendrons we finally came out on the northeast front and in sight of the Tudor garden.

Harley crossed to the entrance, and was about to descend the steps, when the constable on duty there held out his arm.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "but I have orders to admit no one to this part of the garden."

"Oh," said Harley, pulling up short, "but I am acting in this case. My name is Paul Harley."

"Sorry, sir," replied the constable, "but you will have to see Inspector Aylesbury."

My friend uttered an impatient exclamation, but, turning aside:

"Very well, constable," he muttered; "I suppose I must submit. Our friend, Aylesbury," he added to me, as we walked away, "would appear to

be a martinet as well as a walrus. At every step, Knox, he proves himself a tragic nuisance. This means waste of priceless time."

"What had you hoped to do, Harley?"

"Prove my theory," he returned; "but since every moment is precious, I must move in another direction."

He hurried on through the opening in the box hedge and into the courtyard. Manoel had just opened the doors to a sepulchral-looking person who proved to be the coroner's officer, and:

"Manoel!" cried Harley, "tell Carter to bring a car round at once."

"Yes, sir."

"I haven't time to fetch my own," he explained.

"Where are you off to?"

"I am off to see the Chief Constable, Knox. Aylesbury must be superseded at whatever cost. If the Chief Constable fails I shall not hesitate to go higher. I will get along to the garage. I don't expect to be more than an hour. Meanwhile, do your best to act as a buffer between Aylesbury and the women. You understand me?"

"Quite," I returned, shortly. "But the task may prove no light one, Harley."

"It won't," he assured me, smiling grimly, "How you must regret, Knox, that we didn't go fishing!"

With that he was off, eager-eyed and alert, the mood of dreamy abstraction dropped like a cloak discarded. He fully realized, as I did, that his unique reputation was at stake. I wondered, as I had wondered at the Guest House, whether, in undertaking to clear Colin Camber, he had acted upon sheer conviction, or, embittered by the death of his client, had taken a gambler's chance. It was unlike him to do so. But now beyond reach of that charm of manner which Colin Camber possessed, and discounting the pathetic sweetness of his girl-wife, I realized how black was the evidence against him.

Occupied with these, and even more troubled thoughts, I was making my way toward the library, undetermined how to act, when I saw Val Beverley coming along the corridor which communicated with Madame de Stämer's room.

I read a welcome in her eyes which made my heart beat the faster.

"Oh, Mr. Knox," she cried, "I am so glad you have returned. Tell me all that has happened, for I feel in some way that I am responsible for it."

I nodded gravely.

"You know, then, where Inspector Aylesbury went when he left here, after his interview with you?"

She looked at me pathetically.

"He went to the Guest House, of course."

"Yes," I said; "he was close behind us."

"And"—she hesitated—"Mr. Camber?"

"He has been detained."

"Oh!" she moaned. "I could hate myself! Yet what could I say, what could I do?"

"Just tell me all about it," I urged. "What were the Inspector's questions?"

"Well," explained the girl, "he had evidently learned from someone, presumably one of the servants, that there was enmity between Mr. Camber and Colonel Menendez. He asked me if I knew of this, and of course I had to admit that I did. But when I told him that I had no idea of its cause, he did not seem to believe me."

"No," I murmured. "Any evidence which fails to dove-tail with his preconceived theories he puts down as a lie."

"He seemed to have made up his mind for some reason," she continued, "that I was intimately acquainted with Mr. Camber. Whereas, of course, I have never spoken to him in my life, although whenever he has passed me in the road he has always saluted me with quite delightful courtesy. Oh, Mr. Knox, it is horrible to think of this great misfortune coming to those poor people." She looked at me pleadingly. "How did his wife take it?"

"Poor little girl," I replied, "it was an awful blow."

"I feel that I want to set out this very minute," declared Val Beverley, "and go to her, and try to comfort her. Because I feel in my very soul that her husband is innocent. She is such a sweet little thing. I have wanted to speak to her since the very first time I ever saw her, but on the rare occasions when we have met in the village she has hurried past as though she were afraid of me. Mr. Harley surely knows that her husband is not guilty?"

"I think he does," I replied, "but he may have great difficulty in proving it. And what else did Inspector Aylesbury wish to know?"

"How can I tell you?" she said in a low voice; and biting her lip agitatedly she turned her head aside.

"Perhaps I can guess."

"Can you?" she asked, looking at me quickly. "Well, then, he seemed to attach a ridiculous importance to the fact that I had not retired last night at the time of the tragedy."

"I know," said I, grimly. "Another preconceived idea of his."

"I told him the truth of the matter, which is surely quite simple, and at first I was unable to understand the nature of his suspicions. Then, after a time, his questions enlightened me. He finally suggested, quite openly, that I had not come down from my room to the corridor in which Madame de Stämer was lying, but had actually been there at the time!"

"In the corridor outside her room?"

"Yes. He seemed to think that I had just come in from the door near the end of the east wing and beside the tower, which opens into the shrubbery."

"That you had just come in?" I exclaimed. "He thinks, then, that you had been out in the grounds?"

Val Beverley's face had been very pale, but now she flushed indignantly, and glanced away from me as she replied:

"He dared to suggest that I had been to keep an assignation."

"The fool!" I cried. "The ignorant, impudent fool!"

"Oh," she declared, "I felt quite ill with indignation. I am afraid I may regard Inspector Aylesbury as an enemy from now onward, for when I had recovered from the shock I told him very plainly what I thought about his intellect, or lack of it."

"I am glad you did," I said, warmly. "Before Inspector Aylesbury is through with this business I fancy he will know more about his limitations than he knows at present. The fact of the matter is that he is badly out of his depth, but is not man enough to acknowledge the fact even to himself."

She smiled at me pathetically.

"Whatever should I have done if I had been alone?" she said.

I was tempted to direct the conversation into a purely personal channel, but common sense prevailed, and:

"Is Madame de Stämer awake?" I asked.

"Yes." The girl nodded. "Dr. Rolleston is with her now."

"And does she know?"

"Yes. She sent for me directly she awoke, and asked me."

"And you told her?"

"How could I do otherwise? She was quite composed, wonderfully composed; and the way she heard the news was simply heroic. But here is Dr. Rolleston, coming now."

I glanced along the corridor, and there was the physician approaching briskly.

"Good morning, Mr. Knox," he said.

"Good morning, doctor. I hear that your patient is much improved?"

"Wonderfully so," he answered. "She has enough courage for ten men. She wishes to see you, Mr. Knox, and to hear your account of the tragedy."

"Do you think it would be wise?"

"I think it would be best."

"Do you hold any hope of her permanently recovering the use of her limbs?"

Dr. Rolleston shook his head doubtfully.

"It may have only been temporary," he replied. "These obscure nervous affections are very fickle. It is unsafe to make predictions. But mentally, at least, she is quite restored from the effects of last night's shock. You need apprehend no hysteria or anything of that nature, Mr. Knox."

"Oh, I see," exclaimed a loud voice behind us.

We all three turned, and there was Inspector Aylesbury crossing the hall in our direction.

"Good morning, Dr. Rolleston," he said, deliberately ignoring my presence. "I hear that your patient is quite well again this morning?"

"She is much improved," returned the physician, dryly.

"Then I can get her testimony, which is most important to my case?"

"She is somewhat better. If she cares to see you I do not forbid the interview."

"Oh, that's good of you, doctor." He bowed to Miss Beverley. "Perhaps, Miss, you would ask Madame de Stämer to see me for a few minutes."

Val Beverley looked at me appealingly then shrugged her shoulders, turned aside, and walked in the direction of Madame de Stämer's door.

"Well," said Dr. Rolleston, in his brisk way, shaking me by the hand, "I must be getting along. Good morning, Mr. Knox. Good morning, Inspector Aylesbury."

He walked rapidly out to his waiting car. The presence of Inspector Aylesbury exercised upon Dr. Rolleston a similar effect to that which a red rag has upon a bull. As he took his departure, the Inspector drew out his pocket-book, and, humming gently to himself, began to consult certain entries therein, with a portentous air of reflection which would have been funny if it had not been so irritating.

Thus we stood when Val Beverley returned, and:

"Madame de Stämer will see you, Inspector Aylesbury," she said, "but wishes Mr. Knox to be present at the interview."

"Oh," said the Inspector, lowering his chin, "I see. Oh, very well."

XXVI. IN MADAME'S ROOM

Madame de Stämer's apartment was a large and elegant one. From the window-drapings, which were of some light, figured satiny material, to the bed-cover, the lampshades and the carpet, it was French. Faintly perfumed, and decorated with many bowls of roses, it reflected, in its ornaments, its pictures, its slender-legged furniture, the personality of the occupant. In a large, high bed, reclining amidst a number of silken pillows, lay Madame de Stämer. The theme of the room was violet and silver, and to this everything conformed. The toilet service was of dull silver and violet enamel. The mirrors and some of the pictures had dull silver frames, There was nothing tawdry or glittering. The bed itself, which I thought resembled a bed of state, was of the same dull silver, with a coverlet of delicate violet I hue. But Madame's décolleté robe was trimmed with white fur, so that her hair, dressed high upon her head, seemed to be of silver, too.

Reclining there upon her pillows, she looked like some grande dame of that France which was swept away by the Revolution. Immediately above the dressing-table I observed a large portrait of Colonel Menendez dressed as I had imagined he should be dressed when I had first set eyes on him, in tropical riding kit, and holding a broad-brimmed hat in his hand. A strikingly handsome, arrogant figure he made, uncannily like the Velasquez in the library.

At the face of Madame de Stämer I looked long and searchingly. She had not neglected the art of the toilette. Blinds tempered the sunlight which flooded her room; but that, failing the service of rouge, Madame had been pale this morning, I perceived immediately. In some subtle way the night had changed her. Something was gone out of her face, and something come into it. I thought, and lived to remember the thought, that it was thus Marie Antoinette might have looked when they told her how the drums had rolled in the Place de la Revolution on that morning of the twenty-first of January.

"Oh, M. Knox," she said, sadly, "you are there, I see. Come and sit here beside me, my friend. Val, dear, remain. Is this Inspector Aylesbury who wishes to speak to me?"

The Inspector, who had entered with all the confidence in the world, seemed to lose some of it in the presence of this grand lady, who was so little impressed by the dignity of his office.

She waved one slender hand in the direction of a violet brocaded chair.

"Sit down, Monsieur l'inspecteur," she commanded, for it was rather a command than an invitation.

Inspector Aylesbury cleared his throat and sat down.

"Ah, M. Knox!" exclaimed Madame, turning to me with one of her rapid movements, "is your friend afraid to face me, then? Does he think that he has failed? Does he think that I condemn him?"

"He knows that he has failed, Madame de Stämer," I replied, "but his absence is due to the fact that at this hour he is hot upon the trail of the assassin."

"What!" she exclaimed, "what!"—and bending forward touched my arm. "Tell me again! Tell me again!"

"He is following a clue, Madame de Stämer, which he hopes will lead to the truth."

"Ah! if I could believe it would lead to the truth," she said. "If I dared to believe this."

"Why should it not?"

She shook her head, smiling with such a resigned sadness that I averted my gaze and glanced across at Val Beverley who was seated on the opposite side of the bed.

"If you knew—if you knew."

I looked again into the tragic face, and realized that this was an older woman than the brilliant hostess I had known. She sighed, shrugged, and:

"Tell me, M. Knox," she continued, "it was swift and merciful, eh?"

"Instantaneous," I replied, in a low voice.

"A good shot?" she asked, strangely.

"A wonderful shot," I answered, thinking that she imposed unnecessary torture upon herself.

"They say he must be taken away, M. Knox, but I reply: not until I have seen him."

"Madame," began Val Beverley, gently.

"Ah, my dear!" Madame de Stämer, without looking at the speaker, extended one hand in her direction, the fingers characteristically curled.

"You do not know me. Perhaps it is a good job. You are a man, Mr. Knox, and men, especially men who write, know more of women than they know of themselves, is it not so? You will understand that I must see him again?"

"Madame de Stämer," I said, "your courage is almost terrible."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I am not proud to be brave, my friend. The animals are brave, but many cowards are proud. Listen again. He suffered no pain, you think?"

"None, Madame de Stämer."

"So Dr. Rolleston assures me. He died in his sleep? You do not think he was awake, eh?"

"Most certainly he was not awake."

"It is the best way to die," she said, simply. "Yet he, who was brave and had faced death many times, would have counted it"——she snapped her white fingers, glancing across the room to where Inspector Aylesbury, very subdued, sat upon the brocaded chair twirling his cap between his hands. "And now, Inspector Aylesbury," she asked, "what is it you wish me to tell you?"

"Well, Madame," began the Inspector, and stood up, evidently in an endeavour to recover his dignity, but:

"Sit down, Mr. Inspector! I beg of you be seated," cried Madame. "I will not be questioned by one who stands. And if you were to walk about I should shriek."

He resumed his seat, clearing his throat nervously.

"Very well, Madame," he continued, "I have come to you particularly for information respecting a certain Mr. Camber."

"Oh, yes," said Madame.

Her vibrant voice was very low.

"You know him, no doubt?"

"I have never met him."

"What?" exclaimed the Inspector.

Madame shrugged and glanced at me eloquently.

"Well," he continued, "this gets more and more funny. I am told by Pedro, the butler, that Colonel Menendez looked upon Mr. Camber as an enemy, and Miss Beverley, here, admitted that it was true. Yet although he was an enemy, nobody ever seems to have spoken to him, and he swears that he had never spoken to Colonel Menendez."

"Yes?" said Madame, listlessly, "is that so?"

"It is so, Madame, and now you tell me that you have never met him."

"I did tell you so, yes."

"His wife, then?"

"I never met his wife," said Madame, rapidly.

"But it is a fact that Colonel Menendez regarded him as an enemy?"

"It is a fact—yes."

"Ah, now we are coming to it. What was the cause of this?"

"I cannot tell you."

"Do you mean that you don't know?"

"I mean that I cannot tell you."

"Oh," said the Inspector, blankly, "I see. That's not helping me very much, is it?"

"No, it is no help," said Madame, twirling a ring upon her finger.

The Inspector cleared his throat again, then:

"There had been other attempts, I believe, at assassination?" he asked.

Madame nodded.

"Several."

"Did you witness any of these?"

"None of them."

"But you know that they took place?"

"Juan—Colonel Menendez—had told me so."

"And he suspected that there was someone lurking about this house?"

"Yes."

"Also, someone broke in?"

"There were doors unfastened, and a great disturbance, so I suppose someone must have done so."

I wondered if he would refer to the bat wing nailed to the door, but he had evidently decided that this clue was without importance, nor did he once refer to the aspect of the case which concerned Voodoo. He possessed a sort of mulish obstinacy, and was evidently determined to use no scrap of information which he had obtained from Paul Harley.

"Now, Madame," said he, "you heard the shot fired last night?"

"I did."

"It woke you up?"

"I was already awake."

"Oh, I see: you were awake?"

"I was awake."

"Where did you think the sound came from?"

"From back yonder, beyond the east wing."

"Beyond the east wing?" muttered Inspector Aylesbury. "Now, let me see." He turned ponderously in his chair, gazing out of the windows. "We look out on the south here? You say the sound of the shot came from the east?"

"So it seemed to me."

"Oh." This piece of information seemed badly to puzzle him. "And what then?"

"I was so startled that I ran to the door before I remembered that I could not walk."

She glanced aside at me with a tired smile, and laid her hand upon my arm in an oddly caressing way, as if to say, "He is so stupid; I should not have expressed myself in that way."

Truly enough the Inspector misunderstood, for:

"I don't follow what you mean, Madame," he declared. "You say you forgot that you could not walk?"

"No, no, I expressed myself wrongly," Madame replied in a weary voice. "The fright, the terror, gave me strength to stagger to the door, and there I fell and swooned."

"Oh, I see. You speak of fright and terror. Were these caused by the sound of the shot?"

"For some reason my cousin believed himself to be in peril," explained Madame. "He went in dread of assassination, you understand? Very well, he caused me to feel this dread, also. When I heard the shot, something told me, something told me that—"she paused, and suddenly placing her hands before her face, added in a whisper—"that it had come."

Val Beverley was watching Madame de Stämer anxiously, and the fact that she was unfit to undergo further examination was so obvious that any other than an Inspector Aylesbury would have withdrawn. The, latter, however, seemed now to be glued to his chair, and:

"Oh, I see," he said; "and now there's another point: Have you any idea what took Colonel Menendez out into the grounds last night?"

Madame de Stämer lowered her hands and gazed across at the speaker.

"What is that, Monsieur l'inspecteur?"

"Well, you don't think he might have gone out to talk to someone?"

"To someone? To what one?" demanded Madame, scornfully.

"Well, it isn't natural for a man to go walking about the garden at midnight, when he's unwell, is it? Not alone. But if there was a lady in the case he might go."

"A lady?" said Madame, softly. "Yes—continue."

"Well," resumed the Inspector, deceived by the soft voice, "the young lady sitting beside you was still wearing her evening dress when I arrived here last night. I found that out, although she didn't give me a chance to see her."

His words had an effect more dramatic than he could have foreseen.

Madame de Stämer threw her arm around Val Beverley, and hugged her so closely to her side that the girl's curly brown head was pressed against Madame's shoulder. Thus holding her, she sat rigidly upright, her strange, still eyes glaring across the room at Inspector Aylesbury. Her whole pose was instinct with challenge, with defiance, and in that moment I identified the illusive memory which the eyes of Madame so often had conjured up in my mind.

Once, years before, I had seen a wounded tigress standing over her cubs, a beautiful, fearless creature, blazing defiance with dying eyes upon those who had destroyed her, the mother-instinct supreme to the last; for as she fell to rise no more she had thrown her paw around the cowering cubs. It was not in shape, nor in colour, but in expression and in their stillness, that the eyes of Madame de Stämer resembled the eyes of the tigress.

"Oh, Madame, Madame," moaned the girl, "how dare he!"

"Ah!" Madame de Stämer raised her head yet higher, a royal gesture, that unmoving stare set upon the face of the discomfited Inspector Aylesbury. "Leave my apartment." Her left hand shot out dramatically in the direction of the door, but even yet the fingers remained curled. "Stupid, gross fool!"

Inspector Aylesbury stood up, his face very flushed.

"I am only doing my duty, Madame," he said.

"Go, go!" commanded Madame, "I insist that you go!"

Convulsively she held Val Beverley to her side, and although I could not see the girl's face, I knew that she was weeping.

Those implacable flaming eyes followed with their stare the figure of the Inspector right to the doorway, for he essayed no further speech, but retired.

I, also, rose, and:

"Madame de Stämer," I said, speaking, I fear, very unnaturally, "I love your spirit."

She threw back her head, smiling up at me. I shall never forget that look, nor shall I attempt to portray all which it conveyed—for I know I should fail.

"My friend!" she said, and extended her hand to be kissed.

XXVII. AN INSPIRATION

Inspector Aylesbury had disappeared when I came out of the hall, but Pedro was standing there to remind me of the fact that I had not breakfasted. I realized that despite all tragic happenings, I was ravenously hungry, and accordingly I agreed to his proposal that I should take breakfast on the south veranda, as on the previous morning.

To the south veranda accordingly I made my way, rather despising myself because I was capable of hunger at such a time and amidst such horrors. The daily papers were on my table, for Carter drove into Market Hilton every morning to meet the London train which brought them down; but I did not open any of them.

Pedro waited upon me in person. I could see that the man was pathetically anxious to talk. Accordingly, when he presently brought me a fresh supply of hot rolls:

"This has been a dreadful blow to you, Pedro?" I said.

"Dreadful, sir," he returned; "fearful. I lose a splendid master, I lose my place, and I am far, far from home."

"You are from Cuba?"

"Yes, yes. I was with Señor the Colonel Don Juan in Cuba."

"And do you know anything of the previous attempts which had been made upon his life, Pedro?"

"Nothing, sir. Nothing at all."

"But the bat wing, Pedro?"

He looked at me in a startled way.

"Yes, sir," he replied. "I found it pinned to the door here."

"And what did you think it meant?"

"I thought it was a joke, sir—not a nice joke—by someone who knew Cuba."

"You know the meaning of Bat Wing, then?"

"It is Obeah. I have never seen it before, but I have heard of it."

"And what did you think?" said I, proceeding with my breakfast.

"I thought it was meant to frighten."

"But who did you think had done it?"

"I had heard Señor Don Juan say that Mr. Camber hated him, so I thought perhaps he had sent someone to do it."

"But why should Mr. Camber have hated the Colonel?"

"I cannot say, sir. I wish I could tell."

"Was your master popular in the West Indies?" I asked.

"Well, sir—" Pedro hesitated—"perhaps not so well liked."

"No," I said. "I had gathered as much."

The man withdrew, and I continued my solitary meal, listening to the song of the skylarks, and thinking how complex was human existence, compared with any other form of life beneath the sun.

How to employ my time until Harley should return I knew not. Common delicacy dictated an avoidance of Val Beverley until she should have recovered from the effect of Inspector Aylesbury's gross insinuations, and I was curiously disinclined to become involved in the gloomy formalities which ensue upon a crime of violence. Nevertheless, I felt compelled to remain within call, realizing that there might be unpleasant duties which Pedro could not perform, and which must therefore devolve upon Val Beverley.

I lighted my pipe and walked out on to the sloping lawn. A gardener was at work with a big syringe, destroying a patch of weeds which had appeared in one corner of the velvet turf. He looked up in a sort of startled way as I passed, bidding me good morning, and then resuming his task. I thought that this man's activities were symbolic of the way of the world, in whose eternal progression one poor human life counts as nothing.

Presently I came in sight of that door which opened into the rhododendron shrubbery, the door by which Colonel Menendez had come out to meet his death. His bedroom was directly above, and as I picked my way through the closely growing bushes, which at an earlier time I had thought to be impassable, I paused in the very shadow of the tower and glanced back and upward. I could see the windows of the little smoke-room in which we had held our last interview with Menendez; and I thought of the shadow which Harley had seen upon the blind. I was unable to disguise from myself the fact that when Inspector Aylesbury should learn of this occurrence, as presently he must do, it would give new vigour to his ridiculous and unpleasant suspicions.

I passed on, and considering the matter impartially, found myself faced by the questions—Whose was the shadow which Harley had seen upon the blind? And with what purpose did Colonel Menendez leave the house at midnight?

Somnambulism might solve the second riddle, but to the first I could find no answer acceptable to my reason. And now, pursuing my aimless way, I presently came in sight of a gable of the Guest House. I could obtain a glimpse of the hut which had once been Colin Camber's workroom. The window, through which Paul Harley had stared so intently, possessed sliding panes. These were closed, and a ray of sunlight, striking upon the glass, produced, because of an over-leaning branch which crossed the top of the window, an effect like that of a giant eye glittering evilly through the trees. I could see a constable moving about in the garden. Ever and anon the sun shone upon the buttons of his tunic.

By such steps my thoughts led me on to the pathetic figure of Ysola Camber. Save for the faithful Ah Tsong she was alone in that house to which tragedy had come unbidden, unforeseen. I doubted if she had a woman friend in all the countryside. Doubtless, I reflected, the old housekeeper, to whom she had referred, would return as speedily as possible, but pending the arrival of someone to whom she could confide all her sorrows, I found it almost impossible to contemplate the loneliness of the tragic little figure.

Such was my mental state, and my thoughts were all of compassion, when suddenly, like a lurid light, an inspiration came to me.

I had passed out from the shadow of the tower and was walking in the direction of the sentinel yews when this idea, dreadfully complete, leapt to my mind. I pulled up short, as though hindered by a palpable barrier. Vague musings, evanescent theories, vanished like smoke, and a ghastly, consistent theory of the crime unrolled itself before me, with all the cold logic of truth.

"My God!" I groaned aloud, "I see it all. I see it all."

XXVIII. MY THEORY OF THE CRIME

The afternoon was well advanced before Paul Harley returned.

So deep was my conviction that I had hit upon the truth, and so well did my theory stand every test which I could apply to it, that I felt disinclined for conversation with any one concerned in the tragedy until I should have submitted the matter to the keen analysis of Harley. Upon the sorrow of Madame de Stämer I naturally did not intrude, nor did I seek to learn if she had carried out her project of looking upon the dead man.

About mid-day the body was removed, after which an oppressive and awesome stillness seemed to descend upon Cray's Folly.

Inspector Aylesbury had not returned from his investigations at the Guest House, and learning that Miss Beverley was remaining with Madame de Stämer, I declined to face the ordeal of a solitary luncheon in the dining room, and merely ate a few sandwiches, walking over to the Lavender Arms for a glass of Mrs. Wootton's excellent ale.

Here I found the bar-parlour full of local customers, and although a heated discussion was in progress as I opened the door, silence fell upon my appearance. Mrs. Wootton greeted me sadly.

"Ah, sir," she said, as she placed a mug before me; "of course you've heard?"

"I have, madam," I replied, perceiving that she did not know me to be a guest at Cray's Folly.

"Well, well!" She shook her head. "It had to come, with all these foreign folk about."

She retired to some sanctum at the rear of the bar, and I drank my beer amid one of those silences which sometimes descend upon such a gathering when a stranger appears in its midst. Not until I moved to depart was this silence broken, then:

"Ah, well," said an old fellow, evidently a farm-hand, "we know now why he was priming of hisself with the drink, we do."

"Aye!" came a growling chorus.

I came out of the Lavender Arms full of a knowledge that so far as Mid-Hatton was concerned, Colin Camber was already found guilty.

I had hoped to see something of Val Beverley on my return, but she remained closeted with Madame de Stämer, and I was left in loneliness to pursue my own reflections, and to perfect that theory which had presented itself to my mind.

In Harley's absence I had taken it upon myself to give an order to Pedro to the effect that no reporters were to be admitted; and in this I had done well. So quickly does evil news fly that, between mid-day and the hour of Harley's return, no fewer than five reporters, I believe, presented themselves at Cray's Folly. Some of the more persistent continued to haunt the neighbourhood, and I had withdrawn to the deserted library, in order to avoid observation, when I heard a car draw up in the courtyard, and a moment later heard Harley asking for me.

I hurried out to meet him, and as I appeared at the door of the library:

"Hullo, Knox," he called, running up the steps. "Any developments?"

"No actual development?" I replied, "except that several members of the Press have been here."

"You told them nothing?" he asked, eagerly.

"No; they were not admitted."

"Good, good," he muttered.

"I had expected you long before this, Harley."

"Naturally," he said, with a sort of irritation. "I have been all the way to Whitehall and back."

"To Whitehall! What, you have been to London?"

"I had half anticipated it, Knox. The Chief Constable, although quite a decent fellow, is a stickler for routine. On the strength of those facts which I thought fit to place before him he could see no reason for superseding Aylesbury. Accordingly, without further waste of time, I headed straight for Whitehall. You may remember a somewhat elaborate report which I completed upon the eve of our departure from Chancery Lane?"

I nodded.

"A very thankless job for the Home Office, Knox. But I received my reward to-day. Inspector Wessex has been placed in charge of the case and I hope he will be down here within the hour. Pending his arrival I am tied hand and foot."

We had walked into the library, and, stopping, suddenly, Harley stared me very hard in the face.

"You are bottling something up, Knox," he declared. "Out with it. Has Aylesbury distinguished himself again?"

"No," I replied; "on the contrary. He interviewed Madame de Stämer, and came out with a flea in his ear."

"Good," said Harley, smiling. "A clever woman, and a woman of spirit, Knox."

"You are right," I replied, "and you are also right in supposing that I have a communication to make to you."

"Ah, I thought so. What is it?"

"It is a theory, Harley, which appears to me to covet the facts of the case."

"Indeed?" said he, continuing to stare at me. "And what inspired it?"

"I was staring up at the window of the smoke-room to-day, and I remembered the shadow which you had seen upon the blind."

"Yes?" he cried, eagerly; "and does your theory explain that, too?"

"It does, Harley."

"Then I am all anxiety to hear it."

"Very well, then, I will endeavour to be brief. Do you recollect Miss Beverley's story of the unfamiliar footsteps which passed her door on several occasions?"

"Perfectly."

"You recollect that you, yourself, heard someone crossing the hall, and that both of us heard a door close?"

"We did."

"And finally you saw the shadow of a woman upon the blind of the Colonel's private study. Very well. Excluding the preposterous theory of Inspector Aylesbury, there is no woman in Cray's Folly whose footsteps could possibly have been heard in that corridor, and whose shadow could possibly have been seen upon the blind of Colonel Menendez's room."

"I agree," said Harley, quietly. "I have definitely eliminated all the servants from the case. Therefore, proceed, Knox, I am all attention."

"I will do so. There is a door on the south side of the house, close to the tower and opening into the rhododendron shrubbery. This was the door used by Colonel Menendez in his somnambulistic rambles, according to his own account. Now, assuming his statement to have been untrue in one particular, that is, assuming he was not walking in his sleep, but was fully awake—"

"Eh?" exclaimed Harley, his expression undergoing a subtle change. "Do you think his statement was untrue?"

"According to my theory, Harley, his statement was untrue, in this particular, at least. But to proceed: Might he not have employed this door to admit a nocturnal visitor?"

"It is feasible," muttered Harley, watching me closely.

"For the Colonel to descend to this side door when the household was sleeping," I continued, "and to admit a woman secretly to Cray's Folly, would have been a simple matter. Indeed, on the occasions of these visits he might even have unbolted the door himself after Pedro had bolted it, in order to enable her to enter without his descending for the purpose of admitting her."

"By heavens! Knox," said Harley, "I believe you have it!"

His eyes were gleaming excitedly, and I proceeded:

"Hence the footsteps which passed Miss Beverley's door, hence the shadow which you saw upon the blind; and the sounds which you detected in the hall were caused, of course, by this woman retiring. It was the door leading into the shrubbery which we heard being closed!"

"Continue," said Harley; "although I can plainly see to what this is leading."

"You can see, Harley?" I cried; "of course you can see! The enmity between Camber and Menendez is understandable at last."

"You mean that Menendez was Mrs. Camber's lover?"

"Don't you agree with me?"

"It is feasible, Knox, dreadfully feasible. But go on."

"My theory also explains Colin Camber's lapse from sobriety. It is legitimate to suppose that his wife, who was a Cuban, had been intimate with Menendez before her meeting with Camber. Perhaps she had broken the tie at the time of her marriage, but this is mere supposition. Then, her old lover, his infatuation by no means abated, leases the property adjoining that of his successful rival."

"Knox!" exclaimed Paul Harley, "this is brilliant. I am all impatience for the *dénouement*."

"It is coming," I said, triumphantly. "Relations are reëstablished, clandestinely. Colin Camber learns of these. A passionate quarrel ensues, resulting in a long drinking bout designed to drown his sorrows. His love for his wife is so great that he has forgiven her this infidelity. Accordingly, she has promised to see her lover no more. Hers was the figure which you saw outlined upon the blind on the night before the tragedy, Harley! The gestures, which you described as those of despair, furnish evidence to confirm my theory. It was a final meeting!"

"Hm," muttered Harley. "It would be taking big chances, because we have to suppose, Knox, that these visits to Cray's Folly were made whilst her husband was at work in the study. If he had suddenly decided to turn in, all would have been discovered."

"True," I agreed, "but is it impossible?"

"No, not a bit. Women are dreadful gamblers. But continue, Knox."

"Very well. Colonel Menendez has refused to accept his dismissal, and Mrs. Camber had been compelled to promise, without necessarily intending to carry out the promise, that she would see him again on the following night. She failed to come; whereupon he, growing impatient, walked out into the grounds of Cray's Folly to look for her. She may even have intended to come and have been intercepted by her husband. But in any event, the latter, seeing the man who had wronged him, standing out there in the moonlight, found temptation to be too strong. On the whole, I favour the idea that he had intercepted his wife, and snatching up a rifle, had actually gone out into the garden with the intention of shooting Menendez."

"I see," murmured Harley in a low voice. "This hypothesis, Knox, does not embrace the Bat Wing episodes."

"If Menendez has lied upon one point," I returned, "it is permissible to suppose that his entire story was merely a tissue of falsehood."

"I see. But why did he bring me to Cray's Folly?"

"Don't you understand, Harley?" I cried, excitedly. "He really feared for his life, since he knew that Camber had discovered the intrigue."

Paul Harley heaved a long sigh.

"I must congratulate you, Knox," he said, gravely, "upon a really splendid contribution to my case. In several particulars I find myself nearer to the truth. But the definite establishment or shattering of your theory rests upon one thing."

"What's that?" I asked. "You are surely not thinking of the bat wing nailed upon the door?"

"Not at all," he replied. "I am thinking of the seventh yew tree from the northeast corner of the Tudor garden."

XXIX. A LEE-ENFIELD RIFLE

What reply I should have offered to this astonishing remark I cannot say, but at that moment the library door burst open unceremoniously, and outlined against the warmly illuminated hall, where sunlight poured down through the dome, I beheld the figure of Inspector Aylesbury.

"Ah!" he cried, loudly, "so you have come back, Mr. Harley? I thought you had thrown up the case."

"Did you?" said Harley, smilingly. "No, I am still persevering in my ineffectual way."

"Oh, I see. And have you quite convinced yourself that Colin Camber is innocent?"

"In one or two particulars my evidence remains incomplete."

"Oh, in one or two particulars, eh? But generally speaking you don't doubt his innocence?"

"I don't doubt it for a moment."

Harley's words surprised me. I recognized, of course, that he might merely be bluffing the Inspector, but it was totally alien to his character to score a rhetorical success at the expense of what he knew to be the truth; and so sure was I of the accuracy of my deductions that I no longer doubted Colin Camber to be the guilty man.

"At any rate," continued the Inspector, "he is in detention, and likely to remain there. If you are going to defend him at the Assizes, I don't envy you your job, Mr. Harley."

He was blatantly triumphant, so that the fact was evident enough that he had obtained some further piece of evidence which he regarded as conclusive.

"I have detained the man Ah Tsong as well," he went on. "He was an accomplice of your innocent friend, Mr. Harley."

"Was he really?" murmured Harley.

"Finally," continued the Inspector, "I have only to satisfy myself regarding the person who lured Colonel Menendez out into the grounds last night, to have my case complete."

I turned aside, unable to trust myself, but Harley remarked quite coolly:

"Your industry is admirable, Inspector Aylesbury, but I seem to perceive that you have made a very important discovery of some kind."

"Ah, you have got wind of it, have you?"

"I have no information on the point," replied Harley, "but your manner urges me to suggest that perhaps success has crowned your efforts?"

"It has," replied the Inspector. "I am a man that doesn't do things by halves. I didn't content myself with just staring out of the window of that little hut in the grounds of the Guest House, like you did, Mr. Harley, and saying 'twice one are two'—I looked at every book on the shelves, and at every page of those books."

"You must have materially added to your information?"

"Ah, very likely, but my enquiries didn't stop there. I had the floor up."

"The floor of the hut?"

"The floor of the hut, sir. The planks were quite loose. I had satisfied myself that it was a likely hiding place."

"What did you find there, a dead rat?"

Inspector Aylesbury turned, and:

"Sergeant Butler," he called.

The sergeant came forward from the hall, carrying a cricket bag. This Inspector Aylesbury took from him, placing it upon the floor of the library at his feet.

"New, sir," said he, "I borrowed this bag in which to bring the evidence away—the hanging evidence which I discovered beneath the floor of the hut."

I had turned again, when the man had referred to his discovery; and now, glancing at Harley, I saw that his face had grown suddenly very stern.

"Show me your evidence, Inspector?" he asked, shortly.

"There can be no objection," returned the Inspector.

Opening the bag, he took out a rifle!

Paul Harley's hands were thrust in his coat pockets, By the movement of the cloth I could see that he had clenched his fists. Here was confirmation of my theory!

"A Service rifle," said the Inspector, triumphantly, holding up the weapon. "A Lee-Enfield charger-loader. It contains four cartridges, three undischarged, and one discharged. He had not even troubled to eject it."

The Inspector dropped the weapon into the bag with a dramatic movement.

"Fancy theories about bat wings and Voodoos," he said, scornfully, "may satisfy you, Mr. Harley, but I think this rifle will prove more satisfactory to

the Coroner."

He picked up the bag and walked out of the library.

Harley stood posed in a curiously rigid way, looking after him. Even when the door had closed he did not change his position at once. Then, turning slowly, he walked to an armchair and sat down.

"Harley," I said, hesitatingly, "has this discovery surprised you?"

"Surprised me?" he returned in a low voice. "It has appalled me."

"Then, although you seemed to regard my theory as sound," I continued rather resentfully, "all the time you continued to believe Colin Camber to be innocent?"

"I believe so still"

"What?"

"I thought we had determined, Knox," he said, wearily, "that a man of Camber's genius, having decided upon murder, must have arranged for an unassailable alibi. Very well. Are we now to leap to the other end of the scale, and to credit him with such utter stupidity as to place hanging evidence where it could not fail to be discovered by the most idiotic policeman? Preserve your balance, Knox. Theories are wild horses. They run away with us. I know that of old, for which very reason I always avoid speculation until I have a solid foundation of fact upon which to erect it."

"But, my dear fellow," I cried, "was Camber to foresee that the floor of the hut would be taken up?"

Harley sighed, and leaned back in his chair.

"Do you recollect your first meeting with this man, Knox?"

"Perfectly."

"What occurred?"

"He was slightly drunk."

"Yes, but what was the nature of his conversation?"

"He suggested that I had recognized his resemblance to Edgar Allan Poe."

"Quite. What had led him to make this suggestion?'

"The manner in which I had looked at him, I suppose."

"Exactly. Although not quite sober, from a mere glance he was able to detect what you were thinking. Do you wish me to believe, Knox, that this same man had not foreseen what the police would think when Colonel

Menendez was found shot within a hundred yards of the garden of the Guest House?"

I was somewhat taken aback, for Barley's argument was strictly logical, and:

"It is certainly very puzzling," I admitted.

"Puzzling!" he exclaimed; "it is maddening. This case is like a Syrian village-mound. Stratum lies under stratum, and in each we meet with evidence of more refined activity than in the last. It seems we have yet to go deeper."

He took out his pipe and began to fill it.

"Tell me about the interview with Madame de Stämer," he directed.

I took a seat facing him, and he did not once interrupt me throughout my account of Inspector Aylesbury's examination of Madame.

"Good," he commented, when I had told how the Inspector was dismissed. "But at least, Knox, he has a working theory, to which he sticks like an express to the main line, whereas I find myself constantly called upon to readjust my perspective. Directly I can enjoy freedom of movement, however, I shall know whether my hypothesis is a house of cards or a serviceable structure."

"Your hypothesis?" I said. "Then you really have a theory which is entirely different from mine?"

"Not entirely different, Knox, merely not so comprehensive. I have contented myself thus far with a negative theory, if I may so express it."

"Negative theory?"

"Exactly. We are dealing, my dear fellow, with a case of bewildering intricacies. For the moment I have focussed upon one feature only."

"What is that?"

"Upon proving that Colin Camber did not do the murder."

"Did *not* do it?"

"Precisely, Knox. Respecting the person or persons who did do it, I had preserved a moderately open mind, up to the moment that Inspector Aylesbury entered the library with the Lee-Enfield."

"And then?" I said, eagerly.

"Then," he replied, "I began to think hard. However, since I practise what I preach, or endeavour to do so, I must not permit myself to speculate upon

this aspect of the matter until I have tested my theory of Camber's innocence."

"In other words," I said, bitterly, "although you encouraged me to unfold my ideas regarding Mrs. Camber, you were merely laughing at me all the time!"

"My dear Knox!" exclaimed Harley, jumping up impulsively, "please don't be unjust. Is it like me? On the contrary, Knox"—he looked me squarely in the eyes—"you have given me a platform on which already I have begun to erect one corner of a theory of the crime. Without new facts I can go no further. But this much at least you have done."

"Thanks, Harley," I murmured, and indeed I was gratified; "but where do your other corners rest?"

"They rest," he said, slowly, "they rest, respectively, upon a bat wing, a yew tree, and a Lee-Enfield charger-loader."

XXX. THE SEVENTH YEW TREE

Detective-Inspector Wessex arrived at about five o'clock; a quiet, resourceful man, highly competent, and having the appearance of an ex-soldier. His respect for the attainments of Paul Harley alone marked him a student of character. I knew Wessex well, and was delighted when Pedro showed him into the library.

"Thank God you are here, Wessex," said Harley, when we had exchanged greetings. "At last I can move. Have you seen the local officer in charge?"

"No," replied the Inspector, "but I gather that I have been requisitioned over his head."

"You have," said Harley, grimly, "and over the head of the Chief Constable, too. But I suppose it is unfair to condemn a man for the shortcoming with which nature endowed him, therefore we must endeavour to let Inspector Aylesbury down as lightly as possible. I have an idea that I heard him return a while ago."

He walked out into the hall to make enquiries, and a few moments later I heard Inspector Aylesbury's voice.

"Ah, there you are, Inspector Aylesbury," said Harley, cheerily. "Will you please step into the library for a moment?"

The Inspector entered, frowning heavily, followed by my friend.

"There is no earthly reason why we should get at loggerheads over this business," Harley continued; "but the fact of the matter is, Inspector Aylesbury, that there are depths in this case to which neither you nor I have yet succeeded in penetrating. You have a reputation to consider, and so have I. Therefore I am sure you will welcome the cooperation of Detective-Inspector Wessex of Scotland Yard, as I do."

"What's this, what's this?" said Aylesbury. "I have made no application to London."

"Nevertheless, Inspector, it is quite in order," declared Wessex. "I have my instructions here, and I have reported to Market Hilton already. You see, the man you have detained is an American citizen."

"What of that?"

"Well, he seems to have communicated with his Embassy." Wessex glanced significantly at Paul Harley. "And the Embassy communicated with the Home Office. You mustn't regard my arrival as any reflection on your ability, Inspector Aylesbury. I am sure we can work together quite agreeably."

"Oh," muttered the other, in evident bewilderment, "I see. Well, if that's the way of it, I suppose we must make the best of things."

"Good," cried Wessex, heartily. "Now perhaps you would like to state your case against the detained man?"

"A sound idea, Wessex," said Paul Harley. "But perhaps, Inspector Aylesbury, before you begin, you would be good enough to speak to the constable on duty at the entrance to the Tudor garden. I am anxious to take another look at the spot where the body was found."

Inspector Aylesbury took out his handkerchief and blew his nose loudly, continuing throughout the operation to glare at Paul Harley, and finally:

"You are wasting your time, Mr. Harley," he declared, "as Detective-Inspector Wessex will be the first to admit when I have given him the facts of my case. Nevertheless, if you want to examine the garden, do so by all means."

He turned without another word and stamped out of the library across the hall and into the courtyard.

"I will join you again in a few minutes, Wessex," said Paul Harley, following.

"Very good, Mr. Harley," Wessex answered. "I know you wouldn't have had me down if the case had been as simple as he seems to think it is."

I joined Harley, and we walked together up the gravelled path, meeting Inspector Aylesbury and the constable returning.

"Go ahead, Mr. Harley!" cried the Inspector. "If you can find any stronger evidence than the rifle, I shall be glad to take a look at it."

Harley nodded good-humouredly, and together we descended the steps to the sunken garden. I was intensely curious respecting the investigation which Harley had been so anxious to make here, for I recognized that it was associated with something which he had seen from the window of Camber's hut.

He walked along the moss-grown path to the sun-dial, and stood for a moment looking down at the spot where Menendez had lain. Then he stared up the hill toward the Guest House; and finally, directing his attention to the yews which lined the sloping bank:

"One, two, three, four," he counted, checking them with his fingers —"five, six, seven."

He mounted the bank and began to examine the trunk of one of the trees, whilst I watched him in growing astonishment.

Presently he turned and looked down at me.

"Not a trace, Knox," he murmured; "not a trace. Let us try again."

He moved along to the yew adjoining that which he had already inspected, but presently shook his head and passed to the next. Then:

"Ah!" he cried. "Come here, Knox!"

I joined him where he was kneeling, staring at what I took to be a large nail, or bolt, protruding from the bark of the tree.

"You see!" he exclaimed, "you see!"

I stooped, in order to examine the thing more closely, and as I did so, I realized what it was. It was the bullet which had killed Colonel Menendez!

Harley stood upright, his face slightly flushed and his eyes very bright.

"We shall not attempt to remove it, Knox," he said. "The depth of penetration may have a tale to tell. The wood of the yew tree is one of the toughest British varieties."

"But, Harley," I said, blankly, as we descended to the path, "this is merely another point for the prosecution of Camber. Unless"—I turned to him in sudden excitement, "the bullet was of different—"

"No, no," he murmured, "nothing so easy as that, Knox. The bullet was fired from a Lee-Enfield beyond doubt,"

I stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"Then I am utterly out of my depth, Harley. It, appears to me that the case against Camber is finally and fatally complete. Only the motive remains to be discovered, and I flatter myself that I have already detected this."

"I am certainly inclined to think," admitted Harley, "that there is a good deal in your theory."

"Then, Harley," I said in bewilderment, "you do believe that Camber committed the murder?"

"On the contrary," he replied, "I am certain that he did not."

I stood quite still.

"You are certain?" I began.

"I told you that the test of my theory, Knox, was to be looked for in the seventh yew from the northeast corner of the Tudor garden, did I not?"

"You did. And it is there. A bullet fired from a Lee-Enfield rifle; beyond any possible shadow of doubt the bullet which killed Colonel Menendez."

"Beyond any possible shadow of doubt, as you say, Knox, the bullet which killed Colonel Menendez."

"Therefore Camber is guilty?"

"On the contrary, therefore Camber is innocent!"

"What!"

"You are persistently overlooking one little point, Knox," said Harley, mounting the steps on to the gravel path. "I spoke of the seventh yew tree from the northeast corner of the garden."

"Well?"

"Well, my dear fellow, surely you observed that the bullet was embedded in the ninth?"

I was still groping for the significance of this point when, re-crossing the hall, we entered the library again, to find Inspector Aylesbury posed squarely before the mantelpiece stating his case to Wessex.

"You see," he was saying, in his most oratorical manner, as we entered, "every little detail fits perfectly into place. For instance, I find that a

woman, called Mrs. Powis, who for the past two years had acted as housekeeper at the Guest House and never taken a holiday, was sent away recently to her married daughter in London. See what that means? Her room is at the back of the house, and her evidence would have been fatal. Ah Tsong, of course, is a liar. I made up my mind about that the moment I clapped eyes on him. Mrs. Camber is the only innocent party. She was asleep in the front of the house when the shot was fired, and I believe her when she says that she cannot swear to the matter of distance."

"A very interesting case. Inspector," said Wessex, glancing at Harley. "I have not examined the body yet, but I understand that it was a clean wound through the head."

"The bullet entered at the juncture of the nasal and frontal bones," explained Harley, rapidly, "and it came out between the base of the occipital and first cervical. Without going into unpleasant surgical details, the wound was a perfectly *straight* one. There was no ricochet."

"I understand that a regulation rifle was used?"

"Yes," said Inspector Aylesbury; "we have it."

"And at what range did you say, Inspector?"

"Roughly, a hundred yards."

"Possibly less," murmured Harley.

"Hundred yards or less," said Wessex, musingly; "and the obstruction met with in the case of a man shot in that way would be—" He looked towards Paul Harley.

"Less than if the bullet had struck the skull higher up," was the reply. "It passed clean through."

"Therefore," continued Wessex, "I am waiting to hear, Inspector, where you found the bullet lodged?"

"Eh?" said the Inspector, and he slowly turned his prominent eyes in Harley's direction. "Oh, I see. That's why you wanted to examine the Tudor garden, is it?"

"Exactly," replied Harley.

The face of Inspector Aylesbury grew very red.

"I had deferred looking for the bullet," he explained, "as the case was already as clear as daylight. Probably Mr. Harley has discovered it."

"I have," said Harley, shortly.

"Is it the regulation bullet?" asked Wessex.

"It is. I found it embedded in one of the yew trees."

"There you are!" exclaimed Aylesbury. "There isn't the ghost of a doubt."

Wessex looked at Harley in undisguised perplexity.

"I must say, Mr. Harley," he admitted, "that I have never met with a clearer case."

"Neither have I," agreed Harley, cheerfully. "I am going to ask Inspector Aylesbury to return here after nightfall. There is a little experiment which I should like to make, and which would definitely establish my case."

"*Your* case?" said Aylesbury.

"My case, yes."

"You are not going to tell me that you still persist in believing Camber to be innocent?"

"Not at all. I am merely going to ask you to return at nightfall to assist me in this minor investigation."

"If you ask my opinion," said the Inspector, "no further evidence is needed."

"I don't agree with you," replied Harley, quietly. "Whatever your own ideas upon the subject may be, I, personally, have not yet discovered one single piece of convincing evidence for the prosecution of Camber."

"What!" exclaimed Aylesbury, and even Detective-Inspector Wessex stared at the speaker incredulously.

"My dear Inspector Aylesbury," concluded Harley, "when you have witnessed the experiment which I propose to make this evening you will realize, as I have already realized^ that we are faced by a tremendous task."

"What tremendous task?"

"The task of discovering who shot Colonel Menendez."

XXXI. YSOLA CAMBER'S CONFESSION

Paul Harley, with Wessex and Inspector Aylesbury, presently set out for Market Hilton, where Colin Camber and Ah Tsong were detained and where the body of Colonel Menendez had been conveyed for the purpose of the post-mortem. I had volunteered to remain at Cray's Folly, my motive being not wholly an unselfish one.

"Refer reporters to me, Mr. Knox," said Inspector Wessex. "Don't let them trouble the ladies. And tell them as little as possible, yourself."

The drone of the engine having died away down the avenue, I presently found myself alone, but as I crossed the hall in the direction of the library, intending to walk out upon the southern lawns, I saw Val Beverley coming toward me from Madame de Stämer's room.

She remained rather pale, but smiled at me courageously.

"Have they all gone, Mr. Knox?" she asked. "I have really been hiding. I suppose you knew?"

"I suspected it," I said, smiling. "Yes, they are all gone. How is Madame de Stämer, now?"

"She is quite calm. Curiously, almost uncannily calm. She is writing. Tell me, please, what does Mr. Harley think of Inspector Aylesbury's preposterous ideas?"

"He thinks he is a fool," I replied, hotly, "as I do."

"But whatever will happen if he persists in dragging me into this horrible case?"

"He will not drag you into it," I said, quietly. "He has been superseded by a cleverer man, and the case is practically under Harley's direction now."

"Thank Heaven for that," she murmured. "I wonder——" She looked at me hesitatingly.

"Yes?" I prompted.

"I have been thinking about poor Mrs. Camber all alone in that gloomy house, and wondering——"

"Perhaps I know. You are going to visit her?"

Val Beverley nodded, watching me.

"Can you leave Madame de Stämer with safety?"

"Oh, yes, I think so. Nita can attend to her."

"And may I accompany you, Miss Beverley? For more reasons than one, I, too, should like to call upon Mrs. Camber."

"We might try," she said, hesitatingly. "I really only wanted to be kind. You won't begin to cross-examine her, will you?"

"Certainly not," I answered; "although there are many things I should like her to tell us."

"Well, suppose we go," said the girl, "and let events take their own course."

As a result, I presently found myself, Val Beverley by my side, walking across the meadow path. With the unpleasant hush of Cray's Folly left behind, the day seemed to grow brighter. I thought that the skylarks had never sung more sweetly. Yet in this same instant of sheerly physical enjoyment I experienced a pang of remorse, remembering the tragic woman we had left behind, and the poor little sorrowful girl we were going to visit. My emotions were very mingled, then, and I retain no recollection of our conversation up to the time that we came to the Guest House.

We were admitted by a really charming old lady, who informed us that her name was Mrs. Powis and that she was but an hour returned from London, whither she had been summoned by telegram.

She showed us into a quaint, small drawing room which owed its atmosphere quite clearly to Mrs. Camber, for whereas the study was indescribably untidy, this was a model of neatness without being formal or unhomely. Here, in a few moments, Mrs. Camber joined us, an appealing little figure of wistful, almost elfin, beauty. I was surprised and delighted to find that an instant bond of sympathy sprang up between the two girls. I diplomatically left them together for a while, going into Camber's room to smoke my pipe. And when I returned:

"Oh, Mr. Knox," said Val Beverley, "Mrs. Camber has something to tell you which she thinks you ought to know."

"Concerning Colonel Menendez?" I asked, eagerly.

Mrs. Camber nodded her golden head.

"Yes," she replied, but glancing at Val Beverley as if to gather confidence. "The truth can never hurt Colin. He has nothing to conceal. May I tell you?"

"I am all anxiety to hear," I assured her.

"Would you rather I went, Mrs. Camber?" asked Val Beverley.

Mrs. Camber reached across and took her hand.

"Please, no," she replied. "Stay here with me. I am afraid it is rather a long story."

"Never mind," I said. "It will be time well spent if it leads us any nearer to the truth."

"Yes?" she questioned, watching me anxiously, "you think so? I think so, too."

She became silent, sitting looking straight before her, the pupils of her blue eyes widely dilated. Then, at first in a queer, far-away voice, she began to speak again.

"I must tell you," she commenced "that before—my marriage, my name was Isabella de Valera."

I started.

"Ysola was my baby way of saying it, and so I came to be called Ysola. My father was manager of one of Señor Don Juan's estates, in a small island near the coast of Cuba. My mother"—she raised her little hands eloquently —"was half-caste. Do you know? And she and my father—"

She looked pleadingly at Val Beverley.

"I understand," whispered the latter with deep sympathy; "but you don't think it makes any difference, do you?"

"No?" said Mrs. Camber with a quaint little gesture. "To you, perhaps not, but there, where I was born, oh! so much. Well, then, my mother died when I was very little. Ah Tsong was her servant. There are many Chinese in the West Indies, you see, and I can just remember he carried me in to see her. Of course I didn't understand. My father quarrelled bitterly with the priests because they would not bury her in holy ground. I think he no longer believed afterward. I loved him very much. He was good to me; and I was a queen in that little island. All the negroes loved me, because of my mother, I think, who was partly descended from slaves, as they were. But I had not begun to understand how hard it was all going to be when my father sent me to a convent in Cuba.

"I hated to go, but while I was there I learned all about myself. I knew that I was outcast. It was"—she raised her hand—"not possible to stay. I was only fifteen when I came home, but all the same I was a woman. I was no more a child, and happy no longer. After a while, perhaps, when I forgot what I had suffered at the convent, I became less miserable. My father did all in his power to make me happy, and I was glad the work-people loved me. But I was very lonely. Ah Tsong understood."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"Can you imagine," she asked, "that when my father was away in distant parts of the island at night, Ah Tsong slept outside my door? Some of them say, 'Do not trust the Chinese' I say, except my husband and my father, I

have never known another one to trust but Ah Tsong. Now they have taken him away from me."

Tears glittered on her lashes, but she brushed them aside angrily, and continued:

"I was still less than twenty, and looked, they told me, only fourteen, when Señor Menendez came to inspect his estate. I had never seen him before. There had been a rising in the island, in the year after I was born, and he had only just escaped with his life. He was hated. People called him Devil Menendez. Especially, no woman was safe from him, and in the old days, when his power had been great, he had used it for wickedness.

"My father was afraid when he heard he was coming. He would have sent me away, but before it could be arranged Señor the Colonel arrived. He had in his company a French lady. I thought her very beautiful and elegant. It was Madame de Stämer. It is only four years ago, a little more, but her hair was dark brown. She was splendidly dressed and such a wonderful horsewoman. The first time I saw her I felt as they had made me feel at the convent. I wanted to hide from her. She was so grand a lady, and I came from slaves."

She paused hesitatingly and stared down at her own tiny feet.

"Pardon me interrupting you, Mrs. Camber," I said, "but can you tell me in what way these two are related?"

She looked up with her naïve smile.

"I can tell you, yes. A cousin of Señor Menendez married a sister of Madame de Stämer."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed, "a very remote kinship."

"It was in this way they met, in Paris, I think, and"—she raised her hands expressively—"she came with him to the West Indies, although it was during the great war. I think she loved him more than her soul, and me—me she hated. As Señor Menendez dismounted from his horse in front of the house he saw me."

She sighed and ceased speaking again. Then:

"That very night," she continued, "he began. Do you know? I was trying to escape from him when Madame de Stämer found us. She called me a shameful name, and my father, who heard it, ordered her out of the house. Señor Menendez spoke sharply, and my father struck him."

She paused once more, biting her lip agitatedly, but presently proceeded:

"Do you know what they are like, the Spanish, when their blood is hot? Senor Menendez had a revolver, but my father knocked it from his grasp. Then they fought with their bare hands. I was too frightened even to cry out. It was all a horrible dream. What Madame de Stämer did, I do not know. I could see nothing but two figures twined together on the floor. At last one of them arose. I saw it was my father, and I remember no more."

She was almost overcome by her tragic recollections, but presently, with a wonderful courage, which, together with her daintiness of form, spoke eloquently of good blood on one side at any rate, continued to speak:

"My father found he must go to Cuba to make arrangements for the future. Of course, our life there was finished. Ah Tsong stayed with me. You have heard how it used to be in those islands in the old days, but now you think it is so different? I used to think it was different, too. On the first night my father was away, Ah Tsong, who had gone out, was so long returning I became afraid. Then a strange negro came with news that he had been taken ill with cholera, and was lying at a place not far from the house. I forgot my fears and hurried off with this man. Ah!"

She laughed wildly.

"I did not know I should never return, and I did not know I should never see my father again. To you this must seem all wild and strange, because there is a law in England. There is a law in Cuba, too, but in some of those little islands the only law is the law of the strongest."

She raised her hands to her face and there was silence for a while.

"Of course it was a trap," she presently continued. "I was taken to an island called El Manas which belonged to Senor Menendez, and where he had a house. This he could do, but"—she threw back her head proudly —"my spirit he could not break. Lots and lots of money would be mine, and estates of my own; but one thing about him I must tell: he never showed me violence. For one, two, three weeks I stayed a prisoner in his house. All the servants were faithful to him and I could not find a friend among them. Although quite innocent, I was ruined. Do you know?"

She raised her eyes pathetically to Val Beverley.

"I thought my heart was broken, for something told me my father was dead. This was true."

"What!" I exclaimed. "You don't mean—"

"I don't know, I don't know," she answered, brokenly. "He died on his way to Havana. They said it was an accident. Well—at last, Señor Menendez offered me marriage. I thought if I agreed it would give me my freedom, and I could run away and find Ah Tsong."

She paused, and a flush coloured her delicate face and faded again, leaving it very pale.

"We were married in the house, by a Spanish priest. Oh"—she raised her hands pathetically—"do you know what a woman is like? My spirit was not broken still, but crushed. I had now nothing but kindness and gifts. I might never have known, but Senor Menendez, who thought"—she smiled sadly—"I was beautiful, took me to Cuba, where he had a great house. Please remember, please," she pleaded, "before you judge of me, that I was so young and had never known love, except the love of my father. I did not even dream, then, his death was not an accident.

"I was proud of my jewels and fine dresses. But I began to notice that Juan did not present any of his friends to me. We went about, but to strange places, never to visit people of his own kind, and none came to visit us. Then one night I heard someone on the balcony of my room. I was so frightened I could not cry out. It was good I was like that, for the curtain was pulled open and Ah Tsong came in."

She clutched convulsively at the arms of her chair.

"He told me!" she said in a very low voice.

Then, looking up pitifully:

"Do you know?" she asked in her quaint way. "It was a mock marriage. He had done it and thought no shame, because it was so with my mother. Oh!"

Her beautiful eyes flashed, and for the first time since I had met Ysola Camber I saw the real Spanish spirit of the woman leap to life.

"He did not know me. Perhaps I did not know myself. That night, with no money, without a ring, a piece of lace, a peseta, anything that had belonged to him, I went with Ah Tsong. We made our way to a half-sister of my father's who lived in Puerto Principe, and at first—she would not have me. I was talked about, she said, in all the islands. She told me of my poor father. She told me I had dragged the name of de Valera in the dirt. At last I made her understand—that what everyone else had known, I had never even dreamed of."

She looked up wistfully, as if thinking that we might doubt her.

"Do you know?" she whispered.

"I know—oh! I know!" said Val Beverley. I loved her for the sympathy in her voice and in her eyes. "It is very, very brave of you to tell us this, Mrs. Camber."

"Yes? Do you think so?" asked the girl, simply. "What does it matter if it can help Colin?

"This aunt of mine," she presently continued, "was a poor woman, and it was while I was hiding in her house—because spies of Senor Menendez were searching for me—that I met—my husband. He was studying in Cuba the strange things he writes about, you see. And before I knew what had happened—I found I loved him more than all else in the world. It is so wonderful, that feeling," she said, looking across at Val Beverley. "Do you know?"

The girl flushed deeply, and lowered her eyes, but made no reply.

"Because you are a woman, too, you will perhaps understand," she resumed. "I did not tell him. I did not dare to tell him at first. I was so madly happy I had no courage to speak. But when"—her voice sank lower and lower—"he asked me to marry him, I told him. Nothing he could ever do would change my love for him now, because he forgave me and made me his wife."

I feared that at last she was going to break down, for her voice became very tremulous and tears leapt again into her eyes. She conquered her emotion, however, and went on:

"We crossed over to the States, and Colin's family who had heard of his marriage—some friend of Señor Menendez had told them—would not know us. It meant that Colin, who would have been a rich man, was very poor. It made no difference. He was splendid. And I was so happy it was all like a dream. He made me forget I was to blame for his troubles. Then we were in Washington—and I saw Señor Menendez in the hotel!

"Oh, my heart stopped tearing. For me it seemed like the end of everything. I knew, I knew, he was following me. But he had not seen me, and without telling Colin the reason, I made him leave Washington, He was glad to go. Wherever we went, in America, they seemed to find out about my mother. I got to hate them, hate them all. We came to England, and Colin heard about this house, and we took it.

"At last we were really happy. No one knew us. Because we were strange, and because of Ah Tsong, they looked at us very funny and kept away, but we did not care. Then Sir James Appleton sold Cray's Folly."

She looked up quickly.

"How can I tell you? It must have been by Ah Tsong that he traced me to Surrey. Some spy had told him there was a Chinaman living here. Oh, I don't know how he found out, but when I heard who was coming to Cray's Folly I thought I should die.

"Something I must tell you now. When I had told my story to Colin, one thing I had not told him, because I was afraid what he might do. I had not told him the name of the man who had caused me to suffer so much. On the day I first saw Señor Menendez walking in the garden of Cray's Folly I knew I must tell my husband what he had so often asked me to tell him—the name of the man. I told him—and at first I thought he would go mad. He began to drink—do you know? It is a failing in his family. But because I knew—because I knew—I forgave him, and hoped, always hoped, that he would stop. He promised to do so. He had given up going out each day to drink, and was working again like he used to work—too hard, too hard, but it was better than the other way."

She stopped speaking, and suddenly, before I could divine her intention, dropped upon her knees, and raised her clasped hands to me.

"He did not, he did not kill him!" she cried, passionately. "He did not! O God! I who love him tell you he did not! You think he did. You do—you do! I can see it in your eyes!"

"Believe me, Mrs. Camber," I answered, deeply moved, "I don't doubt your word for a moment."

She continued to look at me for a while, and then turned to Val Beverley.

"*You* don't think he did," she sobbed, "do you?"

She looked such a child, such a pretty, helpless child, as she knelt there on the carpet, that I felt a lump rising in my throat.

Val Beverley dropped down impulsively beside her and put her arms around the slender shoulders.

"Of course I don't," she exclaimed, indignantly. "Of course I don't. It's quite unthinkable."

"I know it is," moaned the other, raising her tearful face. "I love him and know his great soul. But what do these others know, and they will never

believe *me*."

"Have courage," I said. "It has never failed you yet. Mr. Paul Harley has promised to clear him by to-night."

"He has promised?" she whispered, still kneeling and clutching Val Beverley tightly. She looked up at me with hope reborn in her beautiful eyes. "He has promised? Oh, I thank him. May God bless him. I know he will succeed."

I turned aside, and walked out across the hall and into the empty study.

XXXII. PAUL HARLEY'S EXPERIMENT

I recognize that whosoever may have taken the trouble to follow my chronicle thus far will be little disposed to suffer any intrusion of my personal affairs at such a point. Therefore I shall pass lightly over the walk back to Cray's Folly, during which I contrived to learn much about Val Beverley's personal history but little to advance the investigation which I was there to assist.

As I had surmised, Miss Beverley had been amply provided for by her father, and was bound to Madame de Stämer by no other ties than those of friendship and esteem. Very reluctantly I released her, on our returning to the house; for she, perforce, hurried off to Madame's room, leaving me looking after her in a state of delightful bewilderment, the significance of which I could not disguise from myself. The absurd suspicions of Inspector Aylesbury were forgotten; so was the shadow upon the blind of Colonel Menendez's study. I only knew that love had come to me, an unbidden guest, to stay for ever.

Manoel informed me that a number of pressmen, not to be denied, had taken photographs of the Tudor garden and of the spot where Colonel Menendez had been found, but Pedro, following my instructions, had referred them all to Market Hilton.

I was standing in the doorway talking to the man when I heard the drone of Harley's motor in the avenue, and a moment later he and Wessex stepped out in front of the porch and joined me. I thought that Wessex looked stern and rather confused, but Harley was quite his old self, his keen eyes

gleaming humorously, and an expression of geniality upon his tanned features.

"Hullo, Knox!" he cried, "any developments?"

"Yes," I said. "Suppose we go up to your room and talk."

"Good enough."

Inspector Wessex nodded without speaking, and the three of us mounted the staircase and entered Paul Harley's room. Harley seated himself upon the bed and began to load his pipe, whilst Wessex, who seemed very restless, stood staring out of the window. I sat down in the armchair, and:

"I have had an interesting interview with Mrs, Camber," I said.

"What?" exclaimed Harley. "Good. Tell us all about it."

Wessex turned, hands clasped behind him, and listened in silence to an account which I gave of my visit to the Guest House. When I had finished:

"It seems to me," said the Inspector, slowly, "that the only doubtful point in the case against Camber is cleared up; namely, his motive."

"It certainly looks like it," agreed Harley. "But how strangely Mrs. Camber's story differs from that of Menendez although there are points of contact. I regret, however, that you were unable to settle the most important matter of all."

"You mean whether or not she had visited Cray's Folly?"

"Exactly."

"Then you still consider my theory to be correct?" I asked eagerly.

"Up to a point it has been proved to be," he returned. "I must congratulate you upon a piece of really brilliant reasoning, Knox. But respecting the most crucial moment of all, we are still without information, unfortunately. However, whilst the presence or otherwise, of Mrs. Camber in Cray's Folly on the night preceding the tragedy may prove to bear intimately upon the case, an experiment which I propose to make presently will give the matter an entirely different significance."

"Hm," said Wessex, doubtfully, "I am looking forward to this experiment of yours, Mr. Harley, with great interest. To be perfectly honest, I have no more idea than the man in the moon how you hope to clear Camber."

"No," replied Harley, musingly, "the weight of evidence against him is crushing. But you are a man of great experience, Wessex, in criminal investigations. Tell me honestly, have you ever known a murder case in which there was such conclusive material for the prosecution?"

"Never," replied the Inspector, promptly. "In this respect, as in others, the case is unique."

"You have seen Camber," continued Harley, "and have been enabled to form some sort of judgment respecting his character. You will admit that he is a clever man, brilliantly clever. Keep this fact in mind. Remember his studies, and he does not deny that they have included Voodoo. Remember his enquiries into the significance of Bat Wing. Remember, as we now learn definitely from Mrs. Camber's evidence, that he was in Cuba at the same time as the late Colonel Menendez, and once, at least, actually in the same hotel in the United States. Consider the rifle found under the floor of the hut; and, having weighed all these points judicially, Wessex, tell me frankly, if in the whole course of your experience, you have ever met with a more perfect frame-up?"

"What!" shouted Wessex, in sudden excitement. "What!"

"I said a frame-up," repeated Harley, quietly. "An American term, but one which will be familiar to you."

"Good God!" muttered the detective, "you have turned all my ideas upside down."

"What may be termed the *physical* evidence," continued Harley, "is complete, I admit: too complete. There lies the weak spot. But what I will call the psychological evidence points in a totally different direction. A man clever enough to have planned this crime, and Camber undoubtedly is such a man, could not—it is humanly impossible—have been fool enough, deliberately to lay such a train of damning facts. It's a frame-up, Wessex! I had begun to suspect this even before I met Camber. Having met him, I knew that I was right. Then came an inspiration. I saw where there must be a flaw in the plan. It was geographically impossible that this could be otherwise."

"Geographically impossible?" I said, in a hushed voice, for Harley had truly astounded me.

"Geographical is the term, Knox. I admit that the discovery of the rifle beneath the floor of the hut appalled me."

"I could see that it did."

"It was the crowning piece of evidence, Knox, evidence of such fiendish cleverness on the part of those who had plotted Menendez's death that I began to wonder whether after all it would be possible to defeat them. I

realized that Camber's life hung upon a hair. For the production of that rifle before a jury of twelve moderately stupid men and true could not fail to carry enormous weight. Whereas the delicate point upon which my counter case rested might be more difficult to demonstrate in court. To-night, however, we shall put it to the test, and there are means, no doubt, which will occur to me later, of making its significance evident to one not acquainted with the locality. The press photographs, which I understand have been taken, may possibly help us in this."

Bewildered by my friend's revolutionary ideas, which explained the hitherto mysterious nature of his enquiries, I scarcely knew what to say; but:

"If it's a frame-up, Mr. Harley," said Wessex, "and the more I think about it the more it has that look to me, practically speaking, we have not yet started on the search for the murderer."

"We have not," replied Harley, grimly. "But I have a dawning idea of a method by which we shall be enabled to narrow down this enquiry."

It must be unnecessary for me to speak of the state of suppressed excitement in which we passed the remainder of that afternoon and evening. Dr. Rolleston called again to see Madame de Stämer, and reported that she was quite calm. In fact, he almost echoed Val Beverley's words spoken earlier in the day.

"She is unnaturally calm, Mr. Knox," he said in confidence. "I understand that the dead man was a cousin, but I almost suspect that she was madly in love with him."

I nodded shortly, admiring his acute intelligence.

"I think you are right, doctor," I replied, "and if it is so, her amazing fortitude is all the more admirable."

"Admirable?" he echoed. "As I said before, she has the courage of ten men."

A formal dinner was out of the question, of course; indeed, no one attempted to dress. Val Beverley excused herself, saying that she would dine in Madame's room, and Harley, Wessex, and I, partook of wine and sandwiches in the library.

Inspector Aylesbury arrived about eight o'clock in a mood of repressed irritation. Pedro showed him in to where the three of us were seated, and:

"Good evening, gentlemen," said he, "here I am, as arranged, but as I am up to my eyes in work on the case, I will ask you, Mr. Harley, to carry out this experiment of yours as quickly as possible."

"No time shall be lost," replied my friend, quietly. "May I request you to accompany Detective-Inspector Wessex and Mr. Knox to the Guest House by the high road? Do not needlessly alarm Mrs. Camber. Indeed, I think you might confine your attention to Mrs. Powis. Merely request permission to walk down the garden to the hut, and be good enough to wait there until I join you, which will be in a few minutes after your arrival."

Inspector Aylesbury uttered an inarticulate, grunting sound, but I, who knew Harley so well, could see that he felt himself to be upon the eve of a signal triumph. What he proposed to do, I had no idea, save that it was designed to clear Colin Camber. I prayed that it might also clear his pathetic girl-wife; and in a sort of gloomy silence I set out with Wessex and Aylesbury, down the drive, past the lodge, which seemed to be deserted to-night, and along the tree-lined high road, cool and sweet in the dusk of evening.

Aylesbury was very morose, and Wessex, who had lighted his pipe, did not seem to be in a talkative mood either. He had the utmost faith in Paul Harley, but it was evident enough that he was oppressed by the weight of evidence against Camber. I divined the fact that he was turning over in his mind the idea of the frame-up, and endeavouring to re-adjust the established facts in accordance with this new point of view.

We were admitted to the Guest House by Mrs. Powis, a cheery old soul; one of those born optimists whose special task in life seems to be that of a friend in need.

As she opened the door, she smiled, shook her head, and raised her finger to her lips.

"Be as quiet as you can, sir," she said. "I have got her to sleep."

She spoke of Mrs. Camber as one refers to a child, and, quite understanding her anxiety:

"There will be no occasion to disturb her, Mrs. Powis," I replied. "We merely wish to walk down to the bottom of the garden to make a few enquiries."

"Yes, gentlemen," she whispered, quietly closing the door as we all entered the hall.

She led us through the rear portion of the house, and past the quarters of Ah Tsong into that neglected garden which I remembered so well.

"There you are, sir, and may Heaven help you to find the truth."

"Rest assured that the truth will be found, Mrs. Powis," I answered.

Inspector Aylesbury cleared his throat, but Wessex, puffing at his pipe, made no remark whatever until we were all come to the hut overhanging the little ravine.

"This is where I found the rifle, Detective-Inspector," explained Aylesbury,

Wessex nodded absently.

It was another perfect night, with only a faint tracery of cloud to be seen like lingering smoke over on the western horizon. Everything seemed very still, so that although we were several miles from the railway line, when presently a train sped on its way one might have supposed, from the apparent nearness of the sound, that the track was no farther off than the grounds of Cray's Folly.

Toward those grounds, automatically, our glances were drawn; and we stood there staring down at the ghostly map of the gardens, and all wondering, no doubt, what Harley was doing and when he would be joining us.

Very faintly I could hear the water of the little stream bubbling beneath us. Then, just as this awkward silence was becoming intolerable, there came a scraping and scratching from the shadows of the gully, and:

"Give me a hand, Knox!" cried the voice of Harley from below. "I want to avoid the barbed wire if possible."

He had come across country, and as I scrambled down the slope to meet him I could not help wondering with what object he had sent us ahead by the high road. Presently, when he came clambering up into the garden, this in a measure was explained, for:

"You are all wondering," he began, rapidly, "what I am up to, no doubt. Let me endeavour to make it clear. In order that my test should be conclusive, and in no way influenced by pre-knowledge of certain arrangements which I had made, I sent you on ahead of me. Not wishing to waste time, I followed by the shorter route. And now gentlemen, let us begin."

"Good," muttered Inspector Aylesbury.

"But first of all," continued Harley, "I wish each one of you in turn to look out of the window of the hut, and down into the Tudor garden of Cray's Folly. Will you begin, Wessex?"

Wessex, taking his pipe out of his mouth, and staring hard at the speaker, nodded, entered the hut, and kneeling on the wooden seat, looked out of the window.

"Open the panes," said Harley, "so that you have a perfectly clear view."

Wessex slid the panes open and stared intently down into the valley.

"Do you see anything unusual in the garden?"

"Nothing," he reported.

"And now, Inspector Aylesbury."

Inspector Aylesbury stamped noisily across the little hut, and peered out, briefly.

"I can see the garden," he said.

"Can you see the sun-dial?"

"Quite clearly."

"Good. And now you, Knox."

I followed, filled with astonishment.

"Do you see the sun-dial?" asked Harley, again.

"Quite clearly."

"And beyond it?"

"Yes, I can see beyond it. I can even see its shadow lying like a black band on the path."

"And you can see the yew trees?"

"Of course."

"But nothing else? Nothing unusual?"

"Nothing."

"Very well," said Harley, tersely. "And now, gentlemen, we take to the rough ground, proceeding due east. Will you be good enough to follow?"

Walking around the hut he found an opening in the hedge, and scrambled down into the place where rank grass grew and through which he and I on a previous occasion had made our way to the high road. To-night, however, he did not turn toward the high road, but proceeded along the crest of the hill.

I followed him, excited by the novelty of the proceedings. Wessex, very silent, came behind me, and Inspector Aylesbury, swearing under his breath,

waded through the long grass at the rear.

"Will you all turn your attention to the garden again, please?" cried Harley.

We all paused, looking to the right.

"Anything unusual?"

We were agreed that there was not.

"Very well," said my friend. "You will kindly note that from this point onward the formation of the ground prevents our obtaining any other view of Cray's Folly or its gardens until we reach the path to the valley, or turn on to the high road. From a point on the latter the tower may be seen but that is all. The first part of my experiment is concluded, gentlemen. We will now return."

Giving us no opportunity for comment, he plunged on in the direction of the stream, and at a point which I regarded as unnecessarily difficult, crossed it, to the great discomfiture of the heavy Inspector Aylesbury. A few minutes later we found ourselves once more in the grounds of Cray's Folly.

Harley, evidently with a definite objective in view, led the way up the terraces, through the rhododendrons, and round the base of the tower. He crossed to the sunken garden, and at the top of the steps paused.

"Be good enough to regard the sun-dial from this point," he directed.

Even as he spoke, I caught my breath, and I heard Aylesbury utter a sort of gasping sound.

Beyond the sun-dial and slightly to the left of it, viewed from where we stood, a faint, elfin light flickered, at a point apparently some four or five feet above the ground!

"What's this?" muttered Wessex.

"Follow again, gentlemen," said Harley quietly.

He led the way down to the garden and along the path to the sun-dial. This he passed, pausing immediately in front of the yew tree in which I knew the bullet to be embedded.

He did not speak, but, extending his finger, pointed.

A piece of candle, some four inches long, was attached by means of a nail to the bark of the tree, so that its flame burned immediately in front of the bullet embedded there!

For perhaps ten seconds no one spoke; indeed I think no one moved. Then:

"Good God!" murmured Wessex. "You have done some clever things to my knowledge, Mr. Harley, but this crowns them all."

"Clever things!" said Inspector Aylesbury. "I think it's a lot of damned tomfoolery."

"Do you, Inspector?" asked the Scotland Yard man, quietly. "I don't. I think it has saved the life of an innocent man."

"What's that? What's that?" cried Aylesbury.

"This candle was burning here on the yew tree," explained Harley, "at the time that you looked out of the window of the hut. You could not see it. You could not see it from the crest adjoining the Guest House—the only other spot in the neighbourhood from which this garden is visible. Now, since the course of a bullet is more or less straight, and since the nature of the murdered man's wound proves that it was not deflected in any way, I submit that the one embedded in the yew tree before you could not possibly have been fired from the Guest House! The second part of my experiment, gentlemen, will be designed to prove from whence it *was* fired."

XXXIII. PAUL HARLEY'S EXPERIMENT CONCLUDED

Up to the very moment that Paul Harley, who had withdrawn, rejoined us in the garden, Inspector Aylesbury had not grasped the significance of that candle burning upon the yew tree. He continued to stare at it as if hypnotized, and when my friend re-appeared, carrying a long ash staff and a sheet of cardboard, I could have laughed to witness the expression upon the Inspector's face, had I not been too deeply impressed with that which underlay this strange business.

Wessex, on the other hand, was watching my friend eagerly, as an earnest student in the class-room might watch a demonstration by some celebrated lecturer.

"You will notice," said Paul Harley, "that I have had a number of boards laid down upon the ground yonder, near the sun-dial. They cover a spot where the turf has worn very thin. Now, this garden, because of its sunken position, is naturally damp. Perhaps, Wessex, you would take up these planks for me."

Inspector Wessex obeyed, and Harley, laying the ash stick and cardboard upon the ground, directed the ray of an electric torch upon the spot uncovered.

"The footprints of Colonel Menendez!" he explained. "Here he turned from the tiled path. He advanced three paces in the direction of the sun-dial, you observe, then stood still, facing we may suppose, since this is the indication of the prints, in a southerly direction."

"Straight toward the Guest House," muttered Inspector Aylesbury.

"Roughly," corrected Harley. "He was fronting in that direction, certainly, but his head may have been turned either to the right or to the left. You observe from the great depth of the toe-marks that on this spot he actually fell. Then, here"—he moved the light—"is the impression of his knee, and here again—"

He shone the white ray upon a discoloured patch of grass, and then returned the lamp to his pocket.

"I am going to make a hole in the turf," he continued, "directly between these two footprints, which seem to indicate that the Colonel was standing in the military position of attention at the moment that he met his death."

With the end of the ash stick, which was pointed, he proceeded to do this.

"Colonel Menendez," he went on, "stood rather over six feet in his shoes. The stick which now stands upright in the turf measures six feet, from the chalk mark up to which I have buried it to the slot which I have cut in the top. Into this slot I now wedge my sheet of cardboard."

As he placed the sheet of cardboard in the slot which he had indicated, I saw that a round hole was cut in it some six inches in diameter. We watched these proceedings in silence, then:

"If you will allow me to adjust the candle, gentlemen," said Harley, "which has burned a little too low for my purpose, I shall proceed to the second part of this experiment."

He walked up to the yew tree, and by means of bending the nail upward he raised the flame of the candle level with the base of the embedded bullet.

"By heavens!" cried Wessex, suddenly divining the object of these proceedings, "Mr. Harley, this is genius!"

"Thank you, Wessex," Harley replied, quietly, but nevertheless he was unable to hide his gratification. "You see my point?"

"Certainly."

"In ten minutes we shall know the truth."

"Oh, I see," muttered Inspector Aylesbury; "we shall know the truth, eh? If you ask me the truth, it's this, that we are a set of lunatics."

"My dear Inspector Aylesbury," said Harley, good humouredly, "surely you have grasped the lesson of experiment number one?"

"Well," admitted the other, "it's funny, certainly. I mean, it wants a lot of explaining, but I can't say I'm convinced."

"That's a pity," murmured Wessex, "because I am."

"You see, Inspector," Harley continued, patiently, "the body of Colonel Menendez as it lay formed a straight line between the sun-dial and the hut in the garden of the Guest House. That is to say: a line drawn from the window of the hut to the sun-dial must have passed through the body. Very well. Such an imaginary line, if continued *beyond* the sun-dial, would have terminated near the base of the *seventh yew* tree. Accordingly, I naturally looked for the *bullet* there. It was not there. But I found it, as you know, in the ninth tree. Therefore, the shot could not possibly have been fired from the Guest House, because the spot in the ninth yew where the bullet had lodged is not visible from the Guest House."

Inspector Aylesbury removed his cap and scratched his head vigorously.

"In order that we may avoid waste of valuable time," said Harley, finally, "let us take a hasty observation from here. As a matter of fact, I have done so already, as nearly as was possible, without employing this rough apparatus."

He knelt down beside the yew tree, lowering his head so that the candlelight shone upon the brown, eager face, and looked upward, over the top of the sun-dial and through the hole in the cardboard.

"Yes," he muttered, a note of rising excitement in his voice. "As I thought, as I thought. Come, gentlemen, let us hurry."

He walked rapidly out of the garden, and up the steps, whilst we followed dumb with wonder—or such at any rate was the cause of my own silence.

In the hall Pedro was standing, a bunch of keys in his hand, and evidently expecting Harley.

"Will you take us by the shortest way to the tower stairs?" my friend directed.

"Yes, sir."

Doubting, wondering, scarcely knowing whether to be fearful or jubilant, I followed, along a carpeted corridor, and thence, a heavy, oaken door being unlocked, across a dusty and deserted apartment apparently intended for a drawing room. From this, through a second doorway we were led into a small, square, unfurnished room, which I knew must be situated in the base of the tower. Yet a third door was unlocked, and:

"Here is the stair, sir," said Pedro.

In Indian file we mounted to the first floor, to find ourselves in a second, identical room, also stripped of furniture and decorations. Harley barely glanced out of the northern window, shook his head, and:

"Next floor, Pedro," he directed.

Up we went, our footsteps arousing a cloud of dust from the uncarpeted stairs, and the sound of our movements echoing in hollow fashion around the deserted rooms.

Gaining the next floor, Harley, unable any longer to conceal his excitement, ran to the north window, looked out, and:

"Gentlemen," he said, "my experiment is complete!"

He turned, his back to the window, and faced us in the dusk of the room.

"Assuming the ash stick to represent the upright body of Colonel Menendez," he continued, "and the sheet of cardboard to represent his head, the hole which I have cut in it corresponds fairly nearly to the position of his forehead. Further assuming the bullet to have illustrated Euclid's definition of a straight line, such a line, *followed back* from the yew tree to the spot where the rifle rested, would pass through the hole in the cardboard! In other words, there is only one place from which it is possible to see the flame of the candle *through the hole in the cardboard*: the place where the rifle rested! Stand here in the left-hand angle of the window and stoop down! Will you come first, Knox?"

I stepped across the room, bent down, and stared out of the window, across the Tudor garden. Plainly I could see the sun-dial with the ash stick planted before it. I could see the piece of cardboard which surmounted it—and, through the hole cut in the cardboard, I could see the feeble flame of the candle nailed to the ninth yew tree!

I stood upright, knowing that I had grown pale, and conscious of a moist sensation upon my forehead.

"Merciful God!" I said in a hollow voice. "It was from *this window* that the shot was fired which killed him!"

XXXIV. THE CREEPING SICKNESS

From the ensuing consultation in the library we did not rise until close upon midnight. To the turbid intelligence of Inspector Aylesbury the fact by this time had penetrated that Colin Camber was innocent, that he was the victim of a frame-up, and that Colonel Juan Menendez had been shot from a window of his own house.

By a process of lucid reasoning which must have convinced a junior schoolboy, Paul Harley, there in the big library, with its garish bookcases and its Moorish ornaments, had eliminated every member of the household from the list of suspects. His concluding words, I remember, were as follows:

"Of the known occupants of Cray's Folly on the night of the tragedy we now find ourselves reduced to four, any one of whom, from the point of view of an impartial critic uninfluenced by personal character, question, or motive, or any consideration other than that of physical possibility, might have shot Colonel Menendez. They are, firstly: Myself.

"In order to believe me guilty, it would be necessary to discount the evidence of Knox, who saw me on the gravel path below at the time that the shot was fired from the tower window.

"Secondly: Knox; whose guilt, equally, could only be assumed by means of eliminating *my* evidence, since I saw him at the window of my room at the time that the shot was fired.

"Thirdly: Madame de Stämer. Regarding this suspect, in the first place she could not have gained access to the tower room without assistance, and in the second place she was so passionately devoted to the late Colonel Menendez that Dr. Rolleston is of opinion that her reason may remain permanently impaired by the shock of his death. Fourthly and lastly: Miss Val Beverley."

Over my own feelings, as he had uttered the girl's name, I must pass in silence.

"Miss Val Beverley is the only one of the four suspects who is not in a position to establish a sound alibi so far as I can see at the moment; but in this case entire absence of motive renders the suspicion absurd. Having dealt with the *known* occupants, I shall not touch upon the possibility that some stranger had gained access to the house. This opens up a province of speculation which we must explore at greater leisure, for it would be profitless to attempt such an exploration now."

Thus the gathering had broken up, Inspector Aylesbury returning to Market Hilton to make his report and to release Colin Camber and Ah Tsong, and Wessex to seek his quarters at the Lavender Arms.

I remember that having seen them off, Harley and I stood in the hall, staring at one another in a very odd way, and so we stood when Val Beverley came quietly from Madame de Stämer's room and spoke to us.

"Pedro has told me what you have done, Mr. Harley," she said in a low voice. "Oh, thank God you have cleared him. But what, in Heaven's name, does your new discovery mean?"

"You may well ask," Harley answered, grimly. "If my first task was a hard one, that which remains before me looks more nearly hopeless than anything I have ever been called upon to attempt."

"It is horrible, it is horrible," said the girl, shudderingly. "Oh, Mr. Knox," she turned to me, "I have felt all along that there was some stranger in the house——"

"You have told me so."

"Conundrums! Conundrums!" muttered Harley, irritably. "Where am I to begin, upon what am I to erect any feasible theory?" He turned abruptly to Val Beverley. "Does Madame de Stämer know?"

"Yes," she answered, nodding her head; "and hearing the others depart, she asked me to tell you that sleep is impossible until you have personally given her the details of your discovery."

"She wishes to see me?" asked Harley, eagerly.

"She insists upon seeing you," replied the girl, "and also requests Mr. Knox to visit her." She paused, biting her lip. "Madame's manner is very, very odd. Dr. Rolleston cannot understand her at all. I expect he has told you? She has been sitting there for hours and hours, writing."

"Writing?" exclaimed Harley. "Letters?"

"I don't know what she has been writing," confessed Val Beverley. "She declines to tell me, or to show me what she has written. But there is quite a little stack of manuscript upon the table beside her bed. Won't you come in?"

I could see that she was more troubled than she cared to confess, and I wondered if Dr. Rolleston's unpleasant suspicions might have solid foundation, and if the loss of her cousin had affected Madame de Stämer's brain.

Presently, then, ushered by Val Beverley, I found myself once more in the violet and silver room in which on that great bed of state Madame reclined amid silken pillows. Her art never deserted her, not even in moments of ultimate stress, and that she had prepared herself for this interview was evident enough.

I had thought previously that one night of horror had added five years to her apparent age. I thought now that she looked radiantly beautiful. That expression in her eyes, which I knew I must forevermore associate with the memory of the dying tigress, had faded entirely. They remained still, as of old, but to-night they were velvety soft. The lips were relaxed in a smile of tenderness. I observed, with surprise, that she wore much jewelery, and upon her white bosom gleamed the famous rope of pearls which I knew her to treasure above almost anything in her possession.

Again the fear touched me coldly that much sorrow had made her mad. But at her very first word of greeting I was immediately reassured.

"Ah, my friend," she said, as I entered, a caressing note in her deep, vibrant voice, "you have great news, they tell me? Mr. Harley, I was afraid that you had deserted me, sir. If you had done so I should have been very angry with you. Set the two armchairs here on my right, Val, dear, and sit close beside me."

Then, as we seated ourselves:

"You are not smoking, my friends," she continued, "and I know that you are both so fond of a smoke."

Paul Harley excused himself but I accepted a cigarette which Val Beverley offered me from a silver box on the table, and presently:

"I am here, like a prisoner of the Bastille," declared Madame, shrugging her shoulders, "where only echoes reach me. Now, Mr. Harley, tell me of this wonderful discovery of yours."

Harley inclined his head gravely, and in that succinct fashion which he had at command acquainted Madame with the result of his two experiments. As he completed the account:

"Ah," she sighed, and lay back upon her pillows, "so to-night he is again a free man, the poor Colin Camber. And his wife is happy once more?"

"Thank God," I murmured. "Her sorrow was pathetic."

"Only the pure in heart can thank God," said Madame, strangely, "but I, too, am glad. I have written, here"—she pointed to a little heap of violet note-paper upon a table placed at the opposite side of the bed—"how glad I am."

Harley and I stared vaguely across at the table. I saw Val Beverley glancing uneasily in the same direction. Save for the writing materials and little heap of manuscript, it held only a cup and saucer, a few sandwiches, and a medicine bottle containing the prescription which Dr. Rolleston had made up for the invalid.

"I am curious to know what you have written, Madame," declared Harley.

"Yes, you are curious?" she said. "Very well, then, I will tell you, and afterward you may read if you wish." She turned to me. "You, my friend," she whispered, and reaching over she laid her jewelled hand upon my arm, "you have spoken with Ysola de Valera this afternoon, they tell me?"

"With Mrs. Camber?" I asked, startled. "Yes, that is true."

"Ah, Mrs. Camber," murmured Madame. "I knew her as Ysola de Valera. She is beautiful, in her golden doll way. You think so?" Then, ere I had time to reply: "She told you, I suppose, eh?"

"She told me," I replied with a certain embarrassment, "that she had met you some years ago in Cuba."

"Ah, yes, although *I* told the fat Inspector it was not so. How we lie, we women! And of course she told you in what relation I stood to Juan Menendez?"

"She did not, Madame de Stämer."

"No-no? Well, it was nice of her. No matter. *I* will tell you. I was his mistress."

She spoke without bravado, but quite without shame, seeming to glory in the statement.

"I met him in Paris," she continued, half closing her eyes. "I was staying at the house of my sister, and my sister, you understand, was married to

Juan's cousin. That is how we met. I was married. Yes, it is true. But in France our parents find our husbands and our lovers find our hearts. Yet sometimes these marriages are happy. To me this good thing had not happened, and in the moment when Juan's hand touched mine a living fire entered into my heart and it has been burning ever since; burning-burning, always till I die.

"Very well, I am a shameless woman, yes. But I have lived, and I have loved, and I am content. I went with him to Cuba, and from Cuba to another island where he had estates, and the name of which I shall not pronounce, because it hurts me so, even yet. There he set eyes upon Ysola de Valera, the daughter of his manager, and, pouf!"

She shrugged and snapped her fingers.

"He was like that, you understand? I knew it well. They did not call him Devil Menendez for nothing. There was a scene, a dreadful scene, and after that another, and yet a third. I have pride. If I had seemed to forget it, still it was there. I left him, and went back to France. I tried to forget. I entered upon works of charity for the soldiers at a time when others were becoming tired. I spent a great part of my fortune upon establishing a hospital, and this child"—she threw her arm around Val Beverley—"worked with me night and day. I think I wanted to die. Often I tried to die. Did I not, dear?"

"You did, Madame," said the girl in a very low voice.

"Twice I was arrested in the French lines, where I had crept dressed like a *poilu*, from where I shot down many a Prussian. Is it not so?"

"It is true," answered the girl, nodding her head.

"They caught me and arrested me," said Madame, with a sort of triumph. "If it had been the British"—she raised her hand in that Bernhardt gesture —"with me it would have gone hard. But in France a woman's smile goes farther than in England. I had had my fun. They called me 'good comrade!' Perhaps I paid with a kiss. What does it matter? But they heard of me, those Prussian dogs. They knew and could not forgive. How often did they come over to bomb us, Val, dear?"

"Oh, many, many times," said the girl, shudderingly.

"And at last they succeeded," added Madame, bitterly. "God! the black villains! Let me not think of it."

She clenched her hands and closed her eyes entirely, but presently resumed again:

"If they had killed me I should have been glad, but they only made of me a cripple. M. de Stämer had been killed a few weeks before this. I am sorry I forgot to mention it. I was a widow. And when after this catastrophe I could be moved, I went to a little villa belonging to my husband at Nice, to gain strength, and this child came with me, like a ray of sunshine.

"Here, to wake the fire in my heart, came Juan, deserted, broken, wounded in soul, but most of all in pride, in that evil pride which belongs to his race, which is so different from the pride of France, but for which all the same I could never hate him.

"Ysola de Valera had run away from his great house in Cuba. Yes! A woman had dared to leave him, the man who had left so many women. To me it was pathetic. I was sorry for him. He had been searching the world for her. He loved this little golden-haired girl as he had never loved me. But to me he came with his broken heart, and I"—her voice trembled—"I took him back. He still cared for me, you understand. Ah!" She laughed. "I am not a woman who is lightly forgotten. But the great passion that burned in his Spanish soul was revenge.

"He was a broken man not only in mind, but in body. Let me tell you. In that island which I have not named there is a horrible disease called by the natives the Creeping Sickness. It is supposed to come from a poisonous place named the Black Belt, and a part of this Black Belt is near, too near, to the hacienda in which Juan sometimes lived."

Paul Harley started and glanced at me significantly.

"They think, those simple negroes, that it is witchcraft, Voodoo, the work of the Obeah man. It is of two kinds, rapid and slow. Those who suffer from the first kind just decline and decline and die in great agony. Others recover, or seem to do so. It is, I suppose, a matter of constitution. Juan had had this sickness and had recovered, or so the doctors said, but, ah!"

She lay back, shaking her finger characteristically.

"In one year, in two, three, a swift pain comes, like a needle, you understand? Perhaps in the foot, in the hand, in the arm. It is exquisite, deathly, while it lasts, but it only lasts for a few moments. It is agony. And then it goes, leaving nothing to show what has caused it. But, my friends, it is a death warning!

"If it comes here"—she raised one delicate white hand—"you may have five years to live; if in the foot, ten, or more. But"—she sank her voice

dramatically—"the nearer it is to the heart, the less are the days that remain to you of life."

"You mean that it recurs?" asked Harley.

"Perhaps in a week, perhaps not for another year, it comes again, that quick agony. This time in the shoulder, in the knee. It is the second warning. Three times it may come, four times, but at last"—she laid her hand upon her breast—"it comes here, in the heart, and all is finished."

She paused as if exhausted, closing her eyes again, whilst we three who listened looked at one another in an awestricken silence, until the vibrant voice resumed:

"There is only one man in Europe who understands this thing, this Creeping Sickness. He is a Frenchman who lives in Paris. To him Juan had been, and he had told him, this clever man, 'If you are very quiet and do not exert yourself, and only take as much exercise as is necessary for your general health, you have one year to live—'"

"My God!" groaned Harley.

"Yes, such was the verdict. And there is no cure. The poor sufferer must wait and wait, always wait, for that sudden pang, not knowing if it will come in his heart and be the finish. Yes. This living death, then, and revenge, were the things ruling Juan's life at the time of which I tell you. He had traced Ysola de Valera to England. A chance remark in a London hotel had told him that a Chinaman had been seen in a Surrey village and of course had caused much silly chatter. He enquired at once, and he found out that Colin Camber, the man who had taken Ysola from him, was living with her at the Guest House, here, on the hill. How shall I tell you the rest?"

"Merciful Heaven!" exclaimed Harley, his glance set upon her, with a sort of horror in his gray eyes, "I think I can guess."

She turned to him rapidly.

"M. Harley," she said, "you are a clever man. I believe you are a genius. And I have the strength to tell you because I am happy to-night. Because of his great wealth Juan succeeded in buying Cray's Folly from Sir James Appleton to whom it belonged. He told everybody he leased it, but really he bought it. He paid him more than twice its value, and so obtained possession.

"But the plan was not yet complete, although it had taken form in that clever, wicked brain of his. Oh! I could tell you stories of the Menendez,

and of the things they have done for love and revenge, which even you, who know much of life, would doubt, I think. Yes, you would not believe. But to continue. Shall I tell you upon what terms he had returned to me, eh? I will. Once more he would suffer that pang of death in life, for he had courage, ah! such great courage, and then, when the waiting for the next grew more than even his fearless heart could bear, I, who also had courage, and who loved him, should——" She paused, "Do you understand?"

Harley nodded dumbly, and suddenly I found Val Beverley's little fingers twined about mine.

"I agreed," continued the deep voice. "It was a boon which I, too, would have asked from one who loved me. But to die, knowing another cherished the woman who had been torn from him, was an impossibility for Juan Menendez. What he had schemed to do at first I never knew. But presently, because of our situation here, and because of that which he had asked of me, it came, the great plan.

"On the night he told me, a night I shall never forget, I drew back in horror from him—I, Marie de Stämer, who thought I knew the blackest that was in him. I shrank. And because of that scene it came to him again in the early morning—the moment of agony, the needle pain, here, low down in his left breast.

"He pleaded with me to do the wicked thing that he had planned, and because I dared not refuse, knowing he might die at my feet, I consented. But, my friends, I had my own plan, too, of which he knew nothing. On the next day he went to Paris, and was told he had two months to live, with great, such great care, but perhaps only a week, a day, if he should permit his hot passions to inflame that threatened heart. Very well.

"I said yes, yes, to all that he suggested, and he began to lay the trail—the trail to lead to his enemy. It was his hobby, this vengeance. He was like a big, cruel boy. It was he, himself, Juan Menendez, who broke into Cray's Folly. It was he who nailed the bat wing to the door. It was he who bought two rifles of a kind of which so many millions were made during the war that anybody might possess one. And it was he who concealed the first of these, one cartridge discharged, under the floor of the hut in the garden of the Guest House. The other, which was to be used, he placed—"

"In the shutter-case of one of the tower rooms," continued Paul Harley. "I know! I found it there to-night."

"What?" I asked, "you found it, Harley?"

"I returned to look for it," he said. "At the present moment it is upstairs in my room."

"Ah, M. Harley," exclaimed Madame, smiling at him radiantly, "I love your genius. Then it was," she continued, "that he thought himself ready, ready for revenge and ready for death. He summoned you, M. Harley, to be an expert witness. He placed with you evidence which could not fail to lead to the arrest of M. Camber. Very well. I allowed him to do all this. His courage, *mon Dieu*, how I worshipped his courage!

"At night, when everyone slept, and he could drop the mask, I have seen what he suffered. I have begged him, begged him upon my knees, to allow me to end it then and there; to forget his dream of revenge, to die without this last stain upon his soul. But he, expecting at any hour, at any minute, to know again the agony which cannot be described, which is unlike any other suffered by the flesh—refused, refused! And I"—she raised her eyes ecstatically—"I have worshipped this courage of his, although it was evil—bad.

"The full moon gives the best light, and so he planned it for the night of the full moon. But on the night before, because of some scene which he had with you, M. Harley, nearly I thought his plans would come to nothing. Nearly I thought the last act of love which he asked of me would never be performed. He sat there, up in the little room which he liked best, the coldness upon him which always came before the pang, waiting, waiting, a deathly dew on his forehead, for the end; and I, I who loved him better than life, watched him. And, so Fate willed it, the pang never came."

"You watched him?" I whispered.

Harley turned to me slowly.

"Don't you understand, Knox?" he said, in a voice curiously unlike his own.

"Ah, my friend," Madame de Stämer laid her hand upon my arm with that caressing gesture which I knew, "you do understand, don't you? The power to use my limbs returned to me during the last week that I lived in Nice."

She bent forward and raised her face, in an almost agonized appeal to Val Beverley.

"My dear, my dear," she said, "forgive me, forgive me! But I loved him so. One day, I think"—her glance sought my face—"you will know. Then you will forgive."

"Oh, Madame, Madame," whispered the girl, and began to sob silently.

"Is it enough?" asked Madame de Stämer, raising her head, and looking defiantly at Paul Harley. "Last night, you, M. Harley, who have genius, nearly brought it all to nothing. You passed the door in the shrubbery just when Juan was preparing to go out. I was watching from the window above. Then, when you had gone, he came out—smoking his last cigarette.

"I went to my place, entering the tower room by the door from that corridor. I opened the window. It had been carefully oiled. It was soundless. I was cold as one already dead, but love made me strong. I had seen him suffer. I took the rifle from its hiding-place, the heavy rifle which so few women could use. It was no heavier than some which I had used before, and to good purpose."

Again she paused, and I saw her lips trembling. Before my mind's eye the picture arose which I had seen from Harley's window, the picture of Colonel Juan Menendez walking in the moonlight along the path to the sun-dial, with halting steps, with clenched fists, but upright as a soldier on parade. Walking on, dauntlessly, to his execution. Out of a sort of haze, which seemed to obscure both sight and hearing, I heard Madame speaking again.

"He turned his head toward me. He threw me a kiss—and I fired. Did you think a woman lived who could perform such a deed, eh? If you did not think so, it is because you have never looked into the eyes of one who loved with her body, her mind, and with her soul. I think, yes, I think I went mad. The rifle I remember I replaced. But I remember no more. Ah!"

She sighed in a resigned, weary way, untwining her arm from about Val Beverley, and falling back upon her pillows.

"It is all written here," she said; "every word of it, my friends, and signed at the bottom. I am a murderess, but it was a merciful deed. You see, I had a plan of which Juan knew nothing. This was my plan." She pointed to the heap of manuscript. "I would give him relief from his agonies, yes. For although he was an evil man, I loved him better than life. I would let him die happy, thinking his revenge complete. But others to suffer? No, no! a thousand times no! Ah, I am so tired."

She took up the little medicine bottle, poured its contents into the glass, and emptied it at a draught.

Paul Harley, as though galvanized, sprang to his feet. "My God!" he cried, huskily, "Stop her, stop her!" Val Beverley, now desperately white, clutched at me with quivering fingers, her agonized glance set upon the smiling face of Madame de Stämer.

"No fuss, dear friends," said Madame, gently, "no trouble, no nasty stomach-pumps; for it is useless. I shall just fall asleep in a few moments now, and when I wake Juan will be with me."

Her face was radiant. It became lighted up magically. I knew in that grim hour what a beautiful woman Madame de Stämer must have been. She rested her hand upon Val Beverley's head, and looked at me with her strange, still eyes.

"Be good to her, my friend," she whispered. "She is English, but not cold like some. She, too, can love."

She closed her eyes and dropped back upon her pillows for the last time.

XXXV. AN AFTERWORD

This shall be a brief afterword, for I have little else to say. As Madame had predicted, all antidotes and restoratives were of no avail. She had taken enough of some drug which she had evidently had in her possession for this very purpose to ensure that there should be no awakening, and although Dr. Rolleston was on the spot within half an hour, Madame de Stämer was already past human aid.

There are perhaps one or two details which may be of interest. For instance, as a result of the post-mortem examination of Colonel Menendez, no trace of disease was discovered in any of the organs, but from information supplied by his solicitors, Harley succeeded in tracing the Paris specialist to whom Madame de Stämer had referred; and he confirmed her statement in every particular. The disease, to which he gave some name which I have forgotten, was untraceable, he declared, by any means thus far known to science.

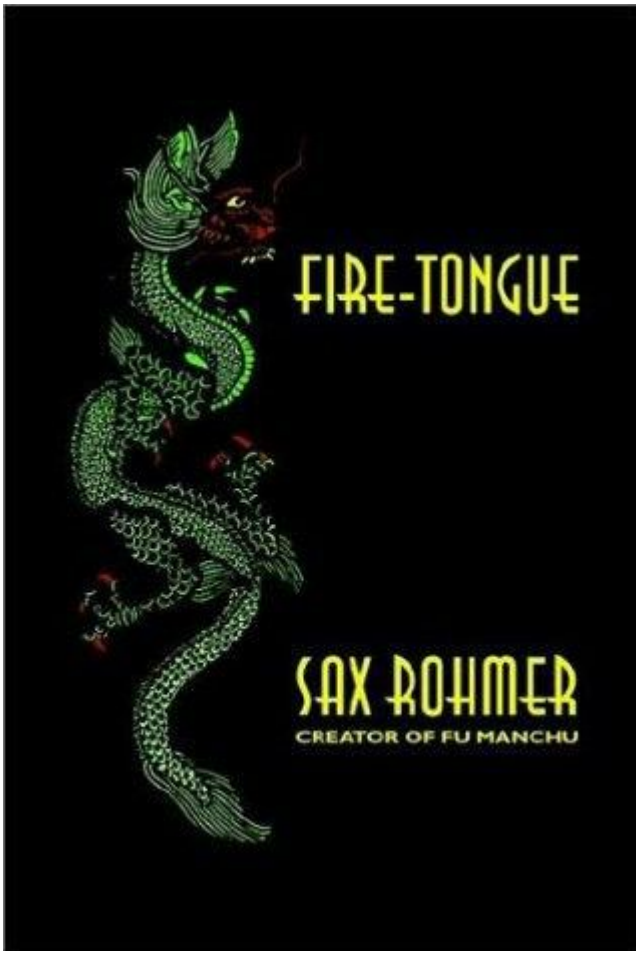
As we had anticipated, the bulk of Colonel Don Juan's wealth he had bequeathed to Madame de Stämer, and she in turn had provided that all of which she might die possessed should be divided between certain charities and Val Beverley.

I thus found myself at the time when all these legal processes terminated engaged to marry a girl as wealthy as she was beautiful. Therefore, except for the many grim memories which it had left with me, nothing but personal good fortune resulted from my sojourn at Cray's Folly, beneath the shadow of that Bat Wing which had had no existence outside the cunning imagination of Colonel Juan Menendez.

THE END

Fire-Tongue

First Published 1921



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XXXIV. Nicol Brinn's Story (concluded)

I. A CLIENT FOR PAUL HARLEY

Some of Paul Harley's most interesting cases were brought to his notice in an almost accidental way. Although he closed his office in Chancery Lane sharply at the hour of six, the hour of six by no means marked the end of his business day. His work was practically ceaseless. But even in times of leisure, at the club or theatre, fate would sometimes cast in his path the first slender thread which was ultimately to lead him into some unsuspected labyrinth, perhaps in the underworld of London, perhaps in a city of the Far East.

His investigation of the case of the man with the shaven skull afforded an instance of this, and even more notable was his first meeting with Major Jack Ragstaff of the Cavalry Club, a meeting which took place after the office had been closed, but which led to the unmasking of perhaps the most cunning murderer in the annals of crime.

One summer's evening when the little clock upon his table was rapidly approaching the much-desired hour, Harley lay back in his chair and stared meditatively across his private office in the direction of a large and very handsome Burmese cabinet, which seemed strangely out of place amid the filing drawers, bookshelves, and other usual impedimenta of a professional man. A peculiarly uninteresting week was drawing to a close, and he was wondering if this betokened a decreased activity in the higher criminal circles, or whether it was merely one of those usual quiescent periods which characterize every form of warfare.

Paul Harley, although the fact was unknown to the general public, occupied something of the position of an unofficial field marshal of the forces arrayed against evildoers. Throughout the war he had undertaken confidential work of the highest importance, especially in regard to the Near East, with which he was intimately acquainted. A member of the English bar, and the last court of appeal to which Home Office and Foreign Office alike came in troubled times, the brass plate upon the door of his unassuming premises in Chancery Lane conveyed little or nothing to the uninitiated.

The man himself, with his tropical bronze and air of eager vitality, must have told the most careless observer that he stood in the presence of an extraordinary personality. He was slightly gray at the temples in these days, but young in mind and body, physically fit, and possessed of an intellectual keenness which had forced recognition from two hemispheres. His office was part of an old city residence, and his chambers adjoined his workroom, so that now, noting that his table clock registered the hour of six, he pressed a bell which summoned Innes, his confidential secretary.

"Well, Innes," said Harley, looking around, "another uneventful day."

"Very uneventful, Mr. Harley. About a month of this and you will have to resume practice at the bar."

Paul Harley laughed.

"Not a bit likely, Innes," he replied. "No more briefs for me. I shall retire to Norfolk and devote my declining years to fishing."

"I don't know that fishing would entirely satisfy me," said Innes.

"It would more than satisfy me," returned Harley. "But every man to his own ambition. Well, there is no occasion to wait; you might as well get along. But what's that you've got in your hand?"

"Well," replied Innes, laying a card upon the table, "I was just coming in with it when you rang."

Paul Harley glanced at the card.

"Sir Charles Abingdon," he read aloud, staring reflectively at his secretary. "That is the osteologist?"

"Yes," answered Innes, "but I fancy he has retired from practice."

"Ah," murmured Harley, "I wonder what he wants. I suppose I had better see him, as I fancy that he and I met casually some years ago in India. Ask him to come in, will you?"

Innes retiring, there presently entered a distinguished-looking, elderly gentleman upon whose florid face rested an expression not unlike that of embarrassment.

"Mr. Harley," he began, "I feel somewhat ill at ease in encroaching upon your time, for I am by no means sure that my case comes within your particular province."

"Sit down, Sir Charles," said Harley with quiet geniality. "Officially, my working day is ended; but if nothing comes of your visit beyond a chat it will have been very welcome. Calcutta, was it not, where we last met?"

"It was," replied Sir Charles, placing his hat and cane upon the table and sitting down rather wearily in a big leather armchair which Harley had pushed forward. "If I presume upon so slight an acquaintance, I am sorry, but I must confess that only the fact of having met you socially encouraged me to make this visit."

He raised his eyes to Harley's face and gazed at him with that peculiarly searching look which belongs to members of his profession; but mingled with it was an expression of almost pathetic appeal, of appeal for understanding, for sympathy of some kind.

"Go on, Sir Charles," said Harley. He pushed forward a box of cigars. "Will you smoke?"

"Thanks, no," was the answer.

Slr Charles evidently was oppressed by some secret trouble, thus Harley mused silently, as, taking out a tin of tobacco from a cabinet beside him, he began in leisurely manner to load a briar. In this he desired to convey that he treated the visit as that of a friend, and also, since business was over, that Sir Charles might without scruple speak at length and at leisure of whatever matters had brought him there.

"Very well, then," began the surgeon; "I am painfully conscious that the facts which I am in a position to lay before you are very scanty and unsatisfactory."

Paul Harley nodded encouragingly.

"If this were not so," he explained, "you would have no occasion to apply to me, Sir Charles. It is my business to look for facts. Naturally, I do not expect my clients to supply them."

Sir Charles slowly nodded his head, and seemed in some measure to recover confidence.

"Briefly, then," he said, "I believe my life is in danger."

"You mean that there is someone who desires your death?"

"I do."

"H'm," said Harley, replacing the tin in the cupboard and striking a match. "Even if the facts are scanty, no doubt you have fairly substantial grounds for such a suspicion?"

"I cannot say that they are substantial, Mr. Harley. They are rather more circumstantial. Frankly, I have forced myself to come here, and now that I

have intruded upon your privacy, I realize my difficulties more keenly than ever."

The expression of embarrassment upon the speaker's face had grown intense; and now he paused, bending forward in his chair. He seemed in his glance to appeal for patience on the part of his hearer, and Harley, lighting his pipe, nodded in understanding fashion. He was the last man in the world to jump to conclusions. He had learned by bitter experience that lightly to dismiss such cases as this of Sir Charles as coming within the province of delusion, was sometimes tantamount to refusing aid to a man in deadly peril.

"You are naturally anxious for the particulars," Sir Charles presently resumed. "They bear, I regret to say, a close resemblance to the symptoms of a well-known form of hallucination. In short, with one exception, they may practically all be classed under the head of surveillance."

"Surveillance," said Paul Harley. "You mean that you are more or less constantly followed?"

"I do."

"And what is your impression of this follower?"

"A very hazy one. To-night, as I came to your office, I have every reason to believe that someone followed me in a taxicab."

"You came in a car?"

"I did."

"And a cab followed you the whole way?"

"Practically the whole way, except that as my chauffeur turned into Chancery Lane, the cab stopped at the corner of Fleet Street."

"Your idea is that your pursuer followed on foot from this point?"

"Such was my impression."

"H'm, quite impossible. And is this sort of thing constant, Sir Charles?"

"It has been for some time past."

"Anything else?"

"One very notable thing, Mr. Harley. I was actually assaulted less than a week ago within sight of my own house."

"Indeed! Tell me of this." Paul Harley became aware of an awakening curiosity. Sir Charles Abingdon was not the type of man who is lightly intimidated.

"I had been to visit a friend in the neighbourhood," Sir Charles continued, "whom I am at present attending professionally, although I am actually retired. I was returning across the square, close to midnight, when, fortunately for myself, I detected the sound of light, pattering footsteps immediately behind me. The place was quite deserted at that hour, and although I was so near home, the worst would have happened, I fear, if my sense of hearing had been less acute. I turned in the very instant that a man was about to spring upon me from behind. He was holding in his hand what looked like a large silk handkerchief. This encounter took place in the shadow of some trees, and beyond the fact that my assailant was a small man, I could form no impression of his identity."

"What did you do?"

"I turned and struck out with my stick."

"And then?"

"Then he made no attempt to contest the issue, but simply ran swiftly off, always keeping in the shadows of the trees."

"Very strange," murmured Harley. "Do you think he had meant to drug you?"

"Maybe," replied Sir Charles. "The handkerchief was perhaps saturated with some drug, or he may even have designed to attempt to strangle me."

"And you formed absolutely no impression of the man?"

"None whatever, Mr. Harley. When you see the spot at which the encounter took place, if you care to do so, you will recognize the difficulties. It is perfectly dark there after nightfall."

"H'm," mused Harley. "A very alarming occurrence, Sir Charles. It must have shaken you very badly. But we must not overlook the possibility that this may have been an ordinary footpad."

"His methods were scarcely those of a footpad," murmured Sir Charles.

"I quite agree," said Harley. "They were rather Oriental, if I may say so."

Sir Charles Abingdon started. "Oriental!" he whispered. "Yes, you are right."

"Does this suggest a train of thought?" prompted Harley.

Sir Charles Abingdon cleared his throat nervously. "It does, Mr. Harley," he admitted, "but a very confusing train of thought. It leads me to a point which I must mention, but which concerns a very well-known man. Before

I proceed I should like to make it clear that I do not believe for a moment that he is responsible for this unpleasant business."

Harley stared at him curiously. "Nevertheless," he said, "there must be some data in your possession which suggest to your mind that he has some connection with it."

"There are, Mr. Harley, and I should be deeply indebted if you could visit my house this evening, when I could place this evidence, if evidence it may be called, before you. I find myself in so delicate a position. If you are free I should welcome your company at dinner."

Paul Harley seemed to be reflecting.

"Of course, Sir Charles," he said, presently, "your statement is very interesting and curious, and I shall naturally make a point of going fully into the matter. But before proceeding further there are two questions I should like to ask you. The first is this: What is the name of the 'well-known' man to whom you refer? And the second: If not he then whom do you suspect of being behind all this?"

"The one matter is so hopelessly involved in the other," he finally replied, "that although I came here prepared as I thought with a full statement of the case, I should welcome a further opportunity of rearranging the facts before imparting them to you. One thing, however, I have omitted to mention. It is, perhaps, of paramount importance. There was a robbery at my house less than a week ago."

"What! A robbery! Tell me: what was stolen?"

"Nothing of the slightest value, Mr. Harley, to any one but myself—or so I should have supposed." The speaker coughed nervously. "The thief had gained admittance to my private study, where there are several cases of Oriental jewellery and a number of pieces of valuable gold and silverware, all antique. At what hour he came, how he gained admittance, and how he retired, I cannot imagine. All the doors were locked as usual in the morning and nothing was disturbed."

"I don't understand, then."

"I chanced to have occasion to open my bureau which I invariably keep locked. Immediately—immediately—I perceived that my papers were disarranged. Close examination revealed the fact that a short manuscript in my own hand, which had been placed in one of the pigeonholes, was missing."

"A manuscript," murmured Harley. "Upon a technical subject?"

"Scarcely a technical subject, Mr. Harley. It was a brief account which I had vaguely contemplated publishing in one of the reviews, a brief account of a very extraordinary patient whom I once attended."

"And had you written it recently?"

"No; some years ago. But I had recently added to it. I may say that it was my purpose still further to add to it, and with this object I had actually unlocked the bureau."

"New facts respecting this patient had come into your possession?"

"They had."

"Before the date of the attack upon you?"

"Before that date, yes."

"And before surveillance of your movements began?"

"I believe so."

"May I suggest that your patient and the 'well-known man' to whom you referred are one and the same?"

"It is not so, Mr. Harley," returned Sir Charles in a tired voice. "Nothing so simple. I realize more than ever that I must arrange my facts in some sort of historical order. Therefore I ask you again: will you dine with me to-night?"

"With pleasure," replied Harley, promptly. "I have no other engagement."

That his ready acceptance had immensely relieved the troubled mind of Sir Charles was evident enough. His visitor stood up. "I am not prone to sickly fancies, Mr. Harley," he said. "But a conviction has been growing upon me for some time that I have incurred, how I cannot imagine, but that nevertheless I have incurred powerful enmity. I trust our evening's counsel may enable you, with your highly specialized faculties, to detect an explanation."

And it was instructive to note how fluently he spoke now that he found himself temporarily relieved of the necessity of confessing the source of his mysterious fears.

II. THE SIXTH SENSE

Paul Harley stepped into his car in Chancery Lane. "Drive in the direction of Hyde Park Corner," he directed the chauffeur. "Go along the Strand."

Glancing neither right nor left, he entered the car, and presently they were proceeding slowly with the stream of traffic in the Strand. "Pull up at the Savoy," he said suddenly through the tube.

The car slowed down in that little bay which contains the entrance to the hotel, and Harley stared fixedly out of the rear window, observing the occupants of all other cars and cabs which were following. For three minutes or more he remained there watching. "Go on," he directed.

Again they proceeded westward and, half-way along Piccadilly, "Stop at the Ritz," came the order.

The car pulled up before the colonnade and Harley, stepping out, dismissed the man and entered the hotel, walked through to the side entrance, and directed a porter to get him a taxicab. In this he proceeded to the house of Sir Charles Abingdon. He had been seeking to learn whether he was followed, but in none of the faces he had scrutinized had he detected any interest in himself, so that his idea that whoever was watching Sir Charles in all probability would have transferred attention to himself remained no more than an idea. For all he had gained by his tactics, Sir Charles's theory might be no more than a delusion after all.

The house of Sir Charles Abingdon was one of those small, discreet establishments, the very neatness of whose appointments inspires respect for the occupant. If anything had occurred during the journey to suggest to Harley that Sir Charles was indeed under observation by a hidden enemy, the suave British security and prosperity of his residence must have destroyed the impression.

As the cab was driven away around the corner, Harley paused for a moment, glancing about him to right and left and up at the neatly curtained windows. In the interval which had elapsed since Sir Charles's departure from his office, he had had leisure to survey the outstanding features of the story, and, discounting in his absence the pathetic sincerity of the narrator, he had formed the opinion that there was nothing in the account which was not susceptible of an ordinary prosaic explanation.

Sir Charles's hesitancy in regard to two of the questions asked had contained a hint that they might involve intimate personal matters, and Harley was prepared to learn that the source of the distinguished surgeon's dread lay in some unrevealed episode of the past. Beyond the fact that Sir Charles was a widower, he knew little or nothing of his private life; and he was far too experienced an investigator to formulate theories until all the facts were in his possession. Therefore it was with keen interest that he looked forward to the interview.

Familiarity with crime, in its many complexions, East and West, had developed in Paul Harley a sort of sixth sense. It was an evasive, fickle thing, but was nevertheless the attribute which had made him an investigator of genius. Often enough it failed him entirely. It had failed him to-night—or else no one had followed him from Chancery Lane.

It had failed him earlier in the evening when, secretly, he had watched from the office window Sir Charles's car proceeding toward the Strand. That odd, sudden chill, as of an abrupt lowering of the temperature, which often advised him of the nearness of malignant activity, had not been experienced.

Now, standing before Sir Charles's house, he "sensed" the atmosphere keenly—seeking for the note of danger.

There had been a thunder shower just before he had set out, and now, although rain had ceased, the sky remained blackly overcast and a curious, dull stillness was come. The air had a welcome freshness and the glistening pavements looked delightfully cool after the parching heat of the day. In the quiet square, no doubt, it was always restful in contrast with the more busy highroads, and in the murmur of distant traffic he found something very soothing. About him then were peace, prosperity, and security.

Yet, as he stood there, waiting—it came to him: the note of danger. Swiftly he looked to right and left, trying to penetrate the premature dusk. The whole complexion of the matter changed. Some menace intangible now, but which at any moment might become evident—lay near him. It was sheer intuition, no doubt, but it convinced him.

A moment later he had rung the bell; and as a man opened the door, showing a easy and well-lighted lobby within, the fear aura no longer touched Paul Harley. Out from the doorway came hominess and that air of security and peace which had seemed to characterize the house when

viewed from outside. The focus of menace, therefore, lay not inside the house of Sir Charles but without. It was very curious. In the next instant came a possible explanation."

"Mr. Paul Harley?" said the butler tentatively.

"Yes, I am he."

"Sir Charles is expecting you, sir. He apologizes for not being in to receive you. but he will only be absent a few minutes."

"Sir Charles has been called out?" inquired Harley as he handed hat and coat to the man.

"Yes, sir. He is attending Mr. Chester Wilson on the other side of the square, and Mr. Wilson's man rang up a few moments ago requesting Sir Charles to step across."

"I see," murmured Harley, as the butler showed him into a small but well-filled library on the left of the lobby.

Refreshments were set invitingly upon a table beside a deep lounge chair. But Harley declined the man's request to refresh himself while waiting and began aimlessly to wander about the room, apparently studying the titles of the works crowding the bookshelves. As a matter of fact, he was endeavouring to arrange certain ideas in order, and if he had been questioned on the subject it is improbable that he could have mentioned the title of one book in the library.

His mental equipment was of a character too rarely met with in the profession to which he belonged. While up to the very moment of reaching Sir Charles's house he had doubted the reality of the menace which hung over this man, the note of danger which he had sensed at the very threshold had convinced him, where more ordinary circumstantial evidence might have left him in doubt.

It was perhaps pure imagination, but experience had taught him that it was closely allied to clairvoyance.

Now upon his musing there suddenly intruded sounds of a muffled altercation. That is to say, the speakers, who were evidently in the lobby beyond the library door, spoke in low tones, perhaps in deference to the presence of a visitor. Harley was only mildly interested, but the voices had broken his train of thought, and when presently the door opened to admit a very neat but rather grim-looking old lady he started, then looked across at her with a smile.

Some of the grimness faded from the wrinkled old face, and the housekeeper, for this her appearance proclaimed her to be, bowed in a queer Victorian fashion which suggested that a curtsy might follow. One did not follow, however. "I am sure I apologize, sir," she said. "Benson did not tell me you had arrived."

"That's quite all right," said Harley, genially.

His smile held a hint of amusement, for in the comprehensive glance which the old lady cast across the library, a glance keen to detect disorder and from which no speck of dust could hope to conceal itself, there remained a trace of that grimness which he had detected at the moment of her entrance. In short, she was still bristling from a recent encounter. So much so that detecting something sympathetic in Harley's smile she availed herself of the presence of a badly arranged vase of flowers to linger and to air her grievances.

"Servants in these times," she informed him, her fingers busily rearranging the blooms, "are not what servants were in my young days."

"Unfortunately, that is so," Harley agreed.

The old lady tossed her head. "I do my best," she continued, "but that girl would not have stayed in the house for one week if I had had my way. Miss Phil is altogether too soft-hearted. Thank goodness, she goes to-morrow, though."

"You don't refer to Miss Phil?" said Harley, intentionally misunderstanding.

"Gracious goodness, no!" exclaimed the house keeper, and laughed with simple glee at the joke. "I mean Jones, the new parlourmaid. When I say new, they are all new, for none of them stay longer than three months."

"Indeed," smiled Harley, who perceived that the old lady was something of a martinet.

"Indeed, they don't. Think they are ladies nowadays. Four hours off has that girl had to-day, although she was out on Wednesday. Then she has the impudence to allow someone to ring her up here at the house; and finally I discover her upsetting the table after Benson had laid it and after I had rearranged it."

She glanced indignantly in the direction of the lobby. "Perhaps one day," she concluded, pathetically, as she walked slowly from the room, "we shall find a parlourmaid who is a parlourmaid. Good evening, sir,"

"Good evening," said Harley, quietly amused to be made the recipient of these domestic confidences.

He continued to smile for some time after the door had been closed. His former train of ideas was utterly destroyed, but for this he was not ungrateful to the housekeeper, since the outstanding disadvantage of that strange gift resembling prescience was that it sometimes blunted the purely analytical part of his mind when this should have been at its keenest. He was now prepared to listen to what Sir Charles had to say and to judge impartially of its evidential value.

Wandering from side to side of the library, he presently found himself standing still before the mantelpiece and studying a photograph in a silver frame which occupied the centre of the shelf. It was the photograph of an unusually pretty girl; that is to say, of a girl whose beauty was undeniable, but who belonged to a type widely removed from that of the ordinary good-looking Englishwoman.

The outline of her face was soft and charming, and there was a questioning look in her eyes which was alluring and challenging. Her naive expression was palpably a pose, and her slightly parted lips promised laughter. She possessed delightfully wavy hair and her neck and one shoulder, which were bare, had a Grecian purity. Harley discovered himself to be smiling at the naive lady of the photograph.

"Presumably 'Miss Phil'," he said aloud.

He removed his gaze with reluctance from the fascinating picture, and dropping into the big lounge chair, he lighted a cigarette. He had just placed the match in an ash tray when he heard Sir Charles's voice in the lobby, and a moment later Sir Charles himself came hurrying into the library. His expression was so peculiar that Harley started up immediately, perceiving that something unusual had happened.

"My dear Mr. Harley," began Sir Charles, "in the first place pray accept my apologies—"

"None are necessary," Harley interrupted. "Your excellent housekeeper has entertained me vastly."

"Good, good," muttered Sir Charles. "I am obliged to Mrs. Howett," and it was plainly to be seen that his thoughts were elsewhere. "But I have to relate a most inexplicable occurrence—inexplicable unless by some divine accident the plan has been prevented from maturing."

"What do you mean, Sir Charles?"

"I was called ten minutes ago by someone purporting to be the servant of Mr. Chester Wilson, that friend and neighbour whom I have been attending."

"So your butler informed me."

"My dear sir," cried Sir Charles, and the expression in his eyes grew almost wild, "no one in Wilson's house knew anything about the matter!"

"What! It was a ruse?"

"Palpably a ruse to get me away from home."

Harley dropped his cigarette into the ash tray beside the match, where, smouldering, it sent up a gray spiral into the air of the library. Whether because of his words or because of the presence of the man himself, the warning, intuitive finger had again touched Paul Harley. "You saw or heard nothing on your way across the square to suggest that any one having designs on your safety was watching you?"

"Nothing. I searched the shadows most particularly on my return journey, of course. For the thing cannot have been purposeless."

"I quite agree with you," said Paul Harley, quietly.

Between the promptings of that uncanny sixth sense of his and the working of the trained deductive reasoning powers, he was momentarily at a loss. Some fact, some episode, a memory, was clamouring for recognition, while the intuitive, subconscious voice whispered: "This man is in danger; protect him." What was the meaning of it all? He felt that a clue lay somewhere outside the reach of his intelligence, and a sort of anger possessed him because of his impotence to grasp it.

Sir Charles was staring at him in that curiously pathetic way which he had observed at their earlier interview in Chancery Large. "In any event," said his host, "let us dine: for already I have kept you waiting."

Harley merely bowed, and walking out of the library, entered the cosy dining room. A dreadful premonition had claimed him as his glance had met that of Sir Charles—a premonition that this man's days were numbered. It was uncanny, unnerving; and whereas, at first, the atmosphere of Sir Charles Abingdon's home had been laden with prosperous security, now from every side, and even penetrating to the warmly lighted dining room, came that chilling note of danger.

In crossing the lobby he had not failed to note that there were many Indian curios in the place which could not well have failed to attract the attention of a burglar. But that the person who had penetrated to the house was no common burglar he was now assured and he required no further evidence upon this point.

As he took his seat at the dining table he observed that Sir Charles's collection had overflowed even into this room. In the warm shadows about him were pictures and ornaments, all of which came from, or had been inspired by, the Far East.

In this Oriental environment lay an inspiration. The terror which had come into Sir Charles's life, the invisible menace which, swordlike, hung over him, surely belonged in its eerie quality to the land of temple bells, of silent, subtle peoples, to the secret land which has bred so many mysteries. Yes, he must look into the past, into the Indian life of Sir Charles Abingdon, for the birth of this thing which now had grown into a shadow almost tangible.

Benson attended at table, assisted by a dark-faced and very surly-looking maid, in whom Harley thought he recognized the housekeeper's bete noire.

When presently both servants had temporarily retired. "You see, Mr. Harley," began Sir Charles, glancing about his own room in a manner almost furtive, "I realized to-day at your office that the history of this dread which has come upon me perhaps went back so far that it was almost impossible to acquaint you with it under the circumstances."

"I quite understand."

"I think perhaps I should inform you in the first place that I have a daughter. Her mother has been dead for many years, and perhaps I have not given her the attention which a motherless girl is entitled to expect from her father. I don't mean," he said, hastily, "that we are in any sense out of sympathy, but latterly in some way I must confess that we have got a little out of touch." He glanced anxiously at his guest, indeed almost apologetically. "You will of course understand, Mr. Harley, that this seeming preamble may prove to have a direct bearing upon what I propose to tell you?"

"Pray tell the story in your own way, Sir Charles," said Harley with sympathy. "I am all attention, and I shall only interrupt you in the event of any point not being quite clear."

"Thank you," said Sir Charles. "I find it so much easier to explain the matter now. To continue, there is a certain distinguished Oriental gentleman "

He paused as Benson appeared to remove the soup plates.

"It is always delightful to chat with one who knows India so well as you do," he continued, glancing significantly at his guest.

Paul Harley, who fully appreciated the purpose of this abrupt change in the conversation, nodded in agreement. "The call of the East," he replied, "is a very real thing. Only one who has heard it can understand and appreciate all it means."

The butler, an excellently trained servant, went about his work with quiet efficiency, and once Harley heard him mutter rapid instructions to the surly parlourmaid, who hovered disdainfully in the background. When again host and guest found themselves alone: "I don't in any way distrust the servants," explained Sir Charles, "but one cannot hope to prevent gossip." He raised his serviette to his lips and almost immediately resumed: "I was about to tell you, Mr. Harley, about my daughter's—"

He paused and cleared his throat, then, hastily pouring out a glass of water, he drank a sip or two and Paul Harley noticed that his hand was shaking nervously. He thought of the photograph in the library, and now, in this reference to a distinguished Oriental gentleman, he suddenly perceived the possible drift of the conversation.

This was the point to which Sir Charles evidently experienced such difficulty in coming. It was something which concerned his daughter; and, mentally visualizing the pure oval face and taunting eyes of the library photograph, Harley found it impossible to believe that the evil which threatened Sir Charles could possibly be associated in any way with Phyllis Abingdon.

Yet, if the revelation which he had to make must be held responsible for his present condition, then truly it was a dreadful one. No longer able to conceal his concern, Harley stood up. "If the story distresses you so keenly, Sir Charles," he said, "I beg—"

Sir Charles waved his hand reassuringly. "A mere nothing. It will pass," he whispered.

"But I fear," continued Harley, "that—"

He ceased abruptly, and ran to his host's assistance, for the latter, evidently enough, was in the throes of some sudden illness or seizure. His fresh-coloured face was growing positively livid, and he plucked at the edge of the table with twitching fingers. As Harley reached his side he made a sudden effort to stand up, throwing out his arm to grasp the other's shoulder.

"Benson!" cried Harley, loudly. "Quick! Your master is ill!"

There came a sound of swift footsteps and the door was thrown open.

"Too late," whispered Sir Charles in a choking voice. He began to clutch his throat as Benson hurried into the room.

"My God!" whispered Harley. "He is dying!"

Indeed, the truth was all too apparent. Sir Charles Abingdon was almost past speech. He was glaring across the table as though he saw some ghastly apparition there. And now with appalling suddenness he became as a dead weight in Harley's supporting grasp. Raspingly, as if forced in agony from his lips:

"Fire-Tongue," he said . . . "Nicol Brinn..."

Benson, white and terror-stricken, bent over him.

"Sir Charles!" he kept muttering. "Sir Charles! What is the matter, sir?"

A stifled shriek sounded from the doorway, and in tottered Mrs. Howett, the old housekeeper, with other servants peering over her shoulder into that warmly lighted dining room where Sir Charles Abingdon lay huddled in his own chair—dead.

III. SHADOWS

"Had you reason to suspect any cardiac trouble, Doctor McMurdoch?" asked Harley.

Doctor McMurdoch, a local practitioner who had been a friend of Sir Charles Abingdon, shook his head slowly. He was a tall, preternaturally thin Scotsman, clean-shaven, with shaggy dark brows and a most gloomy expression in his deep-set eyes. While the presence of his sepulchral figure seemed appropriate enough in that stricken house, Harley could not help thinking that it must have been far from reassuring in a sick room.

"I had never actually detected anything of the kind," replied the physician, and his deep voice was gloomily in keeping with his personality. "I had observed a certain breathlessness at times, however. No doubt it is one of those cases of on suspected endocarditis. Acute. I take it," raising his shaggy brows interrogatively, "that nothing had occurred to excite Sir Charles?"

"On the contrary," replied Harley, "he was highly distressed about some family trouble, the nature of which he was about to confide to me when this sudden illness seized him."

He stared hard at Doctor McMurdoch, wondering how much he might hope to learn from him respecting the affairs of Sir Charles. It seemed almost impertinent at that hour to seek to pry into the dead man's private life.

To the quiet, book-lined apartment stole now and again little significant sounds which told of the tragedy in the household. Sometimes when a distant door was opened, it would be the sobs of a weeping woman, for the poor old housekeeper had been quite prostrated by the blow. Or ghostly movements would become audible from the room immediately over the library—the room to which the dead man had been carried; muffled footsteps, vague stirrings of furniture; each sound laden with its own peculiar portent, awakening the imagination which all too readily filled in the details of the scene above. Then, to spur Harley to action, came the thought that Sir Charles Abingdon had appealed to him for aid. Did his need terminate with his unexpected death or would the shadow under which he had died extend now? Harley found himself staring across the library at the photograph of Phil Abingdon. It was of her that Sir Charles had been speaking when that mysterious seizure had tied his tongue. That strange, fatal illness, mused Harley, all the more strange in the case of a man supposedly in robust health—it almost seemed like the working of a malignant will. For the revelation, whatever its nature, had almost but not quite been made in Harley's office that evening. Something, some embarrassment or mental disability, had stopped Sir Charles from completing his statement. Tonight death had stopped him.

"Was he consulting you professionally, Mr. Harley?" asked the physician.

"He was," replied Harley, continuing to stare fascinatedly at the photograph on the mantelpiece. "I am informed," said he, abruptly, "that

Miss Abingdon is out of town?"

Doctor McMurdoch nodded in his slow, gloomy fashion. "She is staying in Devonshire with poor Abingdon's sister," he answered. "I am wondering how we are going to break the news to her."

Perceiving that Doctor McMurdoch had clearly been intimate with the late Sir Charles, Harley determined to make use of this opportunity to endeavour to fathom the mystery of the late surgeon's fears. "You will not misunderstand me, Doctor McMurdoch," he said, "if I venture to ask you one or two rather personal questions respecting Miss Abingdon?"

Doctor McMurdoch lowered his shaggy brows and looked gloomily at the speaker. "Mr. Harley," he replied, "I know you by repute for a man of integrity. But before I answer your questions will you answer one of mine?"

"Certainly."

"Then my question is this: Does not your interest cease with the death of your client?"

"Doctor McMurdoch," said Harley, sternly, "you no doubt believe yourself to be acting as a friend of this bereaved family. You regard me, perhaps, as a Paul Pry prompted by idle curiosity. On the contrary, I find myself in a delicate and embarrassing situation. From Sir Charles's conversation I had gathered that he entertained certain fears on behalf of his daughter."

"Indeed," said Doctor McMurdoch.

"If these fears were well grounded, the danger is not removed, but merely increased by the death of Miss Abingdon's natural protector. I regret, sir, that I approached you for information, since you have misjudged my motive. But far from my interest having ceased, it has now as I see the matter become a sacred duty to learn what it was that Sir Charles apprehended. This duty, Doctor McMurdoch, I propose to fulfil with or without your assistance."

"Oh," said Doctor McMurdoch, gloomily, "I'm afraid I've offended you. But I meant well, Mr. Harley." A faint trace of human emotion showed itself in his deep voice. "Charley Abingdon and I were students together in Edinburgh," he explained. "I was mayhap a little strange."

His apology was so evidently sincere that Harley relented at once. "Please say no more, Doctor McMurdoch," he responded. "I fully appreciate your feelings in the matter. At such a time a stranger can only be

an intruder; but"—he fixed his keen eyes upon the physician—"there is more underlying all this than you suspect or could readily believe. You will live to know that I have spoken the truth."

"I know it now," declared the Scotsman, solemnly. "Abingdon was always eccentric, but he didn't know the meaning of fear."

"Once that may have been true," replied Harley. "But a great fear was upon him when he came to me, Doctor McMurdoch, and if it is humanly possible I am going to discover its cause."

"Go ahead," said Doctor McMurdoch and, turning to the side table, he poured out two liberal portions of whiskey. "If there's anything I can do to help, count me at your service. You tell me he had fears about little Phil?"

"He had," answered Harley, "and it is maddening to think that he died before he could acquaint me with their nature. But I have hopes that you can help me in this. For instance"—again he fixed his gaze upon the gloomy face of the physician—"who is the distinguished Oriental gentleman with whom Sir Charles had recently become acquainted?"

Doctor McMurdoch's expression remained utterly blank, and he slowly shook his head. "I haven't an idea in the world," he declared. "A patient, perhaps?"

"Possibly," said Harley, conscious of some disappointment; "yet from the way he spoke of him I scarcely think that he was a patient. Surely Sir Charles, having resided so long in India, numbered several Orientals among his acquaintances if not among his friends?"

"None ever came to his home," replied Doctor McMurdoch. "He had all the Anglo-Indian's prejudice against men of colour." He rested his massive chin in his hand and stared down reflectively at the carpet.

"Then you have no suggestion to offer in regard to this person?"

"None. Did he tell you nothing further about him?"

"Unfortunately, nothing. In the next place, Doctor McMurdoch, are you aware of any difference of opinion which had arisen latterly between Sir Charles and his daughter?"

"Difference of opinion!" replied Doctor McMur doch, raising his brows ironically. "There would always be difference of opinion between little Phil and any man who cared for her. But out-and-out quarrel—no!"

Again Harley found himself at a deadlock, and it was with scanty hope of success that he put his third question to the gloomy Scot. "Was Sir Charles a

friend of Mr. Nicol Brinn?" he asked.

"Nicol Brinn?" echoed the physician. He looked perplexed. "You mean the American millionaire? I believe they were acquainted. Abingdon knew most of the extraordinary people in London; and if half one hears is true Nicol Brinn is as mad as a hatter. But they were not in any sense friends as far as I know." He was watching Harley curiously. "Why do you ask that question?"

"I will tell you in a moment," said Harley, rapidly, "but I have one more question to put to you first. Does the term Fire-Tongue convey anything to your mind?"

Doctor McMurdoch's eyebrows shot upward most amazingly. "I won't insult you by supposing that you have chosen such a time for joking," he said, dourly. "But if your third question surprised me, I must say that your fourth sounds simply daft."

"It must," agreed Harley, and his manner was almost fierce; "but when I tell you why I ask these two questions—and I only do so on the understand ing that my words are to be treated in the strictest confidence—you may regard the matter in a new light. 'Nicol Brinn' and 'Fire-Tongue' were the last words which Sir Charles Abingdon uttered."

"What!" cried Doctor McMurdoch, displaying a sudden surprising energy. "What?"

"I solemnly assure you," declared Harley, "that such is the case. Benson, the butler, also overheard them."

Doctor McMurdoch relapsed once more into gloom, gazing at the whiskey in the glass which he held in his hand and slowly shaking his head. "Poor old Charley Abingdon," he murmured. "It's plain to me, Mr. Harley, that his mind was wandering. May not we find here an explanation, too, of this idea of his that some danger overhung Phil? You didn't chance to notice, I suppose, whether he had a temperature?"

"I did not," replied Harley, smiling slightly. But the smile quickly left his face, which became again grim and stern.

A short silence ensued, during which Doctor McMurdoch sat staring moodily down at the carpet and. Harley slowly paced up and down the room; then:

"In view of the fact," he said, suddenly, "that Sir Charles clearly apprehended an attempt upon his life, are you satisfied professionally that

death was due to natural causes?"

"Perfectly satisfied," replied the physician, looking up with a start: "perfectly satisfied. It was unexpected, of course, but such cases are by no means unusual. He was formerly a keen athlete, remember. 'Tis often so. Surely you don't suspect foul play? I understood you to mean that his apprehensions were on behalf of Phil."

Paul Harley stood still, staring meditatively in the other's direction. "There is not a scrap of evidence to support such a theory," he admitted, "but if you knew of the existence of any poisonous agent which would produce effects simulating these familiar symptoms, I should be tempted to take certain steps."

"If you are talking about poisons," said the physician, a rather startled look appearing upon his face, "there are several I might mention; but the idea seems preposterous to me. Why should any one want to harm Charley Abingdon? When could poison have been administered and by whom?"

"When, indeed?" murmured Harley. "Yet I am not satisfied."

"You're not hinting at—suicide?"

"Emphatically no."

"What had he eaten?"

"Nothing but soup, except that he drank a portion of a glass of water. I am wondering if he took anything at Mr. Wilson's house." He stared hard at Doctor McMurdoch. "It may surprise you to learn that I have already taken steps to have the remains of the soup from Sir Charles's plate examined, as well as the water in the glass. I now propose to call upon Mr. Wilson in order that I may complete this line of enquiry."

"I sympathize with your suspicions, Mr. Harley," said the physician dourly, "but you are wasting your time." A touch of the old acidity crept back into his manner. "My certificate will be 'syncope due to unusual excitement'; and I shall stand by it."

"You are quite entitled to your own opinion," Harley conceded, "which if I were in your place would be my own. But what do you make of the fact that Sir Charles received a bogus telephone message some ten minutes before my arrival, as a result of which he visited Mr. Wilson's house?"

"But he's attending Wilson," protested the physician.

"Nevertheless, no one there had telephoned. It was a ruse. I don't assume for a moment that this ruse was purposeless."

Doctor McMurdoch was now staring hard at the speaker.

"You may also know," Harley continued, "that there was an attempted burglary here less than a week ago."

"I know that," admitted the other, "but it counts for little. There have been several burglaries in the neighbourhood of late."

Harley perceived that Doctor McMurdoch was one of those characters, not uncommon north of the Tweed, who, if slow in forming an opinion, once having done so cling to it as tightly as any barnacle.

"You may be right and I may be wrong," Harley admitted, "but while your professional business with Sir Charles unfortunately is ended, mine is only beginning. May I count upon you to advise me of Miss Abingdon's return? I particularly wish to see her, and I should prefer to meet her in the capacity of a friend rather than in that of a professional investigator."

"At the earliest moment that I can decently arrange a meeting," replied Doctor McMurdoch, "I will communicate with you, Mr. Harley. I am just cudgelling my brains at the moment to think how the news is to be broken to her. Poor little Phil! He was all she had."

"I wish I could help you," declared Harley with sincerity, "but in the circumstances any suggestion of mine would be mere impertinence." He held out his hand to the doctor.

"Good-night," said the latter, gripping it heartily. "If there is any mystery surrounding poor Abingdon's death, I believe you are the man to clear it up. But, frankly, it was his heart. I believe he had a touch of the sun once in India. Who knows? His idea that some danger threatened him or threatened Phil may have been merely—" He tapped his brow significantly.

"But in the whole of your knowledge of Sir Charles," cried Harley, exhibiting a certain irritation, "have you ever known him to suffer from delusions of that kind or any other?"

"Never," replied the physician, firmly; "but once a man has had the sun one cannot tell."

"Ah!" said Harley. "Good-night, Doctor McMurdoch."

When presently he left the house, carrying a brown leather bag which he had borrowed from the butler, he knew that rightly or wrongly his own opinion remained unchanged in spite of the stubborn opposition of the Scottish physician. The bogus message remained to be explained, and the assault in the square, as did the purpose of the burglar to whom gold and

silver plate made no appeal. More important even than these points were the dead man's extraordinary words: "Fire-Tongue"—"Nicol Brinn." Finally and conclusively, he had detected the note of danger outside and inside the house; and now as he began to cross the square it touched him again intimately.

He looked up at the darkened sky. A black cloud was moving slowly overhead, high above the roof of the late Sir Charles Abingdon; and as he watched its stealthy approach it seemed to Paul Harley to be the symbol of that dread in which latterly Sir Charles's life had lain, beneath which he had died, and which now was stretching out, mysterious and menacing, over himself.

IV. INTRODUCING MR. NICOL BRINN

At about nine o'clock on the same evening, a man stood at a large window which over looked Piccadilly and the Green Park The room to which the window belonged was justly considered one of the notable sights of London and doubtless would have received suitable mention in the "Blue Guide" had the room been accessible to the general public. It was, on the contrary, accessible only to the personal friends of Mr. Nicol Brinn. As Mr. Nicol Brinn had a rarely critical taste in friendship, none but a fortunate few had seen the long room with its two large windows overlooking Piccadilly.

The man at the window was interested in a car which, approaching from the direction of the Circus, had slowed down immediately opposite and now was being turned, the chauffeur's apparent intention being to pull up at the door below. He had seen the face of the occupant and had recognized it even from that elevation. He was interested; and since only unusual things aroused any semblance of interest in the man who now stood at the window, one might have surmised that there was something unusual about the present visitor, or in his having decided to call at those chambers; and that such was indeed his purpose an upward glance which he cast in the direction of the balcony sufficiently proved.

The watcher, who had been standing in a dark recess formed by the presence of heavy velvet curtains draped before the window, now opened

the curtains and stepped into the lighted room. He was a tall, lean man having straight, jet-black hair, a sallow complexion, and the features of a Sioux. A long black cigar protruded aggressively from the left corner of his mouth. His hands were locked behind him and his large and quite expressionless blue eyes stared straight across the room at the closed door with a dreamy and vacant regard. His dinner jacket fitted him so tightly that it might have been expected at any moment to split at the seams. As if to precipitate the catastrophe, he wore it buttoned.

There came a rap at the door.

"In!" said the tall man.

The door opened silently and a manservant appeared. He was spotlessly neat and wore his light hair cropped close to the skull. His fresh-coloured face was quite as expressionless as that of his master; his glance possessed no meaning. Crossing to the window, he extended a small salver upon which lay a visiting card.

"In!" repeated the tall man, looking down at the card.

His servant silently retired, and following a short interval rapped again upon the door, opened it, and standing just inside the room announced: "Mr. Paul Harley."

The door being quietly closed behind him, Paul Harley stood staring across the room at Nicol Brinn. At this moment the contrast between the types was one to have fascinated a psychologist. About Paul Harley, eagerly alert, there was something essentially British. Nicol Brinn, without being typical, was nevertheless distinctly a product of the United States. Yet, despite the stoic mask worn by Mr. Brinn, whose lack-lustre eyes were so unlike the bright gray eyes of his visitor, there existed, if not a physical, a certain spiritual affinity between the two; both were men of action.

Harley, after that one comprehensive glance, the photographic glance of a trained observer, stepped forward impulsively, hand outstretched. "Mr. Brinn," he said, "we have never met before, and it was good of you to wait in for me. I hope my telephone message has not interfered with your plans for the evening?"

Nicol Brinn, without change of pose, no line of the impassive face altering, shot out a large, muscular hand, seized that of Paul Harley in a tremendous grip, and almost instantly put his hand behind his back again.

"Had no plans," he replied, in a high, monotonous voice; "I was bored stiff. Take the armchair."

Paul Harley sat down, but in the restless manner of one who has urgent business in hand and who is impatient of delay. Mr. Brinn stooped to a coffee table which stood upon the rug before the large open fireplace. "I am going to offer you a cocktail," he said.

"I shall accept your offer," returned Harley, smiling. "The 'N.B. cocktail' has a reputation which extends throughout the clubs of the world."

Nicol Brinn, exhibiting the swift adroitness of that human dodo, the New York bartender, mixed the drinks. Paul Harley watched him, meanwhile drumming his fingers restlessly upon the chair arm.

"Here's success," he said, "to my mission."

It was an odd toast, but Mr. Brinn merely nodded and drank in silence. Paul Harley set his glass down and glanced about the singular apartment of which he had often heard and which no man could ever tire of examining.

In this room the poles met, and the most remote civilizations of the world rubbed shoulders with modernity. Here, encased, were a family of snow-white ermine from Alaska and a pair of black Manchurian leopards. A flying lemur from the Pelews contemplated swooping upon the head of a huge tigress which glared with glassy eyes across the place at the snarling muzzle of a polar bear. Mycenaean vases and gold death masks stood upon the same shelf as Venetian goblets, and the mummy of an Egyptian priestess of the thirteenth dynasty occupied a sarcophagus upon the top of which rested a basrelief found in one of the shrines of the Syrian fish goddess Derceto, at Ascalon.

Arrowheads of the Stone Age and medieval rapiers were ranged alongside some of the latest examples of the gunsmith's art. There were elephants' tusks and Mexican skulls; a stone jar of water from the well of Zem-Zem, and an ivory crucifix which had belonged to Torquemada. A mat of human hair from Borneo overlay a historical and unique rug woven in Ispahan and entirely composed of fragments of Holy Carpets from the Kaaba at Mecca.

"I take it," said Mr. Brinn, suddenly, "that you are up against a stiff proposition."

Paul Harley, accepting a cigarette from an ebony box (once the property of Henry VIII) which the speaker had pushed across the coffee table in his

direction, stared up curiously into the sallow, aquiline face. "You are right. But how did you know?"

"You look that way. Also—you were followed. Somebody knows you've come here."

Harley leaned forward, resting one hand upon the table. "I know I was followed," he said, sternly. "I was followed because I have entered upon the biggest case of my career." He paused and smiled in a very grim fashion. "A suspicion begins to dawn upon my mind that if I fail it will also be my last case. You understand me?"

"I understand absolutely," replied Nicol Brinn. "These are dull days. It's meat and drink to me to smell big danger."

Paul Harley lighted a cigarette and watched the speaker closely the while. His expression, as he did so, was an odd one. Two courses were open to him, and he was mentally debating their respective advantages.

"I have come to you to-night, Mr. Brinn," he said finally, "to ask you a certain question. Unless the theory upon which I am working is entirely wrong, then, supposing that you are in a position to answer my question I am logically compelled to suppose, also, that you stand in peril of your life."

"Good," said Mr. Brinn. "I was getting sluggish." In three long strides he crossed the room and locked the door. "I don't doubt Hoskins's honesty," he explained, reading the inquiry in Harley's eyes, "but an A1 intelligence doesn't fold dress pants at thirty-nine."

Only one very intimate with the taciturn speaker could have perceived any evidence of interest in that imperturbable character. But Nicol Brinn took his cheroot between his fingers, quickly placed a cone of ash in a little silver tray (the work of Benvenuto Cellini), and replaced the cheroot not in the left but in the right corner of his mouth. He was excited.

"You are out after one of the big heads of the crook world," he said. "He knows it and he's trailing you. My luck's turned. How can I help?"

Harley stood up, facing Mr. Brinn. "He knows it, as you say," he replied, "and I hold my life in my hands. But from your answer to the question which I have come here to-night to ask you, I shall conclude whether or not your danger at the moment is greater than mine."

"Good," said Nicol Brinn.

In that unique room, at once library and museum, amid relics of a hundred ages, spoil of the chase, the excavator, and the scholar, these two faced each other; and despite the peaceful quiet of the apartment up to which as a soothing murmur stole the homely sounds of Piccadilly, each saw in the other's eyes recognition of a deadly peril. It was a queer, memorable moment.

"My question is simple but strange," said Paul Harley. "It is this: What do you know of 'Fire-Tongue'?"

V. THE GATES OF HELL

If Paul Harley had counted upon the word "Fire-Tongue" to have a dramatic effect upon Nicol Brinn, he was not disappointed. It was a word which must have conveyed little or nothing to the multitude and which might have been pronounced without perceptible effect at any public meeting in the land. But Mr. Brinn, impassive though his expression remained, could not conceal the emotion which he experienced at the sound of it. His gaunt face seemed to grow more angular and his eyes to become even less lustrous.

"Fire-Tongue!" he said, tensely, following a short silence. "For God's sake, when did you hear that word?"

"I heard it," replied Harley, slowly, "to-night." He fixed his gaze intently upon the sallow face of the American. "It was spoken by Sir Charles Abingdon."

Closely as he watched Nicol Brinn while pronouncing this name he could not detect the slightest change of expression in the stoic features.

"Sir Charles Abingdon," echoed Brinn; "and in what way is it connected with your case?"

"In this way," answered Harley. "It was spoken by Sir Charles a few moments before he died."

Nicol Brinn's drooping lids flickered rapidly. "Before he died! Then Sir Charles Abingdon is dead! When did he die?"

"He died to-night and the last words that he uttered were 'Fire-Tongue'—" He paused, never for a moment removing that fixed gaze from

the other's face.

"Go on," prompted Mr. Brinn.

"And 'Nicol Brinn.'"

Nicol Brinn stood still as a carven man. Indeed, only by an added rigidity in his pose did he reward Paul Harley's intense scrutiny. A silence charged with drama was finally broken by the American. "Mr. Harley," he said, "you told me that you were up against the big proposition of your career. You are right."

With that he sat down in an armchair and, resting his chin in his hand, gazed fixedly into the empty grate. His pose was that of a man who is suddenly called upon to review the course of his life and upon whose decision respecting the future that life may depend. Paul Harley watched him in silence.

"Give me the whole story," said Mr. Brinn, "right from the beginning." He looked up. "Do you know what you have done to-night, Mr. Harley?"

Paul Harley shook his head. Swiftly, like the touch of an icy finger, that warning note of danger had reached him again.

"I'll tell you," continued Brinn. "You have opened the gates of hell!"

Not another word did he speak while Paul Harley, pacing slowly up and down before the hearth, gave him a plain account of the case, omitting all reference to his personal suspicions and to the measures which he had taken to confirm them.

He laid his cards upon the table deliberately. Whether Sir Charles Abingdon had uttered the name of Nicol Brinn as that of one whose aid should be sought or as a warning, he had yet to learn. And by this apparent frankness he hoped to achieve his object. That the celebrated American was in any way concerned in the menace which had overhung Sir Charles he was not prepared to believe. But he awaited with curiosity that explanation which Nicol Brinn must feel called upon to offer.

"You think he was murdered?" said Brinn in his high, toneless voice.

"I have formed no definite opinion. What is your own?"

"I may not look it," replied Brinn, "but at this present moment I am the most hopelessly puzzled and badly frightened man in London."

"Frightened?" asked Harley, curiously.

"I said frightened, I also said puzzled; and I am far too puzzled to be able to express any opinion respecting the death of Sir Charles Abingdon. When

I tell you all I know of him you will wonder as much as I do, Mr. Harley, why my name should have been the last to pass his lips."

He half turned in the big chair to face his visitor, who now was standing before the fireplace staring down at him.

"One day last month," he resumed, "I got out of my car in a big hurry at the top of the Haymarket. A fool on a motorcycle passed between the car and the sidewalk just as I stepped down, and I knew nothing further until I woke up in a drug store close by, feeling very dazed and with my coat in tatters and my left arm numbed from the elbow. A man was standing watching me, and presently when I had pulled round he gave me his card.

"He was Sir Charles Abingdon, who had been passing at the time of the accident. That was how I met him, and as there was nothing seriously wrong with me I saw him no more professionally. But he dined with me a week later and I had lunch at his club about a fortnight ago."

He looked up at Harley. "On my solemn word of honour," he said, "that's all I know about Sir Charles Abingdon."

Paul Harley returned the other's fixed stare. "I don't doubt your assurance on the point, Mr. Brinn," he acknowledged. "I can well understand that you must be badly puzzled; but I would remind you of your statement that you were also frightened. Why?"

Nicol Brinn glanced rapidly about his own luxurious room in an oddly apprehensive manner. "I said that," he declared, "and I meant it."

"Then I can only suppose," resumed Harley, deliberately, "that the cause of your fear lies in the term, 'Fire-Tongue'?"

Brinn again rested his chin in his hand, staring fixedly into the grate.

"And possibly," went on the remorseless voice, "you can explain the significance of that term?"

Nicol Brinn remained silent—but with one foot he was slowly tapping the edge of the fender.

"Mr. Harley," he began, abruptly, "you have been perfectly frank with me and in return I wish to be as frank with you as I can be. I am face to face with a thing that has haunted me for seven years, and every step I take from now onward has to be considered carefully, for any step might be my last. And that's not the worst of the matter. I will risk one of those steps here and now. You ask me to explain the significance of Fire-Tongue" (there was a perceptible pause before he pronounced the word, which Harley duly

noticed). "I am going to tell you that Sir Charles Abingdon, when I lunched with him at his club, asked me precisely the same thing."

"What! He asked you that so long as two weeks ago?"

"He did."

"And what reason did he give for his inquiry?"

Nicol Brinn began to tap the fender again with his foot. "Let me think," he replied. "I recognize that you must regard my reticence as peculiar, Mr. Harley, but if ever a man had reason to look before he leaped, I am that man."

Silence fell again, and Paul Harley, staring down at Nicol Brinn, realized that this indeed was the most hopelessly mystifying case which fate had ever thrown in his way. This millionaire scholar and traveller, whose figure was as familiar in remote cities of the world as it was familiar in New York, in Paris, and in London, could not conceivably be associated with any criminal organization. Yet his hesitancy was indeed difficult to explain, and because it seemed to Harley that the cloud which had stolen out across the house of Sir Charles Abingdon now hung threateningly over those very chambers, he merely waited and wondered.

"He referred to an experience which had befallen him in India," came Nicol Brinn's belated reply.

"In India? May I ask you to recount that experience?"

"Mr. Harley," replied Brinn, suddenly standing up, "I can't."

"You can't?"

"I have said so. But I'd give a lot more than you might believe to know that Abingdon had told you the story which he told me."

"You are not helping, Mr. Brinn," said Harley, sternly. "I believe and I think that you share my belief that Sir Charles Abingdon did not die from natural causes. You are repressing valuable evidence. Allow me to remind you that if anything should come to light necessitating a post-mortem examination of the body, you will be forced to divulge in a court of justice the facts which you refuse to divulge to me."

"I know it," said Brinn, shortly.

He shot out one long arm and grasped Harley's shoulder as in a vice. "I'm counted a wealthy man," he continued, "but I'd give every cent I possess to see 'paid' put to the bill of a certain person. Listen. You don't think I was in any way concerned in the death of Sir Charles Abingdon? It isn't thinkable.

But you do think I'm in possession of facts which would help you find out who is. You're right."

"Good God!" cried Harley. "Yet you remain silent!"

"Not so loud—not so loud!" implored Brinn, repeating that odd, almost furtive glance around. "Mr. Harley—you know me. You've heard of me and now you've met me. You know my place in the world. Do you believe me when I say that from this moment onward I don't trust my own servants? Nor my own friends?" He removed his grip from Harley's shoulder. "Inanimate things look like enemies. That mummy over yonder may have ears!"

"I'm afraid I don't altogether understand you."

"See here!"

Nicol Brinn crossed to a bureau, unlocked it, and while Harley watched him curiously, sought among a number of press cuttings. Presently he found the cutting for which he was looking. "This was said," he explained, handing the slip to Harley, "at the Players' Club in New York, after a big dinner in pre-dry days. It was said in confidence. But some disguised reporter had got in and it came out in print next morning. Read it."

Paul Harley accepted the cutting and read the following:

NICOL BRINN'S SECRET AMBITIONS MILLIONAIRE SPORTSMAN WHO WANTS TO SHOOT NIAGARA!

Mr. Nicol Brinn of Cincinnati, who is at present in New York, opened his heart to members of the Players' Club last night. Our prominent citizen, responding to a toast, "the distinguished visitor," said:

"I'd like to live through months of midnight frozen in among the polar ice; I'd like to cross Africa from east to west and get lost in the middle. I'd like to have a Montana sheriff's posse on my heels for horse stealing, and I've prayed to be wrecked on a desert island like Robinson Crusoe to see if I am man enough to live it out. I want to stand my trial for murder and defend my own case, and I want to be found by the eunuchs in the harem of the Shah. I want to dive for pearls and scale the Matterhorn. I want to know where the tunnel leads to—the tunnel down under the Great Pyramid of Gizeh—and I'd love to shoot Niagara Falls in a barrel."

"It sounds characteristic," murmured Harley, laying the slip on the coffee table.

"It's true!" declared Brinn. "I said it and I meant it. I'm a glutton for danger, Mr. Harley, and I'm going to tell you why. Something happened to me seven years ago—"

"In India?"

"In India. Correct. Something happened to me, sir, which just took the sunshine out of life. At the time I didn't know all it meant. I've learned since. For seven years I have been flirting with death and hoping to fall!"

Harley stared at him uncomprehendingly. "More than ever I fail to understand."

"I can only ask you to be patient, Mr. Harley. Time is a wonderful doctor, and I don't say that in seven years the old wound hasn't healed a bit. But to-night you have, unknowingly, undone all that time had done. I'm a man that has been down into hell. I bought myself out. I thought I knew where the pit was located. I thought I was well away from it, Mr. Harley, and you have told me something tonight which makes me think that it isn't where I supposed at all, but hidden down here right under our feet in London. And we're both standing on the edge!"

That Nicol Brinn was deeply moved no student of humanity could have doubted. From beneath the stoic's cloak another than the dare-devil millionaire whose crazy exploits were notorious had looked out. Persistently the note of danger came to Paul Harley. Those luxurious Piccadilly chambers were a focus upon which some malignant will was concentrated. He became conscious of anger. It was the anger of a just man who finds himself impotent—the rage of Prometheus bound.

"Mr. Brinn!" he cried, "I accept unreservedly all that you have told me. Its real significance I do not and cannot grasp. But my theory that Sir Charles Abingdon was done to death has become a conviction. That a like fate threatens yourself and possibly myself I begin to believe." He looked almost fiercely into the other's dull eyes. "My reputation east and west is that of a white man. Mr. Brinn—I ask you for your confidence."

Nicol Brinn dropped his chin into his hand and resumed that unseeing stare into the open grate. Paul Harley watched him intently.

"There isn't any one I would rather confide in," confessed the American. "We are linked by a common danger. But"—he looked up—"I must ask you again to be patient. Give me time to think—to make plans. For your own part—be cautious. You witnessed the death of Sir Charles Abingdon. You don't think and perhaps I don't think that it was natural; but whatever steps you may have taken to confirm your theories, I dare not hope that you will ever discover even a ghost of a clue. I simply warn you, Mr. Harley. You may go the same way. So may I. Others have travelled that road before poor Abingdon."

He suddenly stood up, all at once exhibiting to his watchful visitor that tremendous nervous energy which underlay his impassive manner. "Good God!" he said, in a cold, even voice. "To think that it is here in London. What does it mean?"

He ceased speaking abruptly, and stood with his elbow resting on a corner of the mantelpiece.

"You speak of it being here," prompted Harley. "Is it consistent with your mysterious difficulties to inform me to what you refer?"

Nicol Brinn glanced aside at him. "If I informed you of that," he answered, "you would know all you want to know. But neither you nor I would live to use the knowledge. Give me time. Let me think."

Silence fell in the big room, Nicol Brinn staring down vacantly into the empty fireplace, Paul Harley standing watching him in a state of almost stupefied mystification. Muffled to a soothing murmur the sounds of Piccadilly penetrated to that curtained chamber which held so many records of the troubled past and which seemed to be charged with shadowy portents of the future.

Something struck with a dull thud upon a windowpane—once—twice. There followed a faint, sibilant sound.

Paul Harley started and the stoical Nicol Brinn turned rapidly and glanced across the room.

"What was that?" asked Harley.

"I expect—it was an owl," answered Brinn. "We sometimes get them over from the Green Park."

His high voice sounded unemotional as ever. But it seemed to Paul Harley that his face, dimly illuminated by the upcast light from the lamp upon the coffee table, had paled, had become gaunt.

VI. PHIL ABINGDON ARRIVES

On the following afternoon Paul Harley was restlessly pacing his private office when Innes came in with a letter which had been delivered by hand. Harley took it eagerly and tore open the envelope. A look of expectancy faded from his eager face almost in the moment that it appeared there. "No luck, Innes," he said, gloomily. "Merton reports that there is no trace of any dangerous foreign body in the liquids analyzed."

He dropped the analyst's report into a wastebasket and resumed his restless promenade. Innes, who could see that his principal wanted to talk, waited. For it was Paul Harley's custom, when the clue to a labyrinth evaded him, to outline his difficulties to his confidential secretary, and by the mere exercise of verbal construction Harley would often detect the weak spot in his reasoning. This stage come to, he would dictate a carefully worded statement of the case to date and thus familiarize himself with its complexities.

"You see, Innes," he began, suddenly, "Sir Charles had taken no refreshment of any kind at Mr. Wilson's house nor before leaving his own. Neither had he smoked. No one had approached him. Therefore, if he was poisoned, he was poisoned at his own table. Since he was never out of my observation from the moment of entering the library up to that of his death, we are reduced to the only two possible mediums—the soup or the water. He had touched nothing else."

"No wine?"

"Wine was on the table but none had been poured out. Let us see what evidence, capable of being put into writing, exists to support my theory that Sir Charles was poisoned. In the first place, he clearly went in fear of some such death. It was because of this that he consulted me. What was the origin of his fear? Something associated with the term Fire-Tongue. So much is clear from Sir Charles's dying words, and his questioning Nicol Brinn on the point some weeks earlier.

"He was afraid, then, of something or someone linked in his mind with the word Fire-Tongue. What do we know about Fire-Tongue? One thing

only: that it had to do with some episode which took place in India. This item we owe to Nicol Brinn.

"Very well. Sir Charles believed himself to be in danger from some thing or person unknown, associated with India and with the term Fire-Tongue. What else? His house was entered during the night under circumstances suggesting that burglary was not the object of the entrance. And next? He was assaulted, with murderous intent. Thirdly, he believed himself to be subjected to constant surveillance. Was this a delusion? It was not. After failing several times I myself detected someone dogging my movements last night at the moment I entered Nicol Brinn's chambers. Nicol Brinn also saw this person.

"In short, Sir Charles was, beyond doubt, at the time of his death, receiving close attention from some mysterious person or persons the object of which he believed to be his death. Have I gone beyond established facts, Innes, thus far?"

"No, Mr. Harley. So far you are on solid ground."

"Good. Leaving out of the question those points which we hope to clear up when the evidence of Miss Abingdon becomes available—how did Sir Charles learn that Nicol Brinn knew the meaning of Fire-Tongue?"

"He may have heard something to that effect in India."

"If this were so he would scarcely have awaited a chance encounter to prosecute his inquiries, since Nicol Brinn is a well-known figure in London and Sir Charles had been home for several years."

"Mr. Brinn may have said something after the accident and before he was in full possession of his senses which gave Sir Charles a clue."

"He did not, Innes. I called at the druggist's establishment this morning. They recalled the incident, of course. Mr. Brinn never uttered a word until, opening his eyes, he said: 'Hello! Am I much damaged?'"

Innes smiled discreetly. "A remarkable character, Mr. Harley," he said. "Your biggest difficulty at the moment is to fit Mr. Nicol Brinn into the scheme."

"He won't fit at all, Innes! We come to the final and conclusive item of evidence substantiating my theory of Sir Charles's murder: Nicol Brinn believes he was murdered. Nicol Brinn has known others, in his own words, 'to go the same way.' Yet Nicol Brinn, a millionaire, a scholar, a sportsman, and a gentleman, refuses to open his mouth."

"He is afraid of something."

"He is afraid of Fire-Tongue—whatever Fire-Tongue may be! I never saw a man of proved courage more afraid in my life. He prefers to court arrest for complicity in a murder rather than tell what he knows!"

"It's unbelievable."

"It would be, Innes, if Nicol Brinn's fears were personal."

Paul Harley checked his steps in front of the watchful secretary and gazed keenly into his eyes.

"Death has no terrors for Nicol Brinn," he said slowly. "All his life he has toyed with danger. He admitted to me that during the past seven years he had courted death. Isn't it plain enough, Innes? If ever a man possessed all that the world had to offer, Nicol Brinn is that man. In such a case and in such circumstances what do we look for?"

Innes shook his head.

"We look for the woman!" snapped Paul Harley.

There came a rap at the door and Miss Smith, the typist, entered. "Miss Phil Abingdon and Doctor McMurdoch," she said.

"Good heavens!" muttered Harley. "So soon? Why, she can only just—" He checked himself. "Show them in, Miss Smith," he directed.

As the typist went out, followed by Innes, Paul Harley found himself thinking of the photograph in Sir Charles Abingdon's library and waiting with an almost feverish expectancy for the appearance of the original.

Almost immediately Phil Abingdon came in, accompanied by the sepulchral Doctor McMurdoch. And Harley found himself wondering whether her eyes were really violet-coloured or whether intense emotion heroically repressed had temporarily lent them that appearance.

Surprise was the predominant quality of his first impression. Sir Charles Abingdon's daughter was so exceedingly vital—petite and slender, yet instinct with force. The seeming repose of the photograph was misleading. That her glance could be naive he realized—as it could also be gay—and now her eyes were sad with a sadness so deep as to dispel the impression of lightness created by her dainty form, her alluring, mobile lips, and the fascinating, wavy, red-brown hair.

She did not wear mourning. He recalled that there had been no time to procure it. She was exquisitely and fashionably dressed, and even the pallor

of grief could not rob her cheeks of the bloom born of Devon sunshine. He had expected her to be pretty. He was surprised to find her lovely.

Doctor McMurdoch stood silent in the doorway, saying nothing by way of introduction. But nothing was necessary. Phil Abingdon came forward quite naturally—and quite naturally Paul Harley discovered her little gloved hand to lie clasped between both his own. It was more like a reunion than a first meeting and was so laden with perfect understanding that, even yet, speech seemed scarcely worth while.

Thinking over that moment, in later days, Paul Harley remembered that he had been prompted by some small inner voice to say: "So you have come back?" It was recognition. Of the hundreds of men and women who came into his life for a while, and ere long went out of it again, he knew, by virtue of that sixth sense of his, that Phil Abingdon had come to stay—whether for joy or sorrow he could not divine.

It was really quite brief—that interval of silence—although perhaps long enough to bridge the ages.

"How brave of you, Miss Abingdon!" said Harley. "How wonderfully brave of you!"

"She's an Abingdon," came the deep tones of Doctor McMurdoch. "She arrived only two hours ago and here she is."

"There can be no rest for me, Doctor," said the girl, and strove valiantly to control her voice, "until this dreadful doubt is removed. Mr. Harley"—she turned to him appealingly—"please don't study my feelings in the least; I can bear anything—now; just tell me what happened. Oh! I had to come. I felt that I had to come."

As Paul Harley placed an armchair for his visitor, his glance met that of Doctor McMurdoch, and in the gloomy eyes he read admiration of this girl who could thus conquer the inherent weakness of her sex and at such an hour and after a dreadful ordeal set her hand to the task which fate had laid upon her.

Doctor McMurdoch sat down on a chair beside the door, setting his silk hat upon the floor and clasping his massive chin with his hand.

"I will endeavour to do as you wish, Miss Abingdon." said Harley, glancing anxiously at the physician.

But Doctor McMurdoch returned only a dull stare. It was evident that this man of stone was as clay in the hands of Phil Abingdon. He deprecated the

strain which she was imposing upon her nervous system, already overwrought to the danger point, but he was helpless for all his dour obstinacy. Harley, looking down at the girl's profile, read a new meaning into the firm line of her chin. He was conscious of an insane desire to put his arms around this new acquaintance who seemed in some indefinable yet definite way to belong to him and to whisper the tragic story he had to tell, comforting her the while.

He began to relate what had taken place at the first interview, when Sir Charles had told him of the menace which he had believed to hang over his life. He spoke slowly, deliberately, choosing his words with a view to sparing Phil Abingdon's feelings as far as possible.

She made no comment throughout, but her fingers alternately tightened and relaxed their hold upon the arms of the chair in which she was seated. Once, at some reference to words spoken by her father, her sensitive lips began to quiver and Harley, watching her, paused. She held the chair arms more tightly. "Please go on, Mr. Harley," she said.

The words were spoken in a very low voice, but the speaker looked up bravely, and Harley, reassured, proceeded uninterruptedly to the end of the story. Then:

"At some future time, Miss Abingdon," he coneluded, "I hope you will allow me to call upon you. There is so much to be discussed—"

Again Phil Abingdon looked up into his face. "I have forced myself to come to see you to-day," she said, "because I realize there is no service I can do poor dad so important as finding out—"

"I understand," Harley interrupted, gently. "But—"

"No, no." Phil Abingdon shook her head rebelliously. "Please ask me what you want to know. I came for that."

He met the glance of violet eyes, and understood something of Doctor McMurdoch's helplessness. He found his thoughts again wandering into strange, wild byways and was only recalled to the realities by the dry, gloomy voice of the physician. "Go on, Mr. Harley," said Doctor McMurdoch. "She has grand courage."

VII. CONFESSIONS

Paul Harley crossed the room and stood in front of the tall Burmese cabinet. He experienced the utmost difficulty in adopting a judicial attitude toward his beautiful visitor. Proximity increased his mental confusion. Therefore he stood on the opposite side of the office ere beginning to question her.

"In the first place, Miss Abingdon," he said, speaking very deliberately, "do you attach any particular significance to the term 'Fire-Tongue'?"

Phil Abingdon glanced rapidly at Doctor McMurdoch. "None at all, Mr. Harley," she replied. "The doctor has already told me of—"

"You know why I ask?" She inclined her head.

"And Mr. Nicol Brinn? Have you met this gentleman?"

"Never. I know that Dad had met him and was very much interested in him."

"In what way?"

"I have no idea. He told me that he thought Mr. Brinn one of the most singular characters he had ever known. But beyond describing his rooms in Piccadilly, which had impressed him as extraordinary, he said very little about Mr. Brinn. He sounded interesting and "—she hesitated and her eyes filled with tears—"I asked Dad to invite him home." Again she paused. This retrospection, by making the dead seem to live again, added to the horror of her sudden bereavement, and Harley would most gladly have spared her more. "Dad seemed strangely disinclined to do so," she added.

At that the keen investigator came to life within Harley. "Your father did not appear anxious to bring Mr. Brinn to his home?" he asked, eagerly.

"Not at all anxious. This was all the more strange because Dad invited Mr. Brinn to his club."

"He gave no reason for his refusal?"

"Oh, there was no refusal, Mr. Harley. He merely evaded the matter. I never knew why."

"H'm," muttered Harley. "And now, Miss Abingdon, can you enlighten me respecting the identity of the Oriental gentleman with whom he had latterly become acquainted?"

Phil Abingdon glanced rapidly at Doctor McMurdoch and then lowered her head. She did not answer at once. "I know to whom you refer, Mr.

Harley," she said, finally. "But it was I who had made this gentleman's acquaintance. My father did not know him."

"Then I wonder why he mentioned him?" murmured Harley.

"That I cannot imagine. I have been wondering ever since Doctor McMurdoch told me."

"You recognize the person to whom Sir Charles referred?"

"Yes. He could only have meant Ormuz Khan."

"Ormuz Khan—" echoed Harley. "Where have I heard that name?"

"He visits England periodically, I believe. In fact, he has a house somewhere near London. I met him at Lady Vail's."

"Lady Vail's? His excellency moves, then, in diplomatic circles? Odd that I cannot place him."

"I have a vague idea, Mr. Harley, that he is a financier. I seem to have heard that he had something to do with the Imperial Bank of Iran." She glanced naively at Harley. "Is there such a bank?" she asked.

"There is," he replied. "Am I to understand that Ormuz Khan is a Persian?"

"I believe he is a Persian," said Phil Abingdon, rather confusedly. "To be quite frank, I know very little about him."

Paul Harley gazed steadily at the speaker for a moment. "Can you think of any reason why Sir Charles should have worried about this gentleman?" he asked.

The girl lowered her head again. "He paid me a lot of attention," she finally confessed.

"This meeting at Lady Vail's, then, was the first of many?"

"Oh, no—not of many! I saw him two or three times. But he began to send me most extravagant presents. I suppose it was his Oriental way of paying a compliment, but Dad objected."

"Of course he would. He knew his Orient and his Oriental. I assume, Miss Abingdon, that you were in England during the years that your father lived in the East?"

"Yes. I was at school. I have never been in the East."

Paul Harley hesitated. He found himself upon dangerously delicate ground and was temporarily at a loss as to how to proceed. Unexpected aid came from the taciturn Doctor McMurdoch.

"He never breathed a word of this to me, Phil," he said, gloomily. "The impudence of the man! Small wonder Abingdon objected."

Phil Abingdon tilted her chin forward rebelliously.

"Ormuz Khan was merely unfamiliar with English customs," she retorted. "There was nothing otherwise in his behaviour to which any one could have taken exception."

"What's that!" demanded the physician. "If a man of colour paid his heathen attentions to my daughter—"

"But you have no daughter, Doctor."

"No. But if I had—"

"If you had," echoed Phil Abingdon, and was about to carry on this wordy warfare which, Harley divined, was of old standing between the two, when sudden realization of the purpose of the visit came to her. She paused, and he saw her biting her lips desperately. Almost at random he began to speak again.

"So far as you are aware, then, Miss Abingdon, Sir Charles never met Ormuz Khan?"

"He never even saw him, Mr. Harley, that I know of."

"It is most extraordinary that he should have given me the impression that this man—for I can only suppose that he referred to Ormuz Khan—was in some way associated with his fears."

"I must remind you, Mr. Harley," Doctor McMurdoch interrupted, "that poor Abingdon was a free talker. His pride, I take it, which was strong, had kept him silent on this matter with me, but he welcomed an opportunity of easing his mind to one discreet and outside the family circle. His words to you may have had no bearing upon the thing he wished to consult you about."

"H'm," mused Harley. "That's possible. But such was not my impression."

He turned again to Phil Abingdon. "This Ormuz Khan, I understood you to say, actually resides in or near London?"

"He is at present living at the Savoy, I believe. He also has a house somewhere outside London."

There were a hundred other questions Paul Harley was anxious to ask: some that were professional but more that were personal. He found himself resenting the intrusion of this wealthy Oriental into the life of the girl who

sat there before him. And because he could read a kindred resentment in the gloomy eye of Doctor McMurdoch, he was drawn spiritually closer to that dour character.

By virtue of his training he was a keen psychologist, and he perceived clearly enough that Phil Abingdon was one of those women in whom a certain latent perversity is fanned to life by opposition. Whether she was really attracted by Ormuz Khan or whether she suffered his attentions merely because she knew them to be distasteful to others, he could not yet decide.

Anger threatened him—as it had threatened him when he had realized that Nicol Brinn meant to remain silent. He combated it, for it had no place in the judicial mind of the investigator. But he recognized its presence with dismay. Where Phil Abingdon was concerned he could not trust himself. In her glance, too, and in the manner of her answers to questions concerning the Oriental, there was a provoking femininity—a deliberate and baffling intrusion of the eternal Eve.

He stared questioningly across at Doctor McMurdoch and perceived a sudden look of anxiety in the physician's face. Quick as the thought which the look inspired, he turned to Phil Abingdon.

She was sitting quite motionless in the big armchair, and her face had grown very pale. Even as he sprang forward he saw her head droop.

"She has fainted," said Doctor McMurdoch. "I'm not surprised."

"Nor I," replied Harley. "She should not have come."

He opened the door communicating with his private apartments and ran out. But, quick as he was, Phil Abingdon had recovered before he returned with the water for which he had gone. Her reassuring smile was somewhat wan. "How perfectly silly of me!" she said. "I shall begin to despise myself."

Presently he went down to the street with his visitors.

"There must be so much more you want to know, Mr. Harley," said Phil Abingdon. "Will you come and see me?"

He promised to do so. His sentiments were so strangely complex that he experienced a desire for solitude in order that he might strive to understand them. As he stood at the door watching the car move toward the Strand he knew that to-day he could not count upon his intuitive powers to warn him of sudden danger. But he keenly examined the faces of passers-by and

stared at the occupants of those cabs and cars which were proceeding in the same direction as the late Sir Charles Abingdon's limousine.

No discovery rewarded him, however, and he returned upstairs to his office deep in thought. "I am in to nobody," he said as he passed the desk at which Innes was at work.

"Very good, Mr. Harley."

Paul Harley walked through to the private office and, seating himself at the big, orderly table, reached over to a cupboard beside him and took out a tin of smoking mixture. He began very slowly to load his pipe, gazing abstractedly across the room at the tall Burmese cabinet.

He realized that, excepting the extraordinary behaviour and the veiled but significant statements of Nicol Brinn, his theory that Sir Charles Abingdon had not died from natural causes rested upon data of the most flimsy description. From Phil Abingdon he had learned nothing whatever. Her evidence merely tended to confuse the case more hopelessly.

It was sheer nonsense to suppose that Ormuz Khan, who was evidently interested in the girl, could be in any way concerned in the death of her father. Nevertheless, as an ordinary matter of routine, Paul Harley, having lighted his pipe, made a note on a little block:

Cover activities of Ormuz Khan.

He smoked reflectively for a while and then added another note:

Watch Nicol Brinn.

For ten minutes or more he sat smoking and thinking, his unseeing gaze set upon the gleaming lacquer of the cabinet; and presently, as he smoked, he became aware of an abrupt and momentary chill. His sixth sense was awake again. Taking up a pencil, he added a third note:

Watch yourself. You are in danger.

VIII. A WREATH OF HYACINTHS

Deep in reflection and oblivious of the busy London life around him, Paul Harley walked slowly along the Strand. Outwardly he was still the keen-eyed investigator who could pry more deeply into a mystery than any

other in England; but to-day his mood was introspective. He was in a brown study.

The one figure which had power to recall him to the actual world suddenly intruded itself upon his field of vision. From dreams which he recognized in the moment of awakening to have been of Phil Abingdon, he was suddenly aroused to the fact that Phil Abingdon herself was present. Perhaps, half subconsciously, he had been looking for her.

Veiled and dressed in black, he saw her slim figure moving through the throng. He conceived the idea that there was something furtive in her movements. She seemed to be hurrying along as if desirous of avoiding recognition. Every now and again she glanced back, evidently in search of a cab, and a dormant suspicion which had lain in Harley's mind now became animate. Phil Abingdon was coming from the direction of the Savoy Hotel. Was it possible that she had been to visit Ormuz Khan?

Harley crossed the Strand and paused just in front of the hurrying, black-clad figure. "Miss Abingdon," he said, "a sort of instinct told me that I should meet you to-day."

She stopped suddenly, and through the black veil which she wore he saw her eyes grow larger—or such was the effect as she opened them widely. Perhaps he misread their message. To him Phil Abingdon's expression was that of detected guilt. More than ever he was convinced of the truth of his suspicions. "Perhaps you were looking for a cab?" he suggested.

Overcoming her surprise, or whatever emotion had claimed her at the moment of this unexpected meeting, Phil Abingdon took Harley's outstretched hand and held it for a moment before replying. "I had almost despaired of finding one," she said, "and I am late already."

"The porter at the Savoy would get you one."

"I have tried there and got tired of waiting," she answered quite simply.

For a moment Harley's suspicions were almost dispelled, and, observing an empty cab approaching, he signalled to the man to pull up.

"Where do you want to go to?" he inquired, opening the door.

"I am due at Doctor McMurdoch's," she replied, stepping in.

Paul Harley hesitated, glancing from the speaker to the driver.

"I wonder if you have time to come with me," said Phil Abingdon. "I know the doctor wants to see you."

"I will come with pleasure," replied Harley, a statement which was no more than true.

Accordingly he gave the necessary directions to the taxi man and seated himself beside the girl in the cab.

"I am awfully glad of an opportunity of a chat with you, Mr. Harley," said Phil Abingdon. "The last few days have seemed like one long nightmare to me." She sighed pathetically. "Surely Doctor McMurdoch is right, and all the horrible doubts which troubled us were idle ones, after all?"

She turned to Harley, looking almost eagerly into his face. "Poor daddy hadn't an enemy in the world, I am sure," she said. "His extraordinary words to you no doubt have some simple explanation. Oh, it would be such a relief to know that his end was a natural one. At least it would dull the misery of it all a little bit."

The appeal in her eyes was of a kind which Harley found much difficulty in resisting. It would have been happiness to offer consolation to this sorrowing girl. But, although he could not honestly assure her that he had abandoned his theories, he realized that the horror of her suspicions was having a dreadful effect upon Phil Abingdon's mind.

"You may quite possibly be right," he said, gently. "In any event, I hope you will think as little as possible about the morbid side of this unhappy business."

"I try to," she assured him, earnestly, "but you can imagine how hard the task is. I know that you must have some good reason for your idea; something, I mean, other than the mere words which have puzzled us all so much. Won't you tell me?"

Now, Paul Harley had determined, since the girl was unacquainted with Nicol Brinn, to conceal from her all that he had learned from that extraordinary man. In this determination he had been actuated, too, by the promptings of the note of danger which, once seemingly attuned to the movements of Sir Charles Abingdon, had, after the surgeon's death, apparently become centred upon himself and upon Nicol Brinn. He dreaded the thought that the cloud might stretch out over the life of this girl who sat beside him and whom he felt so urgently called upon to protect from such a menace.

The cloud? What was this cloud, whence did it emanate, and by whom had it been called into being? He looked into the violet eyes, and as a while

before he had moved alone through the wilderness of London now he seemed to be alone with Phil Abingdon on the border of a spirit world which had no existence for the multitudes around. Psychically, he was very close to her at that moment; and when he replied he replied evasively: "I have absolutely no scrap of evidence, Miss Abingdon, pointing to foul play. The circumstances were peculiar, of course, but I have every confidence in Doctor McMurdoch's efficiency. Since he is satisfied, it would be mere imppertinence on my part to question his verdict."

Phil Abingdon repeated the weary sigh and turned her head aside, glancing down to where with one small shoe she was restlessly tapping the floor of the cab. They were both silent for some moments.

"Don't you trust me?" she asked, suddenly. "Or don't you think I am clever enough to share your confidence?"

As she spoke she looked at him challengingly, and he felt all the force of personality which underlay her outward lightness of manner.

"I both trust you and respect your intelligence," he answered, quietly. "If I withhold anything from you, I am prompted by a very different motive from the one you suggest."

"Then you are keeping something from me," she said, softly. "I knew you were."

"Miss Abingdon," replied Harley, "when the worst trials of this affair are over, I want to have a long talk with you. Until then, won't you believe that I am acting for the best?"

But Phil Abingdon's glance was unrelenting.

"In your opinion it may be so, but you won't do me the honour of consulting mine."

Harley had half anticipated this attitude, but had hoped that she would not adopt it. She possessed in a high degree the feminine art of provoking a quarrel. But he found much consolation in the fact that she had thus shifted the discussion from the abstract to the personal. He smiled slightly, and Phil Abingdon's expression relaxed in response and she lowered her eyes quickly. "Why do you persistently treat me like a child?" she said.

"I don't know," replied Harley, delighted but bewildered by her sudden change of mood. "Perhaps because I want to."

She did not answer him, but stared abstractedly out of the cab window; and Harley did not break this silence, much as he would have liked to do so.

He was mentally reviewing his labours of the preceding day when, in the character of a Colonial visitor with much time on his hands, he had haunted the Savoy for hours in the hope of obtaining a glimpse of Ormuz Khan. His vigil had been fruitless, and on returning by a roundabout route to his office he had bitterly charged himself with wasting valuable time upon a side issue. Yet when, later, he had sat in his study endeavouring to arrange his ideas in order, he had discovered many points in his own defence.

If his ineffective surveillance of Ormuz Khan had been dictated by interest in Phil Abingdon rather than by strictly professional motives, it was, nevertheless, an ordinary part of the conduct of such a case. But while he had personally undertaken the matter of his excellency he had left the work of studying the activities of Nicol Brinn to an assistant. He could not succeed in convincing himself that, on the evidence available, the movements of the Oriental gentleman were more important than those of the American.

"Here we are," said Phil Abingdon.

She alighted, and Harley dismissed the cabman and followed the girl into Doctor McMurdoch's house. Here he made the acquaintance of Mrs. McMurdoch, who, as experience had taught him to anticipate, was as plump and merry and vivacious as her husband was lean, gloomy, and taciturn. But she was a perfect well of sympathy, as her treatment of the bereaved girl showed. She took her in her arms and hugged her in a way that was good to see.

"We were waiting for you, dear," she said when the formality of presenting Harley was over. "Are you quite sure that you want to go?"

Phil Abingdon nodded pathetically. She had raised her veil, and Harley could see that her eyes were full of tears. "I should like to see the flowers," she answered.

She was staying at the McMurdoch's house, and as the object at present in view was that of a visit to her old home, from which the funeral of Sir Charles Abingdon was to take place on the morrow, Harley became suddenly conscious of the fact that his presence was inopportune.

"I believe you want to see me, Doctor McMurdoch," he said, turning to the dour physician. "Shall I await your return or do you expect to be detained?"

But Phil Abingdon had her own views on the matter. She stepped up beside him and linked her arm in his.

"Please come with me, Mr. Harley," she pleaded. "I want you to."

As a result he found himself a few minutes later entering the hall of the late Sir Charles's house. The gloved hand resting on his arm trembled, but when he looked down solicitously into Phil Abingdon's face she smiled bravely, and momentarily her clasp tightened as if to reassure him.

It seemed quite natural that she should derive comfort from the presence of this comparative stranger; and neither of the two, as they stood there looking at the tributes to the memory of the late Sir Charles—which overflowed from a neighbouring room into the lobby and were even piled upon the library table—were conscious of any strangeness in the situation.

The first thing that had struck Harley on entering the house had been an overpowering perfume of hyacinths. Now he saw whence it arose; for, conspicuous amid the wreaths and crosses, was an enormous device formed of hyacinths. Its proportions dwarfed those of all the others.

Mrs. Howett, the housekeeper, a sad-eyed little figure, appeared now from behind the bank of flowers. Her grief could not rob her of that Old World manner which was hers, and she saluted the visitors with a bow which promised to develop into a curtsey. Noting the direction of Phil Abingdon's glance, which was set upon a card attached to the wreath of hyacinths: "It was the first to arrive, Miss Phil," she said. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"It's wonderful," said the girl, moving forward and drawing Harley along with her. She glanced from the card up to his face, which was set in a rather grim expression.

"Ormuz Khan has been so good," she said. "He sent his secretary to see if he could be of any assistance yesterday, but I certainly had not expected this."

Her eyes filled with tears again, and, because he thought they were tears of gratitude, Harley clenched his hand tightly so that the muscles of his forearm became taut to Phil Abingdon's touch. She looked up at him, smiling pathetically: "Don't you think it was awfully kind of him?" she asked.

"Very," replied Harley.

A dry and sepulchral cough of approval came from Doctor McMurdoch; and Harley divined with joy that when the ordeal of the next day was over Phil Abingdon would have to face cross-examination by the conscientious Scotsman respecting this stranger whose attentions, if Orientally extravagant, were instinct with such generous sympathy.

For some reason the heavy perfume of the hyacinths affected him unpleasantly. All his old doubts and suspicions found a new life, so that his share in the conversation which presently arose became confined to a few laconic answers to direct questions.

He was angry, and his anger was more than half directed against himself, because he knew that he had no shadow of right to question this girl about her friendships or even to advise her. He determined, however, even at the cost of incurring a rebuke, to urge Doctor McMurdoch to employ all the influence he possessed to terminate an acquaintanceship which could not be otherwise than undesirable, if it was not actually dangerous.

When, presently, the party returned to the neighbouring house of the physician, however, Harley's plans in this respect were destroyed by the action of Doctor McMurdoch, in whose composition tact was not a predominant factor. Almost before they were seated in the doctor's drawing room he voiced his disapproval. "Phil," he said, ignoring a silent appeal from his wife, "this is, mayhap, no time to speak of the matter, but I'm not glad to see the hyacinths."

Phil Abingdon's chin quivered rebelliously, and, to Harley's dismay, it was upon him that she fixed her gaze in replying. "Perhaps you also disapprove of his excellency's kindness?" she said, indignantly.

Harley found himself temporarily at a loss for words. She was perfectly well aware that he disapproved, and now was taking a cruel pleasure in reminding him of the fact that he was not entitled to do so. Had he been capable of that calm analysis to which ordinarily he submitted all psychological problems, he must have found matter for rejoicing in this desire of the girl's to hurt him. "I am afraid, Miss Abingdon," he replied, quietly, "that the matter is not one in which I am entitled to express my opinion."

She continued to look at him challengingly, but:

"Quite right, Mr. Harley," said Doctor McMurdoch, "but if you were, your opinion would be the same as mine."

Mrs. McMurdoch's glance became positively beseeching, but the physician ignored it. "As your father's oldest friend," he continued, "I feel called upon to remark that it isn't usual for strangers to thrust their attentions upon a bereaved family."

"Oh," said Phil Abingdon with animation, "do I understand that this is also your opinion, Mr. Harley?"

"As a man of the world," declared Doctor McMurdoch, gloomily, "it cannot fail to be."

Tardily enough he now succumbed to the silent entreaties of his wife. "I will speak of this later," he concluded. "Mayhap I should not have spoken now."

Tears began to trickle down Phil Abingdon's cheeks.

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" cried little Mrs. McMurdoch, running to her side.

But the girl sprang up, escaping from the encircling arm of the motherly old lady. She shook her head disdainfully, as if to banish tears and weakness, and glanced rapidly around from face to face. "I think you are all perfectly cruel and horrible," she said in a choking voice, turned, and ran out.

A distant door banged.

"H'm," muttered Doctor McMurdoch, "I've put my foot in it."

His wife looked at him in speechless indignation and then followed Phil Abingdon from the room.

IX. TWO REPORTS

On returning to his office Paul Harley found awaiting him the report of the man to whom he had entrusted the study of the movements of Nicol Brinn. His mood was a disturbed one, and he had observed none of his customary precautions in coming from Doctor McMurdoch's house. He wondered if the surveillance which he had once detected had ceased. Perhaps the chambers of Nicol Brinn were the true danger zone upon which these subtle but powerful forces now were focussed. On the other hand, he was quite well aware that his movements might have been watched almost

uninterruptedly since the hour that Sir Charles Abingdon had visited his office.

During the previous day, in his attempt to learn the identity of Ormuz Khan, he had covered his tracks with his customary care. He had sufficient faith in his knowledge of disguise, which was extensive, to believe that those mysterious persons who were interested in his movements remained unaware of the fact that the simple-minded visitor from Vancouver who had spent several hours in and about the Savoy, and Paul Harley of Chancery Lane, were one and the same.

His brain was far too alertly engaged with troubled thoughts of Phil Abingdon to be susceptible to the influence of those delicate etheric waves which he had come to recognize as the note of danger. Practically there had been no development whatever in the investigation, and he was almost tempted to believe that the whole thing was a mirage, when the sight of the typewritten report translated him mentally to the luxurious chambers in Piccadilly.

Again, almost clairvoyantly, he saw the stoical American seated before the empty fireplace, his foot restlessly tapping the fender. Again he heard the curious, high tones: "I'll tell you... You have opened the gates of hell...."

The whole scene, with its tantalizing undercurrent of mystery, was reenacted before his inner vision. He seemed to hear Nicol Brinn, startled from his reverie, exclaim: "I think it was an owl.... We sometimes get them over from the Green Park...."

Why should so simple an incident have produced so singular an effect? For the face of the speaker had been ashen.

Then the pendulum swung inevitably back: "You are all perfectly cruel and horrible...."

Paul Harley clenched his hands, frowning at the Burmese cabinet as though he hated it.

How persistently the voice of Phil Abingdon rang in his ears! He could not forget her lightest words. How hopelessly her bewitching image intruded itself between his reasoning mind and the problem upon which he sought to concentrate.

Miss Smith, the typist, had gone, for it was after six o'clock, and Innes alone was on duty. He came in as Harley, placing his hat and cane upon the big writing table, sat down to study the report.

"Inspector Wessex rang up, Mr. Harley, about an hour ago. He said he would be at the Yard until six.

"Has he obtained any information?" asked Paul Harley, wearily, glancing at his little table clock.

"He said he had had insufficient time to do much in the matter, but that there were one or two outstanding facts which might interest you."

"Did he seem to be surprised?"

"He did," confessed Innes. "He said that Ormuz Khan was a well-known figure in financial circles, and asked me in what way you were interested in him."

"Ah!" murmured Harley. He took up the telephone. "City 400," he said.... "Is that the Commissioner's Office, New Scotland Yard? ... Paul Harley speaking. Would you please inquire if Detective Inspector Wessex has gone?"

While awaiting a reply he looked up at Innes. "Is there anything else?" he asked.

"Only the letters, Mr. Harley."

"No callers?"

"No."

"Leave the letters, then; I will see to them. You need not wait." A moment later, as his secretary bade him good-night and went out of the office:

"Hello," said Harley, speaking into the mouthpiece... "The inspector has gone? Perhaps you would ask him to ring me up in the morning." He replaced the receiver on the hook.

Resting his chin in his hands, he began to read from the typewritten pages before him. His assistant's report was conceived as follows:

'Re Mr. Nicol Brinn of Raleigh House, Piccadilly, W. 1

'Mr. Nicol Brinn is an American citizen, born at Cincinnati, Ohio, February 15, 1884. He is the son of John Nicolas Brinn of the same city, founder of the firm of J. Nicolas Brinn, Incorporated, later reconstituted under the style of Brinn's Universal Electric Supply Corporation.

'Nicol Brinn is a graduate of Harvard. He has travelled extensively in nearly all parts of the world and has access to the best society of Europe and America. He has a reputation for eccentricity, has won numerous sporting events as a gentleman rider; was the first airman to fly over the Rockies;

took part in the Uruguay rebellion of 1904, and held the rank of lieutenant colonel of field artillery with the American forces during the Great War.

'He has published a work on big game and has contributed numerous travel articles to American periodicals. On the death of Mr. Brinn, senior, in 1914, he inherited an enormous fortune and a preponderating influence in the B.U.E.S.C. He has never taken any active part in conduct of the concern, but has lived a restless and wandering life in various parts of the world.

'Mr. Nicol Brinn is a confirmed bachelor. I have been unable to find that he has ever taken the slightest interest in any woman other than his mother throughout his career. Mrs. J. Nicolas Brinn is still living in Cincinnati, and there is said to be a strong bond of affection between mother and son. His movements on yesterday, 4th June, 1921, were as follows:

'He came out of his chambers at eight o'clock and rode for an hour in the park, when he returned and remained indoors until midday. He then drove to the Carlton, where he lunched with the Foreign Secretary, with whom he remained engaged in earnest conversation until ten minutes to three. The Rt. Hon. gentleman proceeded to the House of Commons and Mr. Brinn to an auction at Christie's. He bought two oil paintings. He then returned to his chambers and did not reappear again until seven o'clock. He dined alone at a small and unfashionable restaurant in Soho, went on to his box at Covent Garden, where he remained for an hour, also alone, and then went home. He had no callers throughout the day.'

Deliberately Paul Harley had read the report, only removing his hand from his chin to turn over the pages. Now from the cabinet at his elbow he took out his tin of tobacco and, filling and lighting a pipe, lay back, eyes half closed, considering what he had learned respecting Nicol Brinn.

That he was concerned in the death of Sir Charles Abingdon he did not believe for a moment; but that this elusive case, which upon investigation only seemed the more obscure, was nevertheless a case of deliberate murder he was as firmly convinced as ever. Of the identity of the murderer, of his motive, he had not the haziest idea, but that the cloud which he had pictured as overhanging the life of the late Sir Charles was a reality and not a myth of the imagination he became more completely convinced with each new failure to pick up a clue.

He found himself helplessly tied. In which direction should he move and to what end? Inclination prompted him in one direction, common sense held him back. As was his custom, he took a pencil and wrote upon a little block:

Find means to force Brinn to speak.

He lay back in his chair again, deep in thought, and presently added the note:

Obtain interview with Ormuz Khan.

Just as he replaced the pencil on the table, his telephone bell rang. The caller proved to be his friend, Inspector Wessex.

"Hello, Mr. Harley," said the inspector. "I had occasion to return to the Yard, and they told me you had rung up. I don't know why you are interested in this Ormuz Khan, unless you want to raise a loan."

Paul Harley laughed. "I gather that he is a man of extensive means," he replied, "but hitherto he has remained outside my radius of observation."

"And outside mine," declared the inspector. "He hasn't the most distant connection with anything crooked. It gave me a lot of trouble to find out what little I have found out. Briefly, all I have to tell you is this: Ormuz Khan—who is apparently entitled to be addressed as 'his excellency'—is a director of the Imperial Bank of Iran, and is associated, too, with one of the Ottoman banks. I presume his nationality is Persian, but I can't be sure of it. He periodically turns up in the various big capitals when international loans and that sort of thing are being negotiated. I understand that he has a flat somewhere in Paris, and the Service de Surete tells me that his name is good for several million francs over there. He appears to have a certain fondness for London during the spring and early summer months, and I am told he has a fine place in Surrey. He is at present living at Savoy Court. He appears to be something of a dandy and to be very partial to the fair sex, but nevertheless there is nothing wrong with his reputation, considering, I mean, that the man is a sort of Eastern multimillionaire."

"Ah!" said Harley, who had been listening eagerly. "Is that the extent of your information, Wessex?"

"That's it," replied Wessex, with a laugh. "I hope you'll find it useful, but I doubt it. He hasn't been picking pockets or anything, has he?"

"No," said Harley, shortly. "I don't apprehend that his excellency will ever appear in your province, Wessex. My interest in him is of a purely personal nature. Thanks for all the trouble you have taken."

Paul Harley began to pace the office. From a professional point of view the information was uninteresting enough, but from another point of view it had awakened again that impotent anger which he had too often experienced in these recent, strangely restless days.

At all costs he must see Ormuz Khan, although how he was to obtain access to this man who apparently never left his private apartments (if the day of his vigil at the Savoy had been a typical one) he failed to imagine.

Nevertheless, pausing at the table, he again took up his pencil, and to the note "Obtain interview with Ormuz Khan" he added the one word, underlined:

"To-morrow."

X. HIS EXCELLENCY ORMUZ KHAN

The city clocks were chiming the hour of ten on the following morning when a page from the Savoy approached the shop of Mr. Jarvis, bootmaker, which is situated at no great distance from the hotel. The impudent face of the small boy wore an expression of serio-comic fright as he pushed open the door and entered the shop.

Jarvis, the bootmaker, belonged to a rapidly disappearing class of British tradesmen. He buckled to no one, but took an artistic pride in his own handiwork, criticism from a layman merely provoking a scornful anger which had lost Jarvis many good customers.

He was engaged, at the moment of the page's entrance, in a little fitting room at the back of his cramped premises, but through the doorway the boy could see the red, bespectacled face with its fringe of bristling white beard, in which he detected all the tokens of brewing storm. He whistled softly in self-sympathy.

"Yes, sir," Jarvis was saying to an invisible patron, "it's a welcome sight to see a real Englishman walk into my shop nowadays. London isn't London, sir, since the war, and the Strand will never be the Strand again." He turned to his assistant, who stood beside him, bootjack in hand. "If he sends them back again," he directed, "tell him to go to one of the French firms in Regent Street who cater to dainty ladies." He positively snorted

with indignation, while the page, listening, whistled again and looked down at the parcel which he carried.

"An unwelcome customer, Jarvis?" inquired the voice of the man in the fitting room.

"Quite unwelcome," said Jarvis. "I don't want him. I have more work than I know how to turn out. I wish he would go elsewhere. I wish—"

He paused. He had seen the page boy. The latter, having undone his parcel, was holding out a pair of elegant, fawn-coloured shoes.

"Great Moses!" breathed Jarvis. "He's had the cheek to send them back again!"

"His excellency—" began the page, when Jarvis snatched the shoes from his hand and hurled them to the other end of the shop. His white beard positively bristled.

"Tell his excellency," he shouted, "to go to the devil, with my compliments!"

So positively ferocious was his aspect that the boy, with upraised arm, backed hastily out into the street. Safety won: "Blimey!" exclaimed the youth. "He's the warm goods, he is!"

He paused for several moments, staring in a kind of stupefied admiration at the closed door of Mr. Jarvis's establishment. He whistled again, softly, and then began to run—for the formidable Mr. Jarvis suddenly opened the door. "Hi, boy!" he called to the page. The page hesitated, glancing back doubtfully. "Tell his excellency that I will send round in about half an hour to remeasure his foot."

"D'you mean it?" inquired the boy, impudently—"or is there a catch in it?"

"I'll tan your hide, my lad!" cried the bootmaker—"and I mean that! Take my message and keep your mouth shut."

The boy departed, grinning, and little more than half an hour later a respectable-looking man presented himself at Savoy Court, inquiring of the attendant near the elevator for the apartments of "his excellency," followed by an unintelligible word which presumably represented "Ormuz Khan." The visitor wore a well-brushed but threadbare tweed suit, although his soft collar was by no means clean. He had a short, reddish-brown beard, and very thick, curling hair of the same hue protruded from beneath a bowler hat which had seen long service.

Like Mr. Jarvis, he was bespectacled, and his teeth were much discoloured and apparently broken in front, as is usual with cobblers. His hands, too, were toil-stained and his nails very black. He carried a cardboard box. He seemed to be extremely nervous, and this nervousness palpably increased when the impudent page, who was standing in the lobby, giggled on hearing his inquiry.

"He's second floor," said the youth. "Are you from Hot-Stuff Jarvis?"

"That's right, lad," replied the visitor, speaking with a marked Manchester accent; "from Mr. Jarvis."

"And are you really going up?" inquired the boy with mock solicitude.

"I'm going up right enough. That's what I'm here for."

"Shut up, Chivers," snapped the hall porter "Ring the bell." He glanced at the cobbler. "Second floor," he said, tersely, and resumed his study of a newspaper which he had been reading.

The representative of Mr. Jarvis was carried up to the second floor and the lift man, having indicated at which door he should knock, descended again. The cobbler's nervousness thereupon became more marked than ever, so that a waiter, seeing him looking helplessly from door to door, took pity on him and inquired for whom he was searching.

"His excellency," was the reply; "but I'm hanged if I can remember the number or how to pronounce his name.

The waiter glanced at him oddly. "Ormuz Khan," he said, and rang the bell beside a door. As he hurried away, "Good luck!" he called back.

There was a short interval, and then the door was opened by a man who looked like a Hindu. He wore correct morning dress and through gold-rimmed pince-nez he stared inquiringly at the caller.

"Is his excellency at home?" asked the latter. "I'm from Mr. Jarvis, the bootmaker."

"Oh!" said the other, smiling slightly. "Come in. What is your name?"

"Parker, sir. From Mr. Jarvis."

As the door closed, Parker found himself in a small lobby. Beside an umbrella rack a high-backed chair was placed. "Sit down," he was directed. "I will tell his excellency that you are here."

A door was opened and closed again, and Parker found himself alone. He twirled his bowler hat, which he held in his hand, and stared about the place vacantly. Once he began to whistle, but checked himself and coughed

nervously. Finally the Hindu gentleman reappeared, beckoning to him to enter.

Parker stood up very quickly and advanced, hat in hand.

Then he remembered the box which he had left on the floor, and, stooping to recover it, he dropped his hat. But at last, leaving his hat upon the chair and carrying the box under his arm, he entered a room which had been converted into a very businesslike office.

There was a typewriter upon a table near the window at which someone had evidently been at work quite recently, and upon a larger table in the centre of the room were dispatch boxes, neat parcels of documents, ledgers, works of reference, and all the evidence of keen commercial activity. Crossing the room, the Hindu rapped upon an inner door, opened it, and standing aside, "The man from the bootmaker," he said in a low voice.

Parker advanced, peering about him as one unfamiliar with his surroundings. As he crossed the threshold the door was closed behind him, and he found himself in a superheated atmosphere heavy with the perfume of hyacinths.

The place was furnished as a sitting room, but some of its appointments were obviously importations. Its keynote was orientalism, not of that sensuous yet grossly masculine character which surrounds the wealthy Eastern esthete but quite markedly feminine. There were an extraordinary number of cushions, and many bowls and vases containing hyacinths. What other strange appointments were present Parker was far too nervous to observe.

He stood dumbly before a man who lolled back in a deep, cushioned chair and whose almond-shaped eyes, black as night, were set immovably upon him. This man was apparently young. He wore a rich, brocaded robe, trimmed with marten fur, and out of it his long ivory throat rose statuesquely. His complexion was likewise of this uniform ivory colour, and from his low smooth brow his hair was brushed back in a series of glossy black waves.

His lips were full and very red. As a woman he might have been considered handsome—even beautiful; in a man this beauty was unnatural and repellent. He wore Oriental slippers, fur-lined, and his feet rested on a small ottoman. One long, slender hand lay upon a cushion placed on the chair arm, and a pretty girl was busily engaged in manicuring his

excellency's nails. Although the day held every promise of being uncomfortably hot, already a huge fire was burning in the grate.

As Parker stood before him, the languid, handsome Oriental did not stir a muscle, merely keeping the gaze of his strange black eyes fixed upon the nervous cobbler. The manicurist, after one quick upward glance, continued her work. But in this moment of distraction she had hurt the cuticle of one of those delicate, slender fingers.

Ormuz Khan withdrew his hand sharply from the cushion, glanced aside at the girl, and then, extending his hand again, pushed her away from him. Because of her half-kneeling posture, she almost fell, but managed to recover herself by clutching at the edge of a little table upon which the implements of her trade were spread. The table rocked and a bowl of water fell crashing on the carpet. His excellency spoke. His voice was very musical.

"Clumsy fool," he said. "You have hurt me. Go."

The girl became very white and began to gather up the articles upon the table. "I am sorry," she said, "but—"

"I do not wish you to speak," continued the musical voice; "only to go."

Hurriedly collecting the remainder of the implements and placing them in an attache case, the manicurist hurried from the room. Her eyes were overbright and her lips pathetically tremulous. Ormuz Khan never glanced in her direction again, but resumed his disconcerting survey of Parker. "Yes?" he said.

Parker bumblingly began to remove the lid of the cardboard box which he had brought with him.

"I do not wish you to alter the shoes you have made," said his excellency. "I instructed you to remeasure my foot in order that you might make a pair to fit."

"Yes, sir," said Parker. "Quite so, your excellency." And he dropped the box and the shoes upon the floor. "Just a moment, sir?"

From an inner pocket he drew out a large sheet of white paper, a pencil, and a tape measure. "Will you place your foot upon this sheet of paper, sir?"

Ormuz Khan raised his right foot listlessly.

"Slipper off, please, sir."

"I am waiting," replied the other, never removing his gaze from Parker's face.

"Oh, I beg your pardon sir, your excellency," muttered the bootmaker.

Dropping upon one knee, he removed the furred slipper from a slender, arched foot, bare, of the delicate colour of ivory, and as small as a woman's.

"Now, sir."

The ivory foot was placed upon the sheet of paper, and very clumsily Parker drew its outline. He then took certain measurements and made a number of notes with a stub of thick pencil. Whenever his none too clean hands touched Ormuz Khan's delicate skin the Oriental perceptibly shuddered.

"Of course, sir," said Parker at last, "I should really have taken your measurement with the sock on."

"I wear only the finest silk."

"Very well, sir. As you wish."

Parker replaced paper, pencil, and measure, and, packing up the rejected shoes, made for the door.

"Oh, bootmaker!" came the musical voice.

Parker turned. "Yes, sir?"

"They will be ready by Monday?"

"If possible, your excellency."

"Otherwise I shall not accept them."

Ormuz Khan drew a hyacinth from a vase close beside him and languidly waved it in dismissal.

In the outer room the courteous secretary awaited Parker, and there was apparently no one else in the place, for the Hindu conducted him to the lobby and opened the door.

Parker said "Good morning, sir," and would have departed without his hat had not the secretary smilingly handed it to him.

When, presently, the cobbler emerged from the elevator, below, he paused before leaving the hotel to mop his perspiring brow with a large, soiled handkerchief. The perfume of hyacinths seemed to have pursued him, bringing with it a memory of the handsome, effeminate ivory face of the man above. He was recalled to his senses by the voice of the impudent page.

"Been kicked out, gov'nor?" the youth inquired. "You're the third this morning."

"Is that so?" answered Parker. "Who were the other two, lad?"

"The girl wot comes to do his nails. A stunnin' bird, too. She came down cryin' a few minutes ago. Then—"

"Shut up, Chivers!" cried the hall porter. "You're asking for the sack, and I'm the man to get it for you."

Chivers did not appear to be vastly perturbed by this prospect, and he grinned agreeably at Parker as the latter made his way out into the courtyard.

Any one sufficiently interested to have done so might have found matter for surprise had he followed that conscientious bootmaker as he left the hotel. He did not proceed to the shop of Mr. Jarvis, but, crossing the Strand, mounted a citybound motor bus and proceeded eastward upon it as far as the Law Courts. Here he dismounted and plunged into that maze of tortuous lanes which dissects the triangle formed by Chancery Lane and Holborn.

His step was leisurely, and once he stopped to light his pipe, peering with interest into the shop window of a law stationer. Finally he came to another little shop which had once formed part of a private house. It was of the lock-up variety, and upon the gauze blind which concealed the interior appeared the words: "The Chancery Agency."

Whether the Chancery Agency was a press agency, a literary or a dramatic agency, was not specified, but Mr. Parker was evidently well acquainted with the establishment, for he unlocked the door with a key which he carried and, entering a tiny shop, closed and locked the door behind him again.

The place was not more than ten yards square and the ceiling was very low. It was barely furnished as an office, but evidently Mr. Parker's business was not of a nature to detain him here. There was a second door to be unlocked; and beyond it appeared a flight of narrow stairs—at some time the servant's stair of the partially demolished house which had occupied that site in former days. Relocking this door in turn, Mr. Parker mounted the stair and presently found himself in a spacious and well-furnished bedroom.

This bedroom contained an extraordinary number of wardrobes, and a big dressing table with wing mirrors lent a theatrical touch to the apartment. This was still further enhanced by the presence of all sorts of wigs, boxes of false hair, and other items of make-up. At the table Mr. Parker seated himself, and when, half an hour later, the bedroom door was opened, it was

not Mr. Parker who crossed the book-lined study within and walked through to the private office where Innes was seated writing. It was Mr. Paul Harley.

XI. THE PURPLE STAIN

For more than an hour Harley sat alone, smoking, neglectful of the routine duties which should have claimed his attention. His face was set and grim, and his expression one of total abstraction. In spirit he stood again in that superheated room at the Savoy. Sometimes, as he mused, he would smoke with unconscious vigour, surrounding himself with veritable fog banks. An imaginary breath of hyacinths would have reached him, to conjure up vividly the hateful, perfumed environment of Ormuz Khan.

He was savagely aware of a great mental disorderliness. He recognized that his brain remained a mere whirlpool from which Phyllis Abingdon, the deceased Sir Charles, Nicol Brinn, and another, alternately arose to claim supremacy. He clenched his teeth upon the mouthpiece of his pipe.

But after some time, although rebelliously, his thoughts began to marshal themselves in a certain definite formation. And outstanding, alone, removed from the ordinary, almost from the real, was the bizarre personality of Ormuz Khan.

The data concerning the Oriental visitor, as supplied by Inspector Wessex, had led him to expect quite a different type of character. Inured as Paul Harley was to surprise, his first sentiment as he had set eyes upon the man had been one of sheer amazement.

"Something of a dandy," inadequately described the repellent sensuousness of this veritable potentate, who could contrive to invest a sitting room in a modern hotel with the atmosphere of a secret Eastern household. To consider Ormuz Khan in connection with matters of international finance was wildly incongruous, while the manicurist incident indicated an inherent cruelty only possible in one of Oriental race.

In a mood of complete mental detachment Paul Harley found himself looking again into those black, inscrutable eyes and trying to analyze the elusive quality of their regard. They were unlike any eyes that he had met with. It were folly to count their possessor a negligible quantity.

Nevertheless, it was difficult, because of the fellow's scented effeminacy, to believe that women could find him attractive. But Harley, wise in worldly lore, perceived that the mystery surrounding Ormuz Khan must make a strong appeal to a certain type of female mind. He was forced to admit that some women, indeed many, would be as clay in the hands of the man who possessed those long-lashed, magnetic eyes.

He thought of the pretty manicurist. Mortification he had read in her white face, and pain; but no anger. Yes, Ormuz Khan was dangerous.

In what respect was he dangerous?

"Phil Abingdon!" Harley whispered, and, in the act of breathing the name, laughed at his own folly.

In the name of reason, he mused, what could she find to interest her in a man of Ormuz Khan's type? He was prepared to learn that there was a mystic side to her personality—a phase in her character which would be responsive to the outre and romantic. But he was loath to admit that she could have any place in her affections for the scented devotee of hyacinths.

Thus, as always, his musings brought him back to the same point. He suppressed a groan and, standing up, began to pace the room. To and fro he walked, before the gleaming cabinet, and presently his expression underwent a subtle change. His pipe had long since gone out, but he had failed to observe the fact. His eyes had grown unusually bright—and suddenly he stepped to the table and stooping made a note upon the little writing block.

He rang the bell communicating with the outer office. Innes came in. "Innes," he said, rapidly, "is there anything of really first-rate importance with which I should deal personally?"

"Well," replied the secretary, glancing at some papers which he carried, "there is nothing that could not wait until to-morrow at a pinch."

"The pinch has come," said Harley. "I am going to interview the two most important witnesses in the Abingdon case."

"To whom do you refer, Mr. Harley?"

Innes stared rather blankly, as he made the inquiry, whereupon:

"I have no time to explain," continued Harley. "But I have suddenly realized the importance of a seemingly trivial incident which I witnessed. It is these trivial incidents, Innes, which so often contain the hidden clue."

"What! you really think you have a clue at last?"

"I do." The speaker's face grew grimly serious. "Innes, if I am right, I shall probably proceed to one of two places: the apartments of Ormuz Khan or the chambers of Nicol Brinn. Listen. Remain here until I phone—whatever the hour."

"Shall I advise Wessex to stand by?"

Harley nodded. "Yes—do so. You understand, Innes, I am engaged and not to be disturbed on any account?"

"I understand. You are going out by the private exit?"

"Exactly."

As Innes retired, quietly closing the door, Harley took up the telephone and called Sir Charles Abingdon's number. He was answered by a voice which he recognized.

"This is Paul Harley speaking," he said. "Is that Benson?"

"Yes, sir," answered the butler. "Good morning, sir."

"Good morning, Benson. I have one or two questions to ask you, and there is something I want you to do for me. Miss Abingdon is out, I presume?"

"Yes, sir," replied Benson, sadly. "At the funeral, sir."

"Is Mrs. Howett in?"

"She is, sir."

"I shall be around in about a quarter of an hour, Benson. In the meantime, will you be good enough to lay the dining table exactly as it was laid on the night of Sir Charles's death?"

Benson could be heard nervously clearing his throat, then: "Perhaps, sir," he said, diffidently, "I didn't quite understand you. Lay the table, sir, for dinner?"

"For dinner—exactly. I want everything to be there that was present on the night of the tragedy; everything. Naturally you will have to place different flowers in the vases, but I want to see the same vases. From the soup tureen to the serviette rings, Benson, I wish you to duplicate the dinner table as I remember it, paying particular attention to the exact position of each article. Mrs. Howett will doubtless be able to assist you in this."

"Very good, sir," said Benson—but his voice betokened bewilderment. "I will see Mrs. Howett at once, sir."

"Right. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, sir."

Replacing the receiver, Harley took a bunch of keys from his pocket and, crossing the office, locked the door. He then retired to his private apartments and also locked the communicating door. A few moments later he came out of "The Chancery Agency" and proceeded in the direction of the Strand. Under cover of the wire-gauze curtain which veiled the window he had carefully inspected the scene before emerging. But although his eyes were keen and his sixth sense whispered "Danger-danger!" he had failed to detect anything amiss.

This constant conflict between intuition and tangible evidence was beginning to tell upon him. Either his sixth sense had begun to play tricks or he was the object of the most perfectly organized and efficient system of surveillance with which he had ever come in contact. Once, in the past, he had found himself pitted against the secret police of Moscow, and hitherto he had counted their methods incomparable. Unless he was the victim of an unpleasant hallucination, those Russian spies had their peers in London.

As he alighted from a cab before the house of the late Sir Charles, Benson opened the door. "We have just finished, sir," he said, as Harley ran up the steps. "But Mrs. Howett would like to see you, sir."

"Very good, Benson," replied Harley, handing his hat and cane to the butler. "I will see her in the dining room, please."

Benson throwing open the door, Paul Harley walked into the room which so often figured in his vain imaginings. The table was laid for dinner in accordance with his directions. The chair which he remembered to have occupied was in place and that in which Sir Charles had died was set at the head of the table.

Brows contracted, Harley stood just inside the room, looking slowly about him. And, as he stood so, an interrogatory cough drew his gaze to the doorway. He turned sharply, and there was Mrs. Howett, a pathetic little figure in black.

"Ah, Mrs. Howett," said Harley; kindly, "please try to forgive me for this unpleasant farce with its painful memories. But I have a good reason. I think you know this. Now, as I am naturally anxious to have everything clear before Miss Abingdon returns, will you be good enough to tell me if the table is at present set exactly as on the night that Sir Charles and I came in to dinner?"

"No, Mr. Harley," was the answer, "that was what I was anxious to explain. The table is now laid as Benson left it on that dreadful night."

"Ah, I see. Then you, personally, made some modifications?"

"I rearranged the flowers and moved the centre vase so." The methodical old lady illustrated her words. "I also had the dessert spoons changed. You remember, Benson?"

Benson inclined his head. From a sideboard he took out two silver spoons which he substituted for those already set upon the table.

"Anything else, Mrs. Howett?"

"The table is now as I left it, sir, a few minutes before your arrival. Just after your arrival I found Jones, the parlourmaid—a most incompetent, impudent girl—altering the position of the serviettes. At least, such was my impression."

"Of the serviettes?" murmured Harley.

"She denied it," continued the housekeeper, speaking with great animation; "but she could give no explanation. It was the last straw. She took too many liberties altogether."

As Harley remained silent, the old lady ran on animatedly, but Harley was no longer listening.

"This is not the same table linen?" he asked, suddenly.

"Why, no, sir," replied Benson. "Last week's linen will be at the laundry."

"It has not gone yet," interrupted Mrs. Howett. "I was making up the list when you brought me Mr. Harley's message."

Paul Harley turned to her.

"May I ask you to bring the actual linen used at table on that occasion, Mrs. Howett?" he said. "My request must appear singular, I know, but I assure you it is no idle one."

Benson looked positively stupid, but Mrs. Howett, who had conceived a sort of reverence for Paul Harley, hurried away excitedly.

"Finally, Benson," said Harley, "what else did you bring into the room after Sir Charles and I had entered?"

"Soup, sir. Here is the tureen, on the sideboard, and all the soup plates of the service in use that night. Of course, sir, I can't say which were the actual plates used."

Paul Harley inspected the plates, a set of fine old Derby ware, and gazed meditatively at the silver ladle. "Did the maid, Jones, handle any of these?"

he asked.

"No, sir"—emphatically. "She was preparing to bring the trout from the kitchen."

"But I saw her in the room."

"She had brought in the fish plates, a sauce boat, and two toast racks, sir. She put them here, on the sideboard. But they were never brought to the table."

"H'm. Has Jones left?"

"Yes, sir. She was under notice. But after her rudeness, Mrs. Howett packed her off right away. She left the very next day after poor Sir Charles died."

"Where has she gone?"

"To a married sister, I believe, until she finds a new job. Mrs. Howett has the address."

At this moment Mrs. Howett entered, bearing a tablecloth and a number of serviettes.

"This was the cloth," she said, spreading it out, "but which of the serviettes were used I cannot say."

"Allow me to look," replied Paul Harley.

One by one he began to inspect the serviettes, opening each in turn and examining it critically.

"What have we here!" he exclaimed, presently. "Have blackberries been served within the week, Mrs. Howett?"

"We never had them on the table, Mr. Harley. Sir Charles—God rest him—said they irritated the stomach. Good gracious!" She turned to Benson. "How is it I never noticed those stains, and what can have caused them?"

The serviette which Paul Harley held outstretched was covered all over with dark purple spots.

XII. THE VEIL IS RAISED

Rising from the writing table in the library, Paul Harley crossed to the mantelpiece and stared long and hungrily at a photograph in a silver frame. So closely did he concentrate upon it that he induced a sort of auto-

hypnosis, so that Phil Abingdon seemed to smile at him sadly. Then a shadow appeared to obscure the piquant face. The soft outline changed, subtly; the lips grew more full, became voluptuous; the eyes lengthened and grew languorous. He found himself looking into the face of Ormuz Khan.

"Damn it!" he muttered, awakened from his trance.

He turned aside, conscious of a sudden, unaccountable chill. It might have been caused by the mental picture which he had conjured up, or it might be another of those mysterious warnings of which latterly he had had so many without encountering any positive danger. He stood quite still, listening.

Afterward he sometimes recalled that moment, and often enough asked himself what he had expected to hear. It was from this room, on an earlier occasion, that he had heard the ominous movements in the apartment above. To-day he heard nothing.

"Benson," he called, opening the library door. As the man came along the hall: "I have written a note to Mr. Innes, my secretary," he explained. "There it is, on the table. When the district messenger, for whom you telephoned, arrives, give him the parcel and the note. He is to accept no other receipt than that of Mr. Innes."

"Very good, sir."

Harley took his hat and cane, and Benson opened the front door.

"Good day, sir," said the butler.

"Good day, Benson," called Harley, hurrying out to the waiting cab. "Number 236 South Lambeth Road," he directed the man.

Off moved the taxi, and Harley lay back upon the cushions heaving a long sigh. The irksome period of inaction was ended. The cloud which for a time had dulled his usually keen wits was lifted. He was by no means sure that enlightenment had come in time, but at least he was in hot pursuit of a tangible clue, and he must hope that it would lead him, though tardily, to the heart of this labyrinth which concealed—what?

Which concealed something, or someone, known and feared as Fire-Tongue.

For the moment he must focus upon establishing, beyond query or doubt, the fact that Sir Charles Abingdon had not died from natural causes. Premonitions, intuitions, beliefs resting upon a foundation of strange dreams—these were helpful to himself, if properly employed, but they were

not legal evidence. This first point achieved, the motive of the crime must be sought; and then—the criminal.

"One thing at a time," Harley finally murmured.

Turning his head, he glanced back at the traffic in the street behind him. The action was sheerly automatic. He had ceased to expect to detect the presence of any pursuer. Yet he was convinced that his every movement was closely watched. It was uncanny, unnerving, this consciousness of invisible surveillance. Now, as he looked, he started. The invisible had become the visible.

His cab was just on the point of turning on to the slope of Vauxhall Bridge. And fifty yards behind, speeding along the Embankment, was a small French car. The features of the driver he had no time to observe. But, peering eagerly through the window, showed the dark face of the passenger. The man's nationality it was impossible to determine, but the keen, almost savage interest, betrayed by the glittering black eyes, it was equally impossible to mistake.

If the following car had turned on to the bridge, Harley, even yet, might have entertained a certain doubt. But, mentally putting himself in the pursuer's place, he imagined himself detected and knew at once exactly what he should do. Since this hypothetical course was actually pursued by the other, Harley's belief was confirmed.

Craning his neck, he saw the little French car turn abruptly and proceed in the direction of Victoria Station. Instantly he acted.

Leaning out of the window he thrust a ten-shilling note into the cabman's hand. "Slow down, but don't pull up," he directed. "I am going to jump out just as you pass that lorry ahead. Ten yards further on stop. Get down and crank your engine, and then proceed slowly over the bridge. I shall not want you again."

"Right-oh, sir," said the man, grinning broadly. As a result, immediately he was afforded the necessary cover, Harley jumped from the cab. The man reached back and closed the door, proceeding on his leisurely way. Excepting the driver of the lorry, no one witnessed this eccentric performance, and Harley, stepping on to the footpath, quietly joined the stream of pedestrians and strolled slowly along.

He presently passed the stationary cab without giving any sign of recognition to the dismounted driver. Then, a minute later, the cab overtook

him and was soon lost in the traffic ahead. Even as it disappeared another cab went by rapidly.

Leaning forward in order to peer through the front window was the dark-faced man whom he had detected on the Embankment!

"Quite correct," murmured Harley, dryly. "Exactly what I should have done."

The spy, knowing himself discovered, had abandoned his own car in favour of a passing taxicab, and in the latter had taken up the pursuit.

Paul Harley lighted a cigarette. Oddly enough, he was aware of a feeling of great relief. In the first place, his sixth sense had been triumphantly vindicated; and, in the second place, his hitherto shadowy enemies, with their seemingly supernatural methods, had been unmasked. At least they were human, almost incredibly clever, but of no more than ordinary flesh and blood.

The contest had developed into open warfare. Harley's accurate knowledge of London had enabled him to locate No. 236 South Lambeth Road without recourse to a guide, and now, walking on past the big gas works and the railway station, he turned under the dark arches and pressed on to where a row of unprepossessing dwellings extended in uniform ugliness from a partly demolished building to a patch of waste ground.

That the house was being watched he did not doubt. In fact, he no longer believed subterfuge to be of any avail. He was dealing with dangerously accomplished criminals. How clever they were he had yet to learn; and it was only his keen intuitive which at this juncture enabled him to score a point over his cunning opponents.

He walked quite openly up the dilapidated steps to the door of No. 236, and was about to seize the dirty iron knocker when the door opened suddenly and a girl came out. She was dressed neatly and wore a pseudo fashionable hat from which a heavy figured veil depended so as almost to hide her features. She was carrying a bulging cane grip secured by a brown leather strap.

Seeing Harley on the step, she paused for a moment, then, recovering herself:

"Ellen!" she shouted down the dim passageway revealed by the opening of the door. "Somebody to see you."

Leaving the door open, she hurried past the visitor with averted face. It was well done, and, thus disguised by the thick veil, another man than Paul Harley might have failed to recognize one of whom he had never had more than an imperfect glimpse. But if Paul Harley's memory did not avail him greatly, his unerring instinct never failed.

He grasped the girl's arm. "One moment, Miss Jones," he said, quietly, "it is you I am here to see!"

The girl turned angrily, snatching her arm from his grasp. "You've made a mistake, haven't you?" she cried, furiously. "I don't know you and I don't want to!"

"Be good enough to step inside again. Don't make a scene. If you behave yourself, you have nothing to fear. But I want to talk to you."

He extended his arm to detain her. But she thrust it aside. "My boy's waiting round the corner!" she said, viciously. "Just see what he'll do when I tell him!"

"Step inside," repeated Harley, quietly. "Or accompany me to Kennington Lane Police Station—whichever you think would be the more amusing."

"What d'you mean!" blustered the girl. "You can't kid me. I haven't done anything."

"Then do as I tell you. You have got to answer my questions—either here or at the station. Which shall it be?"

He had realized the facts of the situation from the moment when the girl had made her sudden appearance, and he knew that his only chance of defeating his cunning opponents was to frighten her. Delicate measures would be wasted upon such a character. But even as the girl, flinging herself sullenly about, returned into the passage, he found himself admiring the resourcefulness of his unknown enemies.

A tired-looking woman carrying a child appeared from somewhere and stared apathetically at Harley.

Addressing the angry girl: "Another o' your flames, Polly?" she inquired in a dull voice. "Has he made you change your mind already?"

The girl addressed as "Polly" dropped her grip on the floor and, banging open a door, entered a shabby little sitting room, followed by Harley. Dropping onto a ragged couch, she stared obstinately out of the dirty window.

"Excuse me, madam, for intruding," said Harley to the woman with the baby, "but Polly has some information of use to the police. Oh, don't be alarmed. She has committed no crime. I shall only detain her for a few minutes."

He bowed to the tired-looking woman and closed the sitting-room door. "Now, young woman," he said, sternly, adopting this official manner of his friend, Inspector Wessex, "I am going to give you one warning, and one only. Although I don't think you know it, you have got mixed up with a gang of crooks. Play the game with me, and I'll stand by you. Try any funny business and you'll go to jail."

The official manner had its effect. Miss Jones looked sharply across at the speaker. "I haven't done anything," she said, sullenly.

Paul Harley advanced and stood over her. "What about the trick with the serviettes at Sir Charles Abingdon's?" he asked, speaking the words in slow and deliberate fashion.

The shaft went home, but the girl possessed a stock of obstinate courage. "What about it?" she inquired, but her voice had changed.

"Who made you do it?"

"What's that to you?"

Paul Harley drew out his watch, glanced at the face, and returned the timepiece to his pocket. "I have warned you," he said. "In exactly three minutes' time I shall put you under arrest."

The girl suddenly lifted her veil and, raising her face, looked up at him. At last he had broken down her obstinate resistance. Already he had noted the coarse, elemental formation of her hands, and now, the veil removed, he saw that she belonged to a type of character often found in Wales and closely duplicated in certain parts of London. There was a curious flatness of feature and prominence of upper jaw singularly reminiscent of the primitive Briton. Withal the girl was not unprepossessing in her coarse way. Utter stupidity and dogged courage are the outstanding characteristics of this type. But fear of the law is strong within them.

"Don't arrest me," she said. "I'll tell you."

"Good. In the first place, then, where were you going when I came here?"

"To meet my boy at Vauxhall Station."

"What is his name?"

"I'm not going to tell you. What's he done?"

"He has done murder. What is his name?"

"My God !"whispered the girl, and her face blanched swiftly. "Murder! I —I can't tell you his name—"

"You mean you won't?"

She did not answer.

"He is a very dark man," continued Harley "with black eyes. He is a Hindu."

The girl stared straight before her, dumbly.

"Answer me!" shouted Harley.

"Yes—yes! He is a foreigner."

"A Hindu?"

"I think so."

"He was here five minutes ago?"

"Yes."

"Where was he going to take you?"

"I don't know. He said he could put me in a good job out of London. We had only ten minutes to catch the train. He's gone to get the tickets."

"Where did you meet him?"

"In the Green Park."

"When?"

"About a month ago."

"Was he going to marry you?"

"Yes."

"What did you do to the serviettes on the night Sir Charles died?"

"Oh, my God! I didn't do anything to hurt him—I didn't do anything to hurt him!"

"Answer me."

"Sidney—"

"Oh, he called himself Sidney, did he? It isn't his name. But go on."

"He asked me to get one of the serviettes, with the ring, and to lend it to him."

"You did this?"

"Yes. But he brought it back."

"When?"

"The afternoon—"

"Before Sir Charles's death? Yes. Go on. What did he tell you to do with this serviette?"

"It—was in a box. He said I was not to open the box until I put the serviette on the table, and that it had to be put by Sir Charles's plate. It had to be put there just before the meal began."

"What else?"

"I had to burn the box."

"Well?"

"That night I couldn't see how it was to be done. Benson had laid the dinner table and Mrs. Howett was pottering about. Then, when I thought I had my chance, Sir Charles sat down in the dining room and began to read. He was still there and I had the box hidden in the hall stand, all ready, when —Sidney—rang up."

"Rang you up?"

"Yes. We had arranged it. He said he was my brother. I had to tell him I couldn't do it."

"Yes!"

"He said: 'You must.' I told him Sir Charles was in the dining room, and he said: 'I'll get him away. Directly he goes, don't fail to do what I told you'."

"And then?"

"Another 'phone call came—for Sir Charles. I knew who it was, because I had told Sidney about the case Sir Charles was attending in the square. When Sir Charles went out I changed the serviettes. Mrs. Howett found me in the dining room and played hell. But afterward I managed to burn the box in the kitchen. That's all I know. What harm was there?"

"Harm enough!" said Harley, grimly. "And now—what was it that 'Sidney' stole from Sir Charles's bureau in the study?"

The girl started and bit her lip convulsively. "It wasn't stealing," she muttered. "It wasn't worth anything."

"Answer me. What did he take?"

"He took nothing."

"For the last time: answer."

"It wasn't Sidney who took it. I took it."

"You took what?"

"A paper."

"You mean that you stole Sir Charles's keys and opened his bureau?"

"There was no stealing. He was out and they were lying on his dressing table. Sidney had told me to do it the first time I got a chance."

"What had he told you to do?"

"To search through Sir Charles's papers and see if there was anything with the word 'Fire-Tongue' in it!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Harley, a note of suppressed triumph in his voice. "Go on."

"There was only one paper about it," continued the girl, now speaking rapidly, "or only one that I could find. I put the bureau straight again and took this paper to Sidney."

"But you must have read the paper?"

"Only a bit of it. When I came to the word 'Fire-Tongue,' I didn't read any more."

"What was it about—the part you did read?"

"The beginning was all about India. I couldn't understand it. I jumped a whole lot. I hadn't much time and I was afraid Mrs. Howett would find me. Then, further on, I came to 'Fire-Tongue'."

"But what did it say about 'Fire-Tongue'?"

"I couldn't make it out, sir. Oh, indeed I'm telling you the truth! It seemed to me that Fire-Tongue was some sort of mark."

"Mark?"

"Yes—a mark Sir Charles had seen in India, and then again in London—"

"In London! Where in London?"

"On someone's arm."

"What! Tell me the name of this person!"

"I can't remember, sir! Oh, truly I can't."

"Was the name mentioned?"

"Yes."

"Was it Armand?"

"No."

"Ormond?"

"No."

"Anything like Ormond?"

The girl shook her head.

"It was not Ormuz Khan?"

"No. I am sure it wasn't."

Paul Harley's expression underwent a sudden change. "Was it Brown?" he asked.

She hesitated. "I believe it did begin with a B." she admitted.

"Was it Brunn?"

"No! I remember, sir. It was Brinn!"

"Good God!" muttered Harley. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Do you know any one of that name?"

"No, sir."

"And is this positively all you remember?"

"On my oath, it is."

"How often have you seen Sidney since your dismissal?"

"I saw him on the morning I left."

"And then not again until to-day?"

"No."

"Does he live in London?"

"No. He is a valet to a gentleman who lives in the country."

"How do you know?"

"He told me."

"What is the name of the place?"

"I don't know."

"Once again—what is the name of the place?"

The girl bit her lip.

"Answer!" shouted Harley.

"I swear, sir," cried the girl, beginning suddenly to sob, "that I don't know! Oh, please let me go! I swear I have told you all I know!"

"Good!"

Paul Harley glanced at his watch, crossed the room, and opened the door. He turned. "You can go now," he said. "But I don't think you will find Sidney waiting!"

It wanted only three minutes to midnight, and Innes, rather haggard and anxious-eyed, was pacing Paul Harley's private office when the 'phone bell rang. Eagerly he took up the receiver.

"Hullo!" came a voice. "That you, Innes?"

"Mr. Harley!"cried Innes. "Thank God you are safe! I was growing desperately anxious!"

"I am by no means safe, Innes! I am in one of the tightest corners of my life! Listen: Get Wessex! If he's off duty, get Burton. Tell him to bring—"

The voice ceased.

"Hullo!—Mr. Harley!" called Innes. "Mr. Harley!"

A faint cry answered him. He distinctly heard the sound of a fall. Then the other receiver was replaced on the hook.

"Merciful Heavens!" whispered Innes. "What has happened? Where was he speaking from? What can I do?"

XIII. NICOL BRINN HAS A VISITOR

It was close upon noon, but Nicol Brinn had not yet left his chambers. From that large window which overlooked Piccadilly he surveyed the prospect with dull, lack-lustre eyes. His morning attire was at least as tightly fitting as that which he favoured in the evening, and now, hands clasped behind his back and an unlighted cigar held firmly in the left corner of his mouth, he gazed across the park with a dreamy and vacant regard. One very familiar with this strange and taciturn man might have observed that his sallow features looked even more gaunt than usual. But for any trace of emotion in that stoic face the most expert physiognomist must have sought in vain.

Behind the motionless figure the Alaskan ermine and Manchurian leopards stared glassily across the room. The flying lemur continued apparently to contemplate the idea of swooping upon the head of the tigress where she crouched upon her near-by pedestal. The death masks grinned; the Egyptian priestess smiled. And Nicol Britain, expressionless, watched the traffic in Piccadilly.

There came a knock at the door.

"In," said Nicol Brinn.

Hoskins, his manservant, entered: "Detective Inspector Wessex would like to see you, sir."

Nicol Brinn did not turn around. "In," he repeated.

Silently Hoskins retired, and, following a short interval, ushered into the room a typical detective officer, a Scotland Yard man of the best type. For Detective Inspector Wessex no less an authority than Paul Harley had predicted a brilliant future, and since he had attained to his present rank while still a comparatively young man, the prophecy of the celebrated private investigator was likely to be realized. Nicol Brinn turned and bowed in the direction of a large armchair.

"Pray sit down, Inspector," he said.

The high, monotonous voice expressed neither surprise nor welcome, nor any other sentiment whatever.

Detective Inspector Wessex returned the bow, placed his bowler hat upon the carpet, and sat down in the armchair. Nicol Brinn seated himself upon a settee over which was draped a very fine piece of Persian tapestry, and stared at his visitor with eyes which expressed nothing but a sort of philosophic stupidity, but which, as a matter of fact, photographed the personality of the man indelibly upon that keen brain.

Detective Inspector Wessex cleared his throat and did not appear to be quite at ease.

"What is it?" inquired Nicol Brinn, and proceeded to light his cigar.

"Well, sir," said the detective, frankly, "it's a mighty awkward business, and I don't know just how to approach it."

"Shortest way," drawled Nicol Brinn. "Don't study me."

"Thanks," said Wessex, "I'll do my best. It's like this"—he stared frankly at the impassive face: "Where is Mr. Paul Harley?"

Nicol Brinn gazed at the lighted end of his cigar meditatively for a moment and then replaced it in the right and not in the left corner of his mouth. Even to the trained eye of the detective inspector he seemed to be quite unmoved, but one who knew him well would have recognized that this simple action betokened suppressed excitement.

"He left these chambers at ten-fifteen on Wednesday night," replied the American. "I had never seen him before and I have never seen him since."

"Sure?"

"Quite."

"Could you swear to it before a jury?"

"You seem to doubt my word."

Detective Inspector Wessex stood up. "Mr. Brinn," he said, "I am in an awkward corner. I know you for a man with a fine sporting reputation, and therefore I don't doubt your word. But Mr. Paul Harley disappeared last night."

At last Nicol Brinn was moved. A second time he took the cigar from his mouth, gazed at the end reflectively, and then hurled the cigar across the room into the hearth. He stood up, walked to a window, and stared out. "Just sit quiet a minute," came the toneless voice. "You've hit me harder than you know. I want to think it out."

At the back of the tall, slim figure Detective Inspector Wessex stared with a sort ef wonder. Mr. Nicol Brinn of Cincinnati was a conundrum which he found himself unable to catalogue, although in his gallery of queer characters were many eccentric and peculiar. If Nicol Brinn should prove to be crooked, then automatically he became insane. This Wessex had reasoned out even before he had set eyes upon the celebrated American traveller. His very first glimpse of Nicol Brinn had confirmed his reasoning, except that the cool, calm strength of the man had done much to upset the theory of lunacy.

Followed an interval of unbroken silence. Not even the ticking of a clock could be heard in that long, singularly furnished apartment. Then, as the detective continued to gaze upon the back of Mr. Nicol Brinn, suddenly the latter turned.

"Detective Inspector Wessex," he said, "there has been a cloud hanging over mv head for seven years. That cloud is going to burst very soon, and it looks as if it were going to do damage."

"I don't understand you, sir," replied the detective, bluntly. "But I have been put in charge of the most extraordinary case that has ever come my way and I'll ask you to make yourself as clear as possible."

"I'll do all I can," Nicol Brinn assured him. "But first tell me something: Why have you come to me for information in respect to Mr. Paul Harley?"

"I'll answer your question," said Wessex, and the fact did not escape the keen observing power of Nicol Brinn that the detective's manner had grown guarded. "He informed Mr. Innes, his secretary, before setting out, that he was coming here to your chambers."

Nicol Brinn stared blankly at the speaker. "He told him that? When?"

"Yesterday."

"That he was coming here?"

"He did."

Nicol Brinn sat down again upon the settee. "Detective Inspector," said he, "I give you my word of honour as a gentleman that I last saw Mr. Paul Harley at ten-fifteen on Wednesday night. Since then, not only have I not seen him, but I have received no communication from him."

The keen glance of the detective met and challenged the dull glance of the speaker. "I accept your word, sir," said Wessex, finally, and he sighed and scratched his chin in the manner of a man hopelessly puzzled.

Silence fell again. The muted sounds of Piccadilly became audible in the stillness. Cabs and cars rolled by below, their occupants all unaware of the fact that in that long, museumlike room above their heads lay the key to a tragedy and the clue to a mystery.

"Look here, sir," said the detective, suddenly, "the result of Mr. Paul Harley's investigations right up to date has been placed in my hands, together with all his notes. I wonder if you realize the fact that, supposing Mr. Harley does not return, I am in repossession of sufficient evidence to justify me in putting you under arrest?"

"I see your point quite clearly," replied Nirol Brinn. "I have seen my danger since the evening that Mr Paul Harley walked into this room: but I'll confess I did not anticipate this particular development."

"To get right down to business," said Wessex, "if Mr. Paul Harley did not come here, where, in your idea, did he go?"

Nicol Brinn considered the speaker meditatively. "If I knew that," said he, "maybe I could help. I told him here in this very room that the pair of us were walking on the edge of hell. I don't like to say it, and you don't know all it means, but in my opinion he has taken a step too far."

Detective Inspector Wessex stood up impatiently. "You have already talked in that strain to Mr. Harley," he said, a bit brusquely. "Mr. Innes has reported something of the conversation to me. But I must ask you to remember that, whereas Mr. Paul Harley is an unofficial investigator, I am an officer of the Criminal Investigation Department, and figures of speech are of no use to me. I want facts. I want plain speaking. I ask you for help and you answer in parables. Now perhaps I am saying too much, and perhaps I am not, but that Mr. Harley was right in what he believed, the

circumstances of his present disappearance go to prove. He learned too much about something called Fire-Tongue."

Wessex spoke the word challengingly, staring straight into the eyes of Nicol Brinn, but the latter gave no sign, and Wessex, concealing his disappointment, continued: "You know more about Fire-Tongue than you ever told Mr. Paul Harley. All you know I have got to know. Mr. Harley has been kidnapped, perhaps done to death."

"Why do you say so?" asked Nicol Brinn, rapidly.

"Because I know it is so. It does not matter how I know."

"You are certain that his absence is not voluntary?"

"We have definite evidence to that effect."

"I don't expect you to be frank with me; Detective Inspector, but I'll be as frank with you as I can be. I haven't the slightest idea in the world where Mr. Harley is. But I have information which, if I knew where he was, would quite possibly enable me to rescue him."

"Provided he is alive!" added Wessex, angrily.

"What leads you to suppose that he is not?"

"If he is alive, he is a prisoner."

"Good God!" said Nicol Brinn in a low voice. "It has come." He took a step toward the detective. "Mr. Wessex," he continued, "I don't tell you to do whatever your duty indicates; I know you will do it. But in the interests of everybody concerned I have a request to make. Have me watched if you like—I suppose that's automatic. But whatever happens, and wherever your suspicions point, give me twenty-four hours. As I think you can see, I am a man who thinks slowly, but moves with a rush. You can believe me or not, but I am even more anxious than you are to see this thing through. You think I know what lies back of it all, and I don't say that you are not right. But one thing you don't know, and that thing I can't tell you. In twenty-four hours I might be able to tell you. Whatever happens, even if poor Harley is found dead, don't hamper my movements between now and this time tomorrow."

Wessex, who had been watching the speaker intently, suddenly held out his hand. "It's a bet!" he said. "It's my case, and I'll conduct it in my own way."

"Mr. Wessex," replied Nicol Brinn, taking the extended hand, "I think you are a clever man. There are questions you would like to ask me, and

there are questions I would like to ask you. But we both realize the facts of the situation, and we are both silent. One thing I'll say: You are in the deadliest peril you have ever known. Be careful. Believe me I mean it. Be very careful."

XIV. WESSEX GETS BUSY

Innes rose from the chair usually occupied by Paul Harley as Detective Inspector Wessex, with a very blank face, walked into the office. Innes looked haggard and exhibited unmistakable signs of anxiety. Since he had received that dramatic telephone message from his chief he had not spared himself for a moment. The official machinery of Scotland Yard was at work endeavouring to trace the missing man, but since it had proved impossible to find out from where the message had been sent, the investigation was handicapped at the very outset. Close inquiries at the Savoy Hotel had shown that Harley had not been there. Wessex, who was a thorough artist within his limitations, had satisfied himself that none of the callers who had asked for Ormuz Khan, and no one who had loitered about the lobbies, could possibly have been even a disguised Paul Harley.

To Inspector Wessex the lines along which Paul Harley was operating remained a matter of profound amazement and mystification. His interview with Mr. Nicol Brinn had only served to baffle him more hopelessly than ever. The nature of Paul Harley's inquiries—inquiries which, presumably from the death of Sir Charles Abingdon, had led him to investigate the movements of two persons of international repute, neither apparently having even the most remote connection with anything crooked—was a conundrum for the answer to which the detectlve inspector sought in vain.

"I can see you have no news," said Innes, dully.

"To be perfectly honest," replied Wessex, "I feel like a man who is walking in his sleep. Except for the extraordinary words uttered by the late Sir Charles Abingdon, I fail to see that there is any possible connection between his death and Mr. Nicol Brinn. I simply can't fathom what Mr. Harley was working upon. To my mind there is not the slightest evidence of

foul play in the case. There is no motive; apart from which, there is absolutely no link."

"Nevertheless," replied Innes, slowly, "you know the chief, and therefore you know as well as I do that he would not have instructed me to communicate with you unless he had definite evidence in his possession. It is perfectly clear that he was interrupted in the act of telephoning. He was literally dragged away from the instrument."

"I agree," said Wessex. "He had got into a tight corner somewhere right enough. But where does Nicol Brinn come in?"

"How did he receive your communication?"

"Oh, it took him fairly between the eyes. There is no denying that. He knows something."

"What he knows," said Innes, slowly, "is what Mr. Harley learned last night, and what he fears is what has actually befallen the chief."

Detective Inspector Wessex stood beside the Burmese cabinet, restlessly drumming his fingers upon its lacquered surface. "I am grateful for one thing," he said. "The press has not got hold of this story."

"They need never get hold of it if you are moderately careful."

"For several reasons I am going to be more than moderately careful. Whatever Fire-Tongue may be, its other name is sudden death! It's a devil of a business; a perfect nightmare. But—" he paused—

"I am wondering what on earth induced Mr. Harley to send that parcel of linen to the analyst."

"The result of the analysis may prove that the chief was not engaged upon any wild-goose chase."

"By heavens!" Wessex sprang up, his eyes brightened, and he reached for his hat, "that gives me an idea!"

"The message with the parcel was written upon paper bearing the letterhead of the late Sir Charles Abingdon. So Mr. Harley evidently made his first call there! I'm off, sir! The trail starts from that house!"

Leaving Innes seated at the big table with an expression of despair upon his face, Detective Inspector Wessex set out. He blamed himself for wasting time upon the obvious, for concentrating too closely upon the clue given by Harley's last words to Innes before leaving the office in Chancery Lane. It was poor workmanship. He had hoped to take a short cut, and it had proved, as usual, to be a long one. Now, as he sat in a laggard cab feeling that every

minute wasted might be a matter of life and death, he suddenly became conscious of personal anxiety. He was a courageous, indeed a fearless, man, and he was subconsciously surprised to find himself repeating the words of Nicol Brinn: "Be careful—be very careful!" With all the ardour of the professional, he longed to find a clue which should lead him to the heart of the mystery.

Innes had frankly outlined the whole of Paul Harley's case to date, and Detective Inspector Wessex, although he had not admitted the fact, had nevertheless recognized that from start to finish the thing did not offer one single line of inquiry which he would have been capable of following up. That Paul Harley had found material to work upon, had somehow picked up a definite clue from this cloudy maze, earned the envious admiration of the Scotland Yard man.

Arrived at his destination, he asked to see Miss Abingdon, and was shown by the butler into a charmingly furnished little sitting room which was deeply impressed with the personality of its dainty owner. It was essentially and delightfully feminine. Yet in the decorations and in the arrangement of the furniture there was a note of independence which was almost a note of defiance. Phyllis Abingdon, an appealingly pathetic figure in her black dress, rose to greet the inspector.

"Don't be alarmed, Miss Abingdon," he said, kindly. "My visit does not concern you personally in any way, but I thought perhaps you might be able to help me trace Mr. Paul Harley."

Wessex had thus expressed himself with the best intentions, but even before the words were fully spoken he realized with a sort of shock that he could not well have made a worse opening. Phil Abingdon's eyes seemed to grow alarmingly large. She stood quite still, twisting his card between her supple fingers.

"Mr. Harley!" she whispered.

"I did not want to alarm you," said the detective, guiltily, "but—" He stopped, at a loss for words.

"Has something happened to him?"

"I am sorry if I have alarmed you," he assured her, "but there is some doubt respecting Mr. Harley's present whereabouts. Have you any idea where he went when he left this house yesterday?"

"Yes, yes. I know where he went, quite well."

"Benson, the butler, told me all about it when I came in." Phil Abingdon spoke excitedly, and took a step nearer Wessex. "He went to call upon Jones, our late parlourmaid."

"Late parlourmaid?" echoed Wessex, uncomprehendingly.

"Yes. He seemed to think he had made a discovery of importance."

"Something to do with a parcel which he sent away from here to the analyst?"

"Yes! I have been wondering whatever it could be. In fact, I rang up his office this morning, but learned that he was out. It was a serviette which he took away. Did you know that?"

"I did know it, Miss Abingdon. I called upon the analyst. I understand you were out when Mr. Harley came. May I ask who interviewed him?"

"He saw Benson and Mrs. Howett, the housekeeper."

"May I also see them?"

"Yes, with pleasure. But please tell me"—Phil Abingdon looked up at him pleadingly—"do you thmk something—something dreadful has happened to Mr. Harley?"

"Don't alarm yourself unduly," said Wessex. "I hope before the day is over to be in touch with him."

As a matter of fact, he had no such hope. It was a lie intended to console the girl, to whom the news of Harley's disappearance seemed to have come as a terrible blow. More and more Wessex found himself to be groping in the dark. And when, in response to the ringing of the bell, Benson came in and repeated what had taken place on the previous day, the detective's state of mystification grew even more profound. As a matter of routine rather than with any hope of learning anything useful, he interviewed Mrs. Howett; but the statement of the voluble old lady gave no clue which Wessex could perceive to possess the slightest value.

Both witnesses having been dismissed, he turned again to Phil Abingdon, who had been sitting watching him with a pathetic light of hope in her eyes throughout his examination of the butler and Mrs. Howett.

"The next step is clear enough," he said, brightly. "I am off to South Lambeth Road. The woman Jones is the link we are looking for."

"But the link with what, Mr. Wessex?" asked Phil Abingdon. "What is it all about?—what does it all mean?"

"The link with Mr. Paul Harley," replied Wessex. He moved toward the door.

"But won't you tell me something more before you go?" said the girl, beseechingly. "I—I—feel responsible if anything has happened to Mr. Harley. Please be frank with me. Are you afraid he is—in danger?"

"Well, miss," replied the detective, haltingly, "he rang up his secretary, Mr. Innes, last night—we don't know where from—and admitted that he was in a rather tight corner. I don't believe for a moment that he is in actual danger, but he probably has—" again he hesitated—"good reasons of his own for remaining absent at present."

Phil Abingdon looked at him doubtingly. "I am almost afraid to ask you," she said in a low voice, "but—if you hear anything, will you ring me up?"

"I promise to do so."

Chartering a more promising-looking cab than that in which he had come, Detective Inspector Wessex proceeded to 236 South Lambeth Road. He had knocked several times before the door was opened by the woman to whom the girl Jones had called on the occasion of Harley's visit.

"I am a police officer," said the detective inspector, "and I have called to see a woman named Jones, formerly in the employ of Sir Charles Abingdon."

"Polly's gone," was the toneless reply.

"Gone? Gone where?"

"She went away last night to a job in the country."

"What time last night?"

"I can't remember the time. Just after a gentleman had called here to see her."

"Someone from the police?"

"I don't know. She seemed to be very frightened."

"Were you present when he interviewed her?"

"No."

"After he had gone, what did Polly do?"

"Sat and cried for about half an hour, then Sidney came for her."

"Sidney?"

"Her boy—the latest one."

"Describe Sidney."

"A dark fellow, foreign."

"French—German?"

"No. A sort of Indian, like."

"Indian?" snapped Wessex. "What do you mean by Indian?"

"Very dark," replied the woman without emotion, swinging a baby she held to and fro in a methodical way which the detective found highly irritating.

"You mean a native of India?"

"Yes, I should think so. I never noticed him much. Polly has so many."

"How long has she known this man?"

"Only a month or so, but she is crazy about him."

"And when he came last night she went away with him?"

"Yes. She was all ready to go before the other gentleman called. He must have told her something which made her think it was all off, and she was crazy with joy when Sidney turned up. She had all her things packed, and off she went."

Experience had taught Detective Inspector Wessex to recognize the truth when he met it, and he did not doubt the statement of the woman with the baby. "Can you give me any idea where this man Sidney came from?" he asked.

"I am afraid I can't," replied the listless voice. "He was in the service of some gentleman in the country; that's all I know about him."

"Did Polly leave no address to which letters were to be forwarded?"

"No; she said she would write."

"One other point," said Wessex, and he looked hard into the woman's face: "What do you know about Fire-Tongue?"

He was answered by a stare of blank stupidity.

"You heard me?"

"Yes, I heard you, but I don't know what you are talking about."

Quick decisions are required from every member of the Criminal Investigation Department, and Detective Inspector Wessex came to one now.

"That will do for the present," he said, turned, and ran down the steps to the waiting cab.

XV. NAIDA

Dusk was falling that evening. Gaily lighted cars offering glimpses of women in elaborate toilets and of their black-coated and white-shirted cavaliers thronged Piccadilly, bound for theatre or restaurant. The workaday shutters were pulled down, and the night life of London had commenced. The West End was in possession of an army of pleasure seekers, but Nicol Brinn was not among their ranks. Wearing his tightly-buttoned dinner jacket, he stood, hands clasped behind him, staring out of the window as Detective Inspector Wessex had found him at noon. Only one who knew him very well could have detected the fact that anxiety was written upon that Sioux-like face. His gaze seemed to be directed, not so much upon the fading prospect of the park, as downward, upon the moving multitude in the street below. Came a subdued knocking at the door.

"In," said Nicol Brinn.

Hoskins, the neat manservant, entered. "A lady to see you, sir."

Nicol Brinn turned in a flash. For one fleeting instant the dynamic force beneath the placid surface exhibited itself in every line of his gaunt face. He was transfigured; he was a man of monstrous energy, of tremendous enthusiasm. Then the enthusiasm vanished. He was a creature of stone again; the familiar and taciturn Nicol Brinn, known and puzzled over in the club lands of the world.

"Name?"

"She gave none."

"English?"

"No, sir, a foreign lady."

"In."

Hoskins having retired, and having silently closed the door, Nicol Brinn did an extraordinary thing, a thing which none of his friends in London, Paris, or New York would ever have supposed him capable of doing. He raised his clenched hands. "Please God she has come," he whispered. "Dare I believe it? Dare I believe it?"

The door was opened again, and Hoskins, standing just inside, announced: "The lady to see you, sir."

He stepped aside and bowed as a tall, slender woman entered the room. She wore a long wrap trimmed with fur, the collar turned up about her face.

Three steps forward she took and stopped. Hoskins withdrew and closed the door.

At that, while Nicol Brinn watched her with completely transfigured features, the woman allowed the cloak to slip from her shoulders, and, raising her head, extended both her hands, uttering a subdued cry of greeting that was almost a sob. She was dark, with the darkness of the East, but beautiful with a beauty that was tragic. Her eyes were glorious wells of sadness, seeming to mirror a soul that had known a hundred ages. Withal she had the figure of a girl, slender and supple, possessing the poetic grace and poetry of movement born only in the Orient.

"Naida!" breathed Nicol Brinn, huskily. "Naida!"

His high voice had softened, had grown tremulous. He extended his hands with a groping movement The woman laughed shudderingly.

Her cloak lying forgotten upon the carpet, she advanced toward him.

She wore a robe that was distinctly Oriental without being in the slightest degree barbaric. Her skin was strangely fair, and jewels sparkled upon her fingers. She conjured up dreams of the perfumed luxury of the East, and was a figure to fire the imagination. But Nicol Brinn seemed incapable of movement; his body was inert, but his eyes were on fire. Into the woman's face had come anxiety that was purely feminine.

"Oh, my big American sweetheart," she whispered, and, approaching him with a sort of timidity, laid her little hands upon his arm. "Do you still think I am beautiful?"

"Beautiful!"

No man could have recognized the voice of Nicol Brinn. Suddenly his arms were about her like bands of iron, and with a long, wondering sigh she lay back looking up into his face, while he gazed hungrily into her eyes. His lips had almost met hers when softly, almost inaudibly, she sighed: "Nicol!"

She pronounced the name queerly, giving to i the value of ee, and almost dropping the last letter entirely.

Their lips met, and for a moment they clung together, this woman of the East and man of the West, in utter transgression of that law which England's poet has laid down. It was a reunion speaking of a love so deep as to be sacred.

Lifting the woman in his arms lightly as a baby, he carried her to the settee between the two high windows and placed her there amid Oriental

cushions, where she looked like an Eastern queen. He knelt at her feet and, holding both her hands, looked into her face with that wondering expression in which there was something incredulous and something sorrowful; a look of great and selfless tenderness. The face of Naida was lighted up, and her big eyes filled with tears. Disengaging one of her jewelled hands, she ruffled Nicol Brinn's hair.

"My Nicol," she said, tenderly. "Have I changed so much?"

Her accent was quaint and fascinating, but her voice was very musical. To the man who knelt at her feet it was the sweetest music in the world.

"Naida," he whispered. "Naida. Even yet I dare not believe that you are here."

"You knew I would come?"

"How was I to know that you would see my message?"

She opened her closed left hand and smoothed out a scrap of torn paper which she held there. It was from the "Agony" column of that day's Times.

N. November 23, 1913. N.B. See Telephone Directory.

"I told you long, long ago that I would come if ever you wanted me."

"Long, long ago," echoed Nicol Brinn. "To me it has seemed a century; to-night it seems a day."

He watched her with a deep and tireless content. Presently her eyes fell. "Sit here beside me," she said. "I have not long to be here. Put your arms round me. I have something to tell you."

He seated himself beside her on the settee, and held her close. "My Naida!" he breathed softly.

"Ah, no, no!" she entreated. "Do you want to break my heart?"

He suddenly released her, clenched his big hands, and stared down at the carpet. "You have broken mine."

Impulsively Naida threw her arms around his neck, coiling herself up lithely and characteristically beside him.

"My big sweetheart," she whispered, crooningly. "Don't say it—don't say it."

"I have said it. It is true."

Turning, fiercely he seized her. "I won't let you go!" he cried, and there was a strange light in his eyes. "Before I was helpless, now I am not. This time you have come to me, and you shall stay."

She shrank away from him terrified, wild-eyed. "Oh, you forget, you forget!"

"For seven years I have tried to forget. I have been mad, but to-night I am sane."

"I trusted you, I trusted you!" she moaned.

Nicol Brinn clenched his teeth grimly for a moment, and then, holding her averted face very close to his own, he began to speak in a low, monotonous voice. "For seven years," he said, "I have tried to die, because without you I did not care to live. I have gone into the bad lands of the world and into the worst spots of those bad lands. Night and day your eyes have watched me, and I have wakened from dreams of your kisses and gone out to court murder. I have earned the reputation of being something more than human, but I am not. I had everything that life could give me except you. Now I have got you, and I am going to keep you."

Naida began to weep silently. The low, even voice of Nicol Brinn ceased. He could feel her quivering in his grasp; and, as she sobbed, slowly, slowly the fierce light faded from his eyes.

"Naida, my Naida, forgive me," he whispered.

She raised her face, looking up to him pathetically. "I came to you, I came to you," she moaned. "I promised long ago that I would come. What use is it, all this? You know, you know! Kill me if you like. How often have I asked you to kill me. It would be sweet to die in your arms. But what use to talk so? You are in great danger or you would not have asked me to come. If you don't know it, I tell you—you are in great danger."

Nicol Brinn released her, stood up, and began slowly to pace about the room. He deliberately averted his gaze from the settee. "Something has happened," he began, "which has changed everything. Because you are here I know that—someone else is here."

He was answered by a shuddering sigh, but he did not glance in the direction of the settee.

"In India I respected what you told me. Because you were strong, I loved you the more. Here in England I can no longer respect the accomplice of assassins."

"Assassins? What, is this something new?"

"With a man's religion, however bloodthirsty it may be, I don't quarrel so long as he sincerely believes in it. But for private assassination I have no

time and no sympathy." It was the old Nicol Brinn who was speaking, coldly and incisively. "That—something we both know about ever moved away from those Indian hills was a possibility I had never considered. When it was suddenly brought home to me that you, you, might be here in London, I almost went mad. But the thing that made me realize it was a horrible thing, a black, dastardly thing. See here."

He turned and crossed to where the woman was crouching, watching him with wide-open, fearful eyes. He took both her hands and looked grimly into her face. "For seven years I have walked around with a silent tongue and a broken heart. All that is finished. I am going to speak."

"Ah, no, no!" She was on her feet, her face a mask of tragedy. "You swore to me, you swore to me!"

"No oath holds good in the face of murder."

"Is that why you bring me here? Is that what your message means?"

"My message means that because of—the thing you know about—I am suspected of the murder."

"You? You?"

"Yes, I, I! Good God! when I realize what your presence here means, I wish more than ever that I had succeeded in finding death."

"Please don't say it," came a soft, pleading voice. "What can I do? What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to release me from that vow made seven years ago."

Naida uttered a stifled cry. "How is it possible? You understand that it is not possible."

Nicol Brinn seized her by the shoulders. "Is it possible for me to remain silent while men are murdered here in a civilized country?"

"Oh," moaned Naida, "what can I do, what can I do?"

"Give me permission to speak and stay here. Leave the rest to me."

"You know I cannot stay, my Nicol," she replied, sadly.

"But," he said with deliberate slowness, "I won't let you go."

"You must let me go. Already I have been here too long."

He threw his arms around her and crushed her against him fiercely. "Never again," he said. "Never again."

She pressed her little hands against his shoulders.

"Listen! Oh, listen!"

"I shall listen to nothing."

"But you must—you must! I want to make you understand something. This morning I see your note in the papers. Every day, every day for seven whole long years, wherever I have been, I have looked. In the papers of India. Sometimes in the papers of France, of England."

"I never even dreamed that you left India," said Nicol Brinn, hoarsely. "It was through the Times of India that I said I would communicate with you."

"Once we never left India. Now we do—sometimes. But listen. I prepared to come when—he—"

Nicol Brinn's clasp of Naida tightened cruelly.

"Oh, you hurt me!" she moaned. "Please let me speak. He gave me your name and told me to bring you!"

"What! What!"

Nicol Brinn dropped his arms and stood, as a man amazed, watching her.

"Last night there was a meeting outside London."

"You don't want me to believe there are English members?"

"Yes. There are. Many. But let me go on. Somehow—somehow I don't understand—he finds you are one—"

"My God!"

"And you are not present last night! Now, do you understand? So he sends me to tell you that a car will be waiting at nine o'clock to-night outside the Cavalry Club. The driver will be a Hindu. You know what to say. Oh, my Nicol, my Nicol, go for my sake! You know it all! You are clever. You can pretend. You can explain you had no call. If you refuse—"

Nicol Brinn nodded grimly. "I understand! But, good God! How has he found out? How has he found out?"

"I don't know!" moaned Naida. "Oh, I am frightened—so frightened!"

A discreet rap sounded upon the door.

Nicol Brinn crossed and stood, hands clasped behind him, before the mantelpiece. "In," he said.

Hoskins entered. "Detective Sergeant Stokes wishes to see you at once, sir."

Brinn drew a watch from his waistcoat pocket. Attached to it was a fob from which depended a little Chinese Buddha. He consulted the timepiece and returned it to his pocket.

"Eight-twenty-five," he muttered, and glanced across to where Naida, wide-eyed, watched him. "Admit Detective Sergeant Stokes at eight-twenty.

six, and then lock the door."

"Very good, sir."

Hoskins retired imperturbably.

XVI. NICOL BRINN GOES OUT

Detective Sergeant Stokes was a big, dark, florid man, the word "constable" written all over him. Indeed, as Wessex had complained more than once, the mere sound of Stokes's footsteps was a danger signal for any crook. His respect for his immediate superior, the detective inspector, was not great. The methods of Wessex savoured too much of the French school to appeal to one of Stokes's temperament and outlook upon life, especially upon that phase of life which comes within the province of the criminal investigator.

Wessex's instructions with regard to Nicol Brinn had been succinct: "Watch Mr. Brinn's chambers, make a note of all his visitors, but take no definite steps respecting him personally without consulting me."

Armed with these instructions, the detective sergeant had undertaken his duties, which had proved more or less tedious up to the time that a fashionably attired woman of striking but unusual appearance had inquired of the hall porter upon which floor Mr. Nicol Brinn resided.

In her manner the detective sergeant had perceived something furtive. There was a hunted look in her eyes, too.

When, at the end of some fifteen or twenty minutes, she failed to reappear, he determined to take the initiative himself. By intruding upon this prolonged conference he hoped to learn something of value. Truth to tell, he was no master of finesse, and had but recently been promoted from an East End district where prompt physical action was of more value than subtlety.

As a result, then, he presently found himself in the presence of the immovable Hoskins; and having caused his name to be announced, he was requested to wait in the lobby for one minute. Exactly one minute had elapsed when he was shown into that long, lofty room, which of late had been the scene of strange happenings.

Nicol Brinn was standing before the fireplace, hands clasped behind him, and a long cigar protruding from the left corner of his mouth. No one else was present, so far as the detective could see, but he glanced rapidly about the room in a way which told the man who was watching that he had expected to find another present. He looked into the unfathomable, light blue eyes of Nicol Brinn, and became conscious of a certain mental confusion.

"Good evening, sir," he said, awkwardly. "I am acting in the case concerning the disappearance of Mr. Paul Harley."

"Yes," replied Brinn.

"I have been instructed to keep an eye on these chambers."

"Yes," repeated the high voice.

"Well, sir"—again he glanced rapidly about-"I don't want to intrude more than necessary, but a lady came in here about half an hour ago."

"Yes," drawled Brinn. "It's possible."

"It's a fact," declared the detective sergeant. "If it isn't troubling you too much, I should like to know that lady's name. Also, I should like a chat with her before she leaves."

"Can't be done," declared Nicol Brinn. "She isn't here."

"Then where is she?"

"I couldn't say. She went some time ago."

Stokes stood squarely before Nicol Brinn—a big, menacing figure; but he could not detect the slightest shadow of expression upon the other's impassive features. He began to grow angry. He was of that sanguine temperament which in anger acts hastily.

"Look here, sir," he said, and his dark face flushed. "You can't play tricks on me. I've got my duty to do, and I am going to do it. Ask your visitor to step in here, or I shall search the premises."

Nicol Brinn replaced his cigar in the right corner of his mouth: "Detective Sergeant Stokes, I give you my word that the lady to whom you refer is no longer in these chambers."

Stokes glared at him angrily. "But there is no other way out," he blustered.

"I shall not deal with this matter further," declared Brinn, coldly. "I may have vices, but I never was a liar."

"Oh," muttered the detective sergeant, taken aback by the cold incisiveness of the speaker. "Then perhaps you will lead the way, as I should like to take a look around."

Nicol Brinn spread his feet more widely upon the hearthrug. "Detective Sergeant Stokes," he said, "you are not playing the game. Inspector Wessex passed his word to me that for twenty-four hours my movements should not be questioned or interfered with. How is it that I find you here?"

Stokes thrust his hands in his pockets and coughed uneasily. "I am not a machine," he replied; "and I do my own job in my own way."

"I doubt if Inspector Wessex would approve of your way."

"That's my business."

"Maybe, but it is no affair of yours to interfere with private affairs of mine, Detective Sergeant. See here, there is no lady in these chambers. Secondly, I have an appointment at nine o'clock, and you are detaining me."

"What's more," answered Stokes, who had now quite lost his temper, "I intend to go on detaining you until I have searched these chambers and searched them thoroughly."

Nicol Brinn glanced at his watch. "If I leave in five minutes, I'll be in good time," he said. "Follow me."

Crossing to the centre section of a massive bookcase, he opened it, and it proved to be a door. So cunning was the design that the closest scrutiny must have failed to detect any difference between the dummy books with which it was decorated, and the authentic works which filled the shelves to right and to left of it. Within was a small and cosy study. In contrast with the museum-like room out of which it opened, it was furnished in a severely simple fashion, and one more experienced in the study of complex humanity than Detective Sergeant Stokes must have perceived that here the real Nicol Brinn spent his leisure hours. Above the mantel was a life-sized oil painting of Mrs. Nicolas Brinn; and whereas the great room overlooking Piccadilly was exotic to a degree, the atmosphere of the study was markedly American.

Palpably there was no one there. Nor did the two bedrooms, the kitchen, and the lobby afford any more satisfactory evidence. Nicol Brinn led the way back from the lobby, through the small study, and into the famous room where the Egyptian priestess smiled eternally. He resumed his place upon the hearthrug. "Are you satisfied, Detective Sergeant?"

"I am!" Stokes spoke angrily. "While you kept me talking, she slipped out through that study, and down into the street."

"Ah," murmured Nicol Brinn.

"In fact, the whole business looks very suspicious to me," continued the detective.

"Sorry," drawled Brinn, again consulting his watch. "The five minutes are up. I must be off."

"Not until I have spoken to Scotland Yard, sir."

"You wish to speak to Scotland Yard?"

"I do," said Stokes, grimly.

Nicol Brinn strode to the telephone, which stood upon a small table almost immediately in front of the bookcase. The masked door remained ajar.

"You are quite fixed upon detaining me?"

"Quite," said Stokes, watching him closely.

In one long stride Brinn was through the doorway, telephone in hand! Before Stokes had time to move, the door closed violently, in order, no doubt, to make it shut over the telephone cable which lay under it!

Detective Sergeant Stokes fell back, gazed wildly at the false books for a moment, and then, turning, leaped to the outer door. It was locked!

In the meanwhile, Nicol Brinn, having secured the door which communicated with the study, walked out into the lobby where Hoskins was seated. Hoskins stood up.

"The lady went, Hoskins?"

"She did, sir."

Nicol Brinn withdrew the key from the door of the room in which Detective Sergeant Stokes was confined. Stokes began banging wildly upon the panels from within.

"That row will continue," Nicol Brinn said, coldly; "perhaps he will shout murder from one of the windows. You have only to say you had no key. I am going out now. The light coat, Hoskins."

Hoskins unemotionally handed coat, hat, and cane to his master and, opening the front door, stood aside. The sound of a window being raised became audible from within the locked room.

"Probably," added Nicol Brinn, "you will be arrested."

"Very good, sir," said Hoskins. "Good-night, sir..."

XVII. WHAT HAPPENED TO HARLEY

Some two hours after Paul Harley's examination of Jones, the ex-parlourmaid, a shabby street hawker appeared in the Strand, bearing a tray containing copies of "Old Moore's Almanac." He was an ugly-looking fellow with a split lip, and appeared to have neglected to shave for at least a week. Nobody appeared to be particularly interested, and during his slow progression from Wellington Street to the Savoy Hotel he smoked cigarettes almost continuously. Trade was far from brisk, and the vendor of prophecies filled in his spare time by opening car doors, for which menial service he collected one three-penny bit and several sixpences.

This commercial optimist was still haunting the courtyard of the hotel at a time when a very handsome limousine pulled up beside the curb and a sprucely attired Hindu stepped out. One who had been in the apartments of Ormuz Khan must have recognized his excellency's private secretary. Turning to the chauffeur, a half-caste of some kind, and ignoring the presence of the prophet who had generously opened the door, "You will return at eight o'clock," he said, speaking perfect and cultured English, "to take his excellency to High Claybury. Make a note, now, as I shall be very busy, reminding me to call at Lower Claybury station for a parcel which will be awaiting me there."

"Yes, sir," replied the chauffeur, and he touched his cap as the Hindu walked into the hotel.

The salesman reclosed the door of the car, and spat reflectively upon the pavement.

Limping wearily, he worked his way along in the direction of Chancery Lane. But, before reaching Chancery Lane, he plunged into a maze of courts with which he was evidently well acquainted. His bookselling enterprise presently terminated, as it had commenced, at The Chancery Agency.

Once more safe in his dressing room, the pedler rapidly transformed himself into Paul Harley, and Paul Harley, laying his watch upon the table before him, lighted his pipe and indulged in half an hour's close thinking.

His again electing to focus his attention upon Ormuz Khan was this time beyond reproach. It was the course which logic dictated. Until he had attempted the task earlier in the day, he could not have supposed it so difficult to trace the country address of a well-known figure like that of the Persian.

This address he had determined to learn, and, having learned it, was also determined to inspect the premises. But for such a stroke of good luck as that which had befallen him at the Savoy, he could scarcely have hoped. His course now lay clearly before him. And presently, laying his pipe aside, he took up a telephone which stood upon the dressing table and rang up a garage with which he had an account.

"Hello, is that you, Mason?" he said. "Have the racer to meet me at seven o'clock, half-way along Pall Mall."

Never for a moment did he relax his vigilance. Observing every precaution when he left The Chancery Agency, he spent the intervening time at one of his clubs, from which, having made an early dinner, he set off for Pall Mall at ten minutes to seven. A rakish-looking gray car resembling a giant torpedo was approaching slowly from the direction of Buckingham Palace. The driver pulled up as Paul Harley stepped into the road, and following a brief conversation Harley set out westward, performing a detour before heading south for Lower Claybury, a little town with which he was only slightly acquainted. No evidence of espionage could he detect, but the note of danger spoke intimately to his inner consciousness; so that when, the metropolis left behind, he found himself in the hilly Surrey countryside, more than once he pulled up, sitting silent for a while and listening intently. He failed, always, to detect any sign of pursuit.

The night was tropically brilliant, hot, and still, but saving the distant murmur of the city, and ordinary comings and goings along the country roads, there was nothing to account for a growing anxiety of which he became conscious.

He was in gunshot of Old Claybury church tower, when the sight of a haystack immediately inside a meadow gate suggested a likely hiding place for the racer; and, having run the car under cover, Harley proceeded on foot to the little railway station. He approached a porter who leaned in the doorway. "Could you direct me to the house of his excellency Ormuz Khan?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir," was the reply. "If you follow the uphill road on the other side of the station until you come to the Manor Park—you will see the gates—and then branch off to the right, taking the road facing the gates. Hillside—that's the name of the house—is about a quarter of a mile along."

Dusk was beginning to fall and, although the nature of his proposed operations demanded secrecy, he recognized that every hour was precious. Accordingly he walked immediately back to the spot at which he had left the car and, following the porter's directions, drove over the line at the level crossing immediately beyond the station, and proceeded up a tree-lined road until he found himself skirting the railing of an extensive tract of park land.

Presently heavy gates appeared in view; and then, to the right, another lane in which the growing dusk had painted many shadows. He determined to drive on until he should find a suitable hiding place. And at a spot, as he presently learned, not a hundred yards from Hillside, he discovered an opening in the hedge which divided the road from a tilled field. Into this, without hesitation, he turned the racer, backing in, in order that he might be ready for a flying start in case of emergency. Once more he set out on foot.

He proceeded with caution, walking softly close to the side of the road, and frequently pausing to listen. Advancing in this fashion, he found himself standing ere long before an open gateway, and gazing along a drive which presented a vista of utter blackness. A faint sound reached his ear—the distant drone of a powerful engine. A big car was mounting the slope from Lower Claybury Station.

XVIII. WHAT HAPPENED TO HARLEY—CONTINUED

Not until Harley came within sight of the house, a low, rambling Jacobean building, did he attempt to take cover. He scrambled up a tree and got astride of a wall. A swift survey by his electric torch of the ground on the other side revealed a jungle of weeds in either direction.

He uttered an impatient exclamation. He calculated that the car was now within a hundred yards of the end of the lane. Suddenly came an idea that was born of emergency. Swarming up the tree to where its dense foliage began, he perched upon a stout bough and waited.

Three minutes later came a blaze of light through the gathering darkness, and the car which he had last seen at the Savoy was turned into the drive, and presently glided smoothly past him below.

The interior lights were extinguished, so that he was unable to discern the occupants. The house itself was also unilluminated. And when the car pulled up before the porch, less than ten yards from his observation post, he could not have recognized the persons who descended and entered Hillside.

Indeed, only by the sound of the closing door did he know that they had gone in. But two figures were easily discernible; and he judged them to be those of Ormuz Khan and his secretary. He waited patiently, and ere long the limousine was turned in the little courtyard before the porch and driven out into the lane again. He did not fail to note that, the lane regained, the chauffeur headed, not toward Lower Claybury, but away from it.

He retained his position until the hum of the motor grew dim in the distance, and was about to descend when he detected the sound of a second approaching car! Acutely conscious of danger, he remained where he was. Almost before the hum of the retiring limousine had become inaudible, a second car entered the lane and turned into the drive of Hillside.

Harley peered eagerly downward, half closing his eyes in order that he might not be dazzled by the blaze of the headlight. This was another limousine, its most notable characteristic being that the blinds were drawn in all the windows.

On this occasion, when the chauffeur stepped around and opened the door, only one passenger alighted. There seemed to be some delay before he was admitted, but Harley found it impossible to detect any details of the scene being enacted in the shadowed porch.

Presently the second car was driven away, pursuing the same direction as the first. Hot upon its departure came the drone of a third. The windows of the third car also exhibited drawn blinds. As it passed beneath him he stifled an exclamation of triumph. Vaguely, nebulously, the secret of this dread thing Fire-Tongue, which had uplifted its head in England, appeared before his mind's eye. It was only necessary for him to assure himself that the latest visitor had been admitted to the house before the next move became possible. Accordingly he changed his position, settling himself more comfortably upon the bough. And now he watched the three cars perform each two journeys to some spot or spots unknown, and, returning, deposit

their passengers before the porch of Hillside. The limousine used by Ormuz Khan, upon its second appearance had partaken of the same peculiarity as the others: there were blinds drawn inside the windows.

Paul Harley believed that he understood precisely what this signified, and when, after listening intently in the stillness of the night, he failed to detect sounds of any other approach, he descended to the path and stole toward the dark house.

There were French windows upon the ground floor, all of them closely shuttered. Although he recognized that he was taking desperate chances, he inspected each one of them closely.

Passing gently from window to window, his quest ultimately earned its reward. Through a crack in one of the shutters a dim light shone out. His heart was beating uncomfortably, although he had himself well in hand; and, crawling into the recess formed by the window, he pressed his ear against a pane and listened intently. At first he could hear nothing, but, his investigation being aided by the stillness of the night, he presently became aware that a voice was speaking within the room—deliberately, musically. The beating of his heart seemed to make his body throb to the very finger tips. He had recognized the voice to be the voice of Ormuz Khan!

Now, his sense of hearing becoming attuned to the muffled tones, he began to make out syllables, words, and, finally, sentences. Darkness wrapped him about, so that no one watching could have seen his face. But he himself knew that under the bronze which he never lost he had grown pale. His heartbeats grew suddenly fainter, an eerie chill more intense than any which the note of danger had ever occasioned caused him to draw sharply back.

"My God!" he whispered. He drew his automatic swiftly from his pocket, and, pressed against the wall beside the window, looked about him as a man looks who finds himself surrounded by enemies. Not a sound disturbed the stillness of the garden except for sibilant rustlings of the leaves, occasioned by a slight breeze.

Paul Harley retreated step by step to the bushes. He held the pistol tightly clenched in his right hand.

He had heard his own death sentence pronounced and he knew that it was likely to be executed.

XIX. WHAT HAPPENED TO HARLEY—CONCLUDED

He regained the curve of the drive without meeting any opposition. There, slipping the pistol into his pocket, he climbed rapidly up the tree from which he had watched the arrival of the three cars, climbed over the wall, and dropped into the weed jungle beyond. He crept stealthily forward to the gap where he had concealed the racer, drawing nearer and nearer to the bushes lining the lane. Only by a patch of greater darkness before him did he realize that he had reached it. But when the realization came one word only he uttered: "Gone!"

His car had disappeared!

Despair was alien to his character: A true Englishman, he never knew when he was beaten. Beyond doubt, now, he must accept the presence of hidden enemies surrounding him, of enemies whose presence even his trained powers of perception had been unable to detect. The intensity of the note of danger which he had recognized now was fully explained. He grew icily cool, master of his every faculty. "We shall see!" he muttered, grimly.

Feeling his way into the lane, he set out running for the highroad, his footsteps ringing out sharply upon the dusty way. The highroad gained, he turned, not to the left, but to the right, ran up the bank and threw himself flatly down upon it, lying close to the hedge and watching the entrance to the lane. Nothing appeared; nothing stirred. He knew the silence to be illusive; he blamed himself for having ventured upon such a quest without acquainting himself with the geography of the neighbourhood.

Great issues often rest upon a needle point. He had no idea of the direction or extent of the park land adjoining the highroad. Nevertheless, further inaction being out of the question, creeping along the grassy bank, he began to retreat from the entrance to the lane. Some ten yards he had progressed in this fashion when his hidden watchers made their first mistake.

A faint sound, so faint that only a man in deadly peril could have detected it, brought him up sharply. He crouched back against the hedge, looking behind him. For a long time he failed to observe anything. Then, against the

comparatively high tone of the dusty road, he saw a silhouette—the head and shoulders of someone who peered out cautiously.

Still as the trees above him he crouched, watching, and presently, bent forward, questing to right and left, questing in a horribly suggestive animal fashion, the entire figure of the man appeared in the roadway.

As Paul Harley had prayed would be the case, his pursuers evidently believed that he had turned in the direction of Lower Claybury. A vague, phantom figure, Harley saw the man wave his arm, whereupon a second man joined him—a third—and, finally, a fourth.

Harley clenched his teeth grimly, and as the ominous quartet began to move toward the left, he resumed his slow retreat to the right—going ever farther away, of necessity, from the only centre with which he was acquainted and from which he could hope to summon assistance. Finally he reached a milestone resting almost against the railings of the Manor Park.

Drawing a deep breath, he sprang upon the milestone, succeeded in grasping the top of the high iron railings, and hauled himself up bodily.

Praying that the turf might be soft, he jumped. Fit though he was, and hardened by physical exercise, the impact almost stunned him. He came down like an acrobat—left foot, right foot, and then upon his hands, but nevertheless he lay there for a moment breathless and temporarily numbed by the shock.

In less than a minute he was on his feet again and looking alertly about him. Striking into the park land, turning to the left, and paralleling the highroad, he presently came out upon the roadway, along which under shelter of a straggling hedge, he began to double back. In sight of the road dipping down to Lower Claybury he crossed, forcing his way through a second hedge thickly sown with thorns.

Badly torn, but careless of such minor injuries, he plunged heavily through a turnip field, and, bearing always to the left, came out finally upon the road leading to the station, and only some fifty yards from the bottom of the declivity.

A moment he paused, questioning the silence. He was unwilling to believe that he had outwitted his pursuers. His nerves were strung to highest tension, and his strange gift of semi-prescience told him that danger was at least as imminent as ever, even though he could neither see nor hear his

enemies. Therefore, pistol in hand again, he descended to the foot of the hill.

He remembered having noticed, when he had applied to the porter for information respecting the residence of Ormuz Khan, that upon a window adjoining the entrance had appeared the words "Station Master." The station master's office, therefore, was upon the distant side of the line.

Now came the hardest blow of all. The station was closed for the night. Nor was there any light in the signal box. Evidently no other train was due upon that branch line until some time in the early morning. The level crossing gate was open, but before breaking cover he paused a while to consider what he should do. Lower Claybury was one of those stations which have no intimate connection with any township. The nearest house, so far as Harley could recall, was fully twenty yards from the spot at which he stood. Furthermore, the urgency of the case had fired the soul of the professional investigator.

He made up his mind, and, darting out into the road, he ran across the line, turned sharply, and did not pause until he stood before the station master's window. Then his quick wits were put to their ultimate test.

Right, left, it seemed from all about him, came swiftly pattering footsteps! Instantly he divined the truth. Losing his tracks upon the highroad above, a section of his pursuers had surrounded the station, believing that he would head for it in retreat.

Paul Harley whipped off his coat in a flash, and using it as a ram, smashed the window. He reached up, found the catch, and opened the sash. In ten seconds he was in the room, and a great clatter told him that he had overturned some piece of furniture.

Disentangling his coat, he sought and found the electric torch. He pressed the button. No light came. It was broken! He drew a hissing breath, and began to grope about the little room. At last his hand touched the telephone, and, taking it up:

"Hello!" he said. "Hello!"

"Yes," came the voice of the operator—"what number?"

"City 8951. Police business! Urgent!"

One, two, three seconds elapsed, four, five, six.

"Hello!" came the voice of Innes.

"That you, Innes?" said Harley. And, interrupting the other's reply: "I am by no means safe, Innes! I am in one of the tightest corners of my life. Listen: Get Wessex! If he's off duty, get Burton. Tell him to bring—"

Someone leaped in at the broken window behind the speaker. Resting the telephone upon the table, where he had found it, Harley reached into his hip pocket and snapped out his automatic.

Dimly he could hear Innes speaking. He half-turned, raised the pistol, and knew a sudden intense pain at the back of his skull. A thousand lights seemed suddenly to split the darkness. He felt himself sinking into an apparently bottomless pit.

XX. CONFLICTING CLUBS

"Any news, Wessex?" asked Innes, eagerly, starting up from his chair as the inspector entered the office.

Wessex shook his head, and sitting down took out and lighted a cigarette.

"News of a sort," he replied, slowly, "but nothing of any value, I am afraid. My assistant, Stokes, has distinguished himself."

"In what way?" asked Innes, dully, dropping back into his chair.

These were trying days for the indefatigable secretary. Believing that some clue of importance might come to light at any hour of the day or night he remained at the chambers in Chancery Lane, sleeping nightly in the spare room.

"Well," continued the inspector, "I had detailed him to watch Nicol Brinn, but my explicit instructions were that Nicol Brinn was not to be molested in any way."

"What happened?"

"To-night Nicol Brinn had a visitor—possibly a valuable witness. Stokes, like an idiot, allowed her to slip through his fingers and tried to arrest Brinn!"

"What? Arrest him!" cried Innes.

"Precisely. But I rather fancy," added the inspector, grimly, "that Mr. Stokes will think twice before taking leaps like that in the dark again."

"You say he tried to arrest him. What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that Nicol Brinn, leaving Stokes locked in his chambers, went out and has completely disappeared!"

"But the woman?"

"Ah, the woman! There's the rub. If he had lain low and followed the woman, all might have been well. But who she was, where she came from, and where she has gone, we have no idea."

"Nicol Brinn must have been desperate to adopt such measures?"

Detective Inspector Wessex nodded.

"I quite agree with you."

"He evidently had an appointment of such urgency that he could permit nothing to stand in his way."

"He is a very clever man, Mr. Innes. He removed the telephone from the room in which he had locked Stokes, so that my blundering assistant was detained for nearly fifteen minutes—detained, in fact, until his cries from the window attracted the attention of a passing constable!"

"Nicol Brinn's man did not release him?"

"No, he said he had no key."

"What happened?"

"Stokes wanted to detain the servant, whose name is Hoskins, but I simply wouldn't hear of it. I am a poor man, but I would cheerfully give fifty pounds to know where Nicol Brinn is at this moment."

Innes stood up restlessly and began to drum his fingers upon the table edge. Presently he looked up, and:

"There's a shadow of hope," he said. "Rector—you know Rector?—had been detailed by the chief to cover the activities of Nicol Brinn. He has not reported to me so far to-night."

"You mean that he may be following him?" cried Wessex.

"It is quite possible—following either Nicol Brinn or the woman."

"My God, I hope you're right!—even though it makes the Criminal Investigation Department look a bit silly."

"Then," continued Innes, "there is something else which you should know. I heard to-day from a garage, with which Mr. Harley does business, that he hired a racing car last night. He has often used it before. It met him half-way along Pall Mall at seven o'clock, and he drove away in it in the direction of Trafalgar Square."

"Alone?"

"Yes, unfortunately."

"Toward Trafalgar Square," murmured Wessex.

"Ah," said Innes, shaking his head, "that clue is of no importance. Under the circumstances the chief would be much more likely to head away from his objective than toward it."

"Quite," murmured Wessex. "I agree with you. But what's this?"

The telephone bell was ringing, and as Innes eagerly took up the receiver:

"Yes, yes, Mr. Innes speaking," he said, quickly. "Is that you, Rector?"

The voice of Rector, one of Paul Harley's assistants, answered him over the wire:

"I am speaking from Victoria Station, Mr. Innes."

"Yes!" said Innes. "Go ahead."

"A very odd-looking woman visited Mr. Nicol Brinn's chambers this evening. She was beautifully dressed, but wore the collar of her fur coat turned up about her face, so that it was difficult to see her. But somehow I think she was an Oriental."

"An Oriental!" exclaimed Innes.

"I waited for her to come out," Rector continued. "She had arrived in a cab, which was waiting, and I learned from the man that he had picked her up at Victoria Station."

"Yes?"

"She came out some time later in rather a hurry. In fact, I think there was no doubt that she was frightened. By this time I had another cab waiting."

"And where did she go?" asked Innes.

"Back to Victoria Station."

"Yes! Go on!"

"Unfortunately, Mr. Innes, my story does not go much further. I wasted very little time, you may be sure. But although no train had left from the South Eastern station, which she had entered, there was no sign of her anywhere. So that I can only suppose she ran through to the Brighton side, or possibly out to a car, which may have been waiting for her somewhere."

"Is that all?" asked Innes, gloomily.

"That's all, Mr. Innes. But I thought I would report it."

"Quite right, Rector; you could do no more. Did you see anything of Detective Sergeant Stokes before you left Piccadilly?"

"I did," replied the other. "He also was intensely interested in Nicol Brinn's visitor. And about five minutes before she came out he went upstairs."

"Oh, I see. She came out almost immediately after Stokes had gone up?"

"Yes."

"Very well, Rector. Return to Piccadilly, and report to me as soon as possible." Innes hung up the receiver.

"Did you follow, Wessex?" he said. "Stokes was on the right track, but made a bad blunder. You see, his appearance led to the woman's retreat."

"He explained that to me," returned the inspector, gloomily. "She got out by another door as he came in. Oh! a pretty mess he has made of it. If he and Rector had been cooperating, they could have covered her movements perfectly."

"There is no use crying over spilt milk," returned Innes. He glanced significantly in the inspector's direction. "Miss Abingdon has rung up practically every hour all day," he said.

Wessex nodded his head.

"I'm a married man myself," he replied, "and happily married, too. But if you had seen the look in her eyes when I told her that Mr. Harley had disappeared, I believe you would have envied him."

"Yes," murmured Innes. "They haven't known each other long, but I should say from what little I have seen of them that she cares too much for her peace of mind." He stared hard at the inspector. "I think it will break her heart if anything has happened to the chief. The sound of her voice over the telephone brings a lump into my throat, Wessex. She rang up an hour ago. She will ring up again."

"Yet I never thought he was a marrying man," muttered the inspector.

"Neither did I," returned Innes, smiling sadly. "But even he can be forgiven for changing his mind in the case of Phil Abingdon."

"Ah," said the inspector. "I am not sorry to know that he is human like the rest of us." His expression grew retrospective, and: "I can't make out how the garage you were speaking about didn't report that matter before," he added.

"Well, you see," explained Innes, "they were used to the chief making long journeys."

"Long journeys," muttered the inspector. "Did he make a long journey? I wonder—I wonder."

XXI. THE SEVENTH KAMA

As Nicol Brinn strolled out from the door below his chambers in Piccadilly, a hoarse voice made itself audible above his head.

"Police!" he heard over the roar of the traffic. "Help! Police!"

Detective Sergeant Stokes had come out upon the balcony. But up to the time that Nicol Brinn turned and proceeded in leisurely fashion in the direction of the Cavalry Club, the sergeant had not succeeded in attracting any attention.

Nicol Brinn did not hurry. Having his hands thrust in the pockets of his light overcoat, he sauntered along Piccadilly as an idle man might do. He knew that he had ample time to keep his appointment, and recognizing the vital urgency of the situation, he was grateful for some little leisure to reject.

One who had obtained a glimpse of his face in the light of the shop windows which he passed must have failed to discern any evidence of anxiety. Yet Nicol Brinn knew that death was beckoning to him. He knew that his keen wit was the only weapon which could avail him to-night; and he knew that he must show himself a master of fence.

A lonely man, of few but enduring friendships, he had admitted but one love to his life, except the love of his mother. This one love for seven years he had sought to kill. But anything forceful enough to penetrate to the stronghold of Nicol Brinn's soul was indestructible, even by Nicol Brinn himself.

So, now, at the end of a mighty struggle, he had philosophically accepted this hopeless passion which Fate had thrust upon him. Yet he whose world was a chaos outwardly remained unmoved.

Perhaps even that evil presence whose name was Fire-Tongue might have paused, might have hesitated, might even have changed his plans, which, in a certain part of the world, were counted immutable, had he known the manner of man whom he had summoned to him that night.

Just outside the Cavalry Club a limousine was waiting, driven by a chauffeur who looked like some kind of Oriental. Nicol Brinn walked up to the man, and bending forward:

"Fire-Tongue," he said, in a low voice.

The chauffeur immediately descended and opened the door of the car. The interior was unlighted, but Nicol Brinn cast a comprehensive glance around ere entering. As he settled himself upon the cushions, the door was closed again, and he found himself in absolute darkness.

"Ah," he muttered. "Might have foreseen it." All the windows were curtained, or rather, as a rough investigation revealed, were closed with aluminium shutters which were immovable.

A moment later, as the car moved off, a lamp became lighted above him. Then he saw that several current periodicals were placed invitingly in the rack, as well as a box of very choice Egyptian cigarettes.

"H'm," he murmured.

He made a close investigation upon every side, but he knew enough of the organization with which he was dealing to be prepared for failure.

He failed. There was no cranny through which he could look out. Palpably, it would be impossible to learn where he was being taken. The journey might be a direct one, or might be a detour. He wished that he could have foreseen this device. Above all, he wished that Detective Sergeant Stokes had been a more clever man.

It would have been good to know that he was followed. His only hope was that someone detailed by Paul Harley might be in pursuit.

Lighting a fresh cigar, Nicol Brinn drew a copy of the Sketch from the rack, and studied the photographs of more or less pretty actresses with apparent contentment. He had finished the Sketch, and was perusing the Bystander, when, the car having climbed a steep hill and swerved sharply to the right, he heard the rustling of leaves, and divined that they were proceeding along a drive.

He replaced the paper in the rack, and took out his watch. Consulting it, he returned it to his pocket as the car stopped and the light went out.

The door, which, with its fellow, Nicol Brinn had discovered to be locked, was opened by the Oriental chauffeur, and Brinn descended upon the steps of a shadowed porch. The house door was open, and although there was no light within:

"Come this way," said a voice, speaking out of the darkness.

Nicol Brinn entered a hallway the atmosphere of which seemed to be very hot.

"Allow me to take your hat and coat," continued the voice.

He was relieved of these, guided along a dark passage; and presently, an inner door being opened, he found himself in a small, barely furnished room where one shaded lamp burned upon a large writing table.

His conductor, who did not enter, closed the door quietly, and Nicol Brinn found himself looking into the smiling face of a Hindu gentleman who sat at the table.

The room was decorated with queer-looking Indian carvings, pictures upon silk, and other products of Eastern craftsmanship. The table and the several chairs were Oriental in character, but the articles upon the table were very European and businesslike in appearance. Furthermore, the Hindu gentleman, who wore correct evening dress, might have been the representative of an Eastern banking house, as indeed he happened to be, amongst other things.

"Good evening," he said, speaking perfect English "won't you sit down?"

He pointed with a pen which he was holding in the direction of a heavily carved chair which stood near the table. Nicol Brinn sat down, regarding the speaker with lack-lustre eyes.

"A query has arisen respecting your fraternal rights," continued the Hindu. "Am I to understand that you claim to belong to the Seventh Kama?"

"Certainly," replied Brinn in a toneless voice.

The Hindu drew his cuff back from a slender yellow wrist, revealing a curious mark which appeared to be branded upon the flesh. It was in the form of a torch or flambeau surmounted by a tongue of flame. He raised his black brows, smiling significantly.

Nicol Brinn stood up, removing his tight dinner jacket. Then, rolling back his sleeve from a lean, sinuous forearm, he extended the powerful member, having his fist tightly clenched.

Upon the inside of his arm, just above the elbow, an identical mark had been branded!

The Hindu stood up and saluted Nicol Brinn in a peculiar manner. That is to say, he touched the second finger of his right hand with the tip of his

tongue, and then laid the finger upon his forehead, at the same time bowing deeply.

Nicol Brinn repeated the salutation, and quietly put his coat on.

"We greet you," said the Hindu. "I am Rama Dass of the Bengal Lodge. Have you Hindustani?"

"No."

"Where were you initiated?"

"At Moon Ali Lane."

"Ah!" exclaimed the Hindu. "I see it all. In Bombay?"

"In Bombay."

"When, and by whom, may I ask?"

"By Ruhmani, November 23, 1913."

"Strange," murmured Rama Dass. "Brother Ruhmani died in that year; which accounts for our having lost touch with you. What is your grade?"

"The fifth."

"You have not proceeded far, brother. How do you come to be unacquainted with our presence in England?"

"I cannot say."

"What work has been allotted to you?"

"None."

"Never?"

"Never."

"More and more strange," murmured the Hindu, watching Nicol Brinn through the gold-rimmed spectacles which he wore. "I have only known one other case. Such cases are dangerous, brother."

"No blame attaches to me," replied Nicol Brinn.

"I have not said so," returned Rama Dass. "But in the Seventh Kama all brothers must work. A thousand lives are as nothing so the Fire lives. We had thought our information perfect, but only by accident did we learn of your existence."

"Indeed," murmured Nicol Brinn, coldly.

Not even this smiling Hindu gentleman, whose smile concealed so much, could read any meaning in those lack-lustre eyes, nor detect any emotion in that high, cool voice.

"A document was found, and in this it was recorded that you bore upon your arm the sign of the Seventh Kama."

"'Tis Fire that moves the grains of dust," murmured Nicol Brinn, tonelessly, "which one day make a mountain for the gods."

Rama Dass stood up at once and repeated his strange gesture of salutation, which Nicol Brinn returned ceremoniously; and resumed his seat at the table.

"You are advanced beyond your grade, brother," he said. "You are worthy the next step. Do you wish to take it?"

"Every little drop swells the ocean," returned Nicol Brinn.

"You speak well," the Hindu said. "We have here your complete record. It shall not be consulted. To do so were unnecessary. We are satisfied. We regret only that one so happily circumstanced to promote the coming of the Fire should have been lost sight of. Last night there were three promotions and several rejections. You were expected."

"But I was not summoned."

"No," murmured Rama Dass. "We had learned of you as I have said. However, great honour results. You will be received alone. Do you desire to advance?"

"No. Give me time."

Rama Dass again performed the strange salutation, and again Nicol Brinn returned it.

"Wisdom is a potent wine," said the latter, gravely.

"We respect your decision."

The Hindu rang a little silver bell upon his table, and the double doors which occupied one end of the small room opened silently, revealing a large shadowy apartment beyond.

Rama Dass stood up, crossed the room, and standing just outside the open doors, beckoned to Nicol Brinn to advance.

"There is no fear," he said, in a queer, chanting tone.

"There is no fear," repeated Nicol Brinn.

"There is no love."

"There is no love."

"There is no death."

"There is no death."

"Fire alone is eternal."

"Fire alone is eternal."

As he pronounced those words Nicol Brinn crossed the threshold of the dark room, and the double doors closed silently behind him.

XXII. FIRE-TONGUE SPEAKS

Absolute darkness surrounded Nicol Brinn. Darkness, unpleasant heat, and a stifling odour of hyacinths. He had been well coached, and thus far his memory had served him admirably. But now he knew not what to expect. Therefore inwardly on fire but outwardly composed, muscles taut and nerves strung highly, he waited for the next development.

It took the form, first, of the tinkling of a silver bell, and then of the coming of a dim light at the end of what was evidently a long apartment. The light grew brighter, assuming the form of a bluish flame burning in a little flambeau. Nicol Brinn watched it fascinatedly.

Absolutely no sound was discernible, until a voice began to speak, a musical voice of curiously arresting quality.

"You are welcome," said the voice. "You are of the Bombay Lodge, although a citizen of the United States. Because of some strange error, no work has been allotted to you hitherto. This shall be remedied."

Of the weird impressiveness of the scene there could be no doubt. It even touched some unfamiliar chord in the soul of Nicol Brinn. The effect of such an interview upon an imaginative, highly strung temperament, could be well imagined. It was perhaps theatrical, but that by such means great ends had already been achieved he knew to his cost.

The introduction of Maskelyne illusions into an English country house must ordinarily have touched his sense of humour, but knowing something of the invisible presence in which he stood in that darkened chamber, there was no laughter in the heart of Nicol Brinn, but rather an unfamiliar coldness, the nearest approach to fear of which this steel-nerved man was capable.

"Temporarily," the sweet voice continued, "you will be affiliated with the London Lodge, to whom you will look for instructions. These will reach you almost immediately. There is great work to be done in England. It has

been decided, however, that you shall be transferred as quickly as possible in our New York Lodge. You will await orders. Only Fire is eternal."

Again the voice ceased. But, Nicol Brinn remained silent:

"Your reply is awaited."

"Fire is life," replied Nicol Brinn.

The blue tongue of flame subsided, lower and lower, and finally disappeared, so that the apartment became enwrapped in absolute darkness. A faint rustling sound suggested that a heavy curtain had been lowered, and almost immediately the doors behind Nicol Brinn were opened again by Rama Dass.

"We congratulate you, brother," he said, extending his hand. "Yet the ordeal was no light one, for all the force of the Fire was focussed upon you."

Nicol Brinn reentered the room where the shaded lamp stood upon the writing table. In the past he had moved unscathed through peril unknown to the ordinary man. He was well acquainted with the resources of the organization whose agents, unseen, surrounded him in that remote country house, but that their pretensions were extravagant his present immunity would seem to prove.

If the speaker with the strangely arresting voice were indeed that Fire-Tongue whose mere name was synonymous with dread in certain parts of the East, then Fire-Tongue was an impostor. He who claimed to read the thoughts of all men had signally failed in the present instance, unless Nicol Brinn stared dully into the smiling face of Rama Dass. Not yet must he congratulate himself. Perhaps the Hindu's smile concealed as much as the mask worn by Nicol Brinn.

"We congratulate you," said Rama Dass. "You are a worthy brother."

He performed the secret salutation, which Nicol Brinn automatically acknowledged. Then, without another word, Rama Dass led the way to the door.

Out into the dark hallway Nicol Brinn stepped, his muscles taut, his brain alert for instant action. But no one offered to molest him. He was assisted into his coat, and his hat was placed in his hands. Then, the front door being opened, he saw the headlights of the waiting car shining on a pillar of the porch.

A minute later he was seated again in the shuttered limousine, and as it moved off, and the lights leapt up above him, he lay back upon the cushions and uttered a long sigh.

Already he divined that, following a night's sleep, these scenes would seem like the episodes of a dream. Taking off his hat, he raised his hand to his forehead, and discovered it to be slightly damp.

"No wonder," he muttered.

Drawing out a silk handkerchief from the breast pocket of his dinner jacket, he wiped his face and forehead deliberately. Then, selecting a long black cigar from a case which bore the monogram of the late Czar of Russia, he lighted it, dropped the match in the tray, and lolling back in a corner, closed his eyes wearily.

Thus, almost unmoving, he remained throughout the drive. His only actions were, first, to assure himself that both doors were locked again, and then at intervals tidily to place a little cone of ash in the tray provided for the purpose. Finally, the car drew up and a door was unlocked by the chauffeur.

Nicol Brinn, placing his hat upon his head, stepped out before the porch of the Cavalry Club.

The chauffeur closed the door, and returned again to the wheel. Immediately the car moved away. At the illuminated number Nicol Brinn scarcely troubled to glance. Common sense told him that it was not that under which the car was registered. His interest, on the contrary, was entirely focussed upon a beautiful Rolls Royce, which was evidently awaiting some visitor or member of the club. Glancing shrewdly at the chauffeur, a smart, military-looking fellow, Nicol Brinn drew a card from his waistcoat pocket, and resting it upon a wing in the light of one of the lamps, wrote something rapidly upon it in pencil.

Returning the pencil to his pocket:

"Whose car, my man?" he inquired of the chauffear.

"Colonel Lord Wolverham's, sir."

"Good," said Nicol Brinn, and put the card and a ten-shilling note into the man's hand. "Go right into the club and personally give Colonel Lord Wolverham this card. Do you understand?"

The man understood. Used to discipline, he recognized the note of command in the speaker's voice.

"Certainly, sir," he returned, without hesitation; and stepping down upon the pavement he walked into the club.

Less than two minutes afterward a highly infuriated military gentleman—who, as it chanced, had never even heard of the distinguished American traveller—came running out hatless into Piccadilly, holding a crumpled visiting card in his hand. The card, which his chauffeur had given him in the midst of a thrilling game, read as follows:

MR. NICOL BRINN
RALEIGH HOUSE,
PICCADILLY, W. 1.

And written in pencil beneath the name appeared the following:
Borrowed your Rolls. Urgent. Will explain tomorrow. Apologize. N.B.

XXIII. PHIL ABINGDON'S VISITOR

On the following morning the card of His Excellency Ormuz Khan was brought to Phil Abingdon in the charming little room which Mrs. McMurdoch had allotted to her for a private sanctum during the period of her stay under this hospitable roof.

"Oh," she exclaimed, and looked at the maid in a startled way. "I suppose I must see him. Will you ask him to come in, please?"

A few moments later Ormuz Khan entered. He wore faultless morning dress, too faultless; so devoid of any flaw or crease as to have lost its masculine character. In his buttonhole was a hyacinth, and in one slender ivory hand he carried a huge bunch of pink roses, which, bowing deeply, he presented to the embarrassed girl.

"Dare I venture," he said in his musical voice, bending deeply over her extended hand, "to ask you to accept these flowers? It would honour me. Pray do not refuse."

"Your excellency is very kind," she replied, painfully conscious of acute nervousness. "It is more than good of you."

"It is good of you to grant me so much pleasure," he returned, sinking gracefully upon a settee, as Phil Abingdon resumed her seat. "Condolences are meaningless. Why should I offer them to one of your acute perceptions? But you know—" the long, magnetic eyes regarded her fixedly—"you know what is in my heart."

Phil Abingdon bit her lip, merely nodding in reply.

"Let us then try to forget, if only for a while," said Ormuz Khan. "I could show you so easily, if you would consent to allow me, that those we love never leave us."

The spell of his haunting voice was beginning to have its effect. Phil Abingdon found herself fighting against something which at once repelled and attracted her. She had experienced this unusual attraction before, and this was not the first time that she had combated it. But whereas formerly she had more or less resigned herself to the strange magic which lay in the voice and in the eyes of Ormuz Khan, this morning there was something within her which rebelled fiercely against the Oriental seductiveness of his manner.

She recognized that a hot flush had covered her cheeks. For the image of Paul Harley, bronzed, gray-eyed, and reproachful, had appeared before her mind's eye, and she knew why her resentment of the Persian's charm of manner had suddenly grown so intense. Yet she was not wholly immune from it, for:

"Does Your Excellency really mean that?" she whispered.

A smile appeared upon his face, an alluring smile, but rather that of a beautiful woman than of a man.

"As you of the West," he said, "have advanced step by step, ever upward in the mechanical sciences, we of the East have advanced also step by step in other and greater sciences."

"Certainly," she admitted, "you have spoken of such things before."

"I speak of things which I know. From that hour when you entered upon your first Kama, back in the dawn of time, until now, those within the ever-moving cycle which bears you on through the ages have been beside you, at times unseen by the world, at times unseen by you, veiled by the mist which men call death, but which is no more than a curtain behind which we sometimes step for a while. In the East we have learned to raise that curtain;

in the West are triflers who make like claims, but whose knowledge of the secret of the veil is—" And he snapped his fingers contemptuously.

The strange personality of the man was having its effect. Phil Abingdon's eyes were widely open, and she was hanging upon his words. Underneath the soft effeminate exterior lay a masterful spirit—a spirit which had known few obstacles. The world of womanhood could have produced no more difficult subject than Phil Abingdon. Yet she realized, and became conscious of a sense of helplessness, that under certain conditions she would be as a child in the hands of this Persian mystic, whose weird eyes appeared to be watching not her body, nor even her mind, but her soul, whose voice touched unfamiliar chords within her—chords which had never responded to any other human voice.

It was thrilling, vaguely pleasurable, but deep terror underlay it.

"Your Excellency almost frightens me," she whispered. "Yet I do not doubt that you speak of what you know."

"It is so," he returned, gravely. "At any hour, day or night, if you care to make the request, I shall be happy to prove my words. But," he lowered his dark lashes and then raised them again, "the real object of my visit is concerned with more material things."

"Indeed," said Phil Abingdon, and whether because of the words of Ormuz Khan, or because of some bond of telepathy which he had established between them, she immediately found herself to be thinking of Paul Harley.

"I bring you a message," he continued, "from a friend."

With eyes widely open, Phil Abingdon watched him.

"From," she began—but her lips would not frame the name.

"From Mr. Paul Harley," he said, inclining his head gravely.

"Oh! tell me, tell me!"

"I am here to tell you, Miss Abingdon. Mr. Harley feels that his absence may have distressed you."

"Yes, yes," she said, eagerly.

"But in pursuit of a certain matter which is known to you, he has found it necessary in the interests of his safety to remain out of London for a while."

"Oh," Phil Abingdon heaved a great sigh. "Oh, Your Excellency, how glad I am to hear that he is safe!"

The long, dark eyes regarded her intently, unemotionally, noting that the flush had faded from her face, leaving it very pale, and noting also the expression of gladness in her eyes, the quivering of her sweet lips.

"He is my guest," continued Ormuz Khan, "my honoured guest."

"He is with you?" exclaimed Phil, almost incredulously.

"With me, at my home in Surrey. In me he found a natural ally, since my concern was as great as his own. I do not conceal from you, Miss Abingdon, that he is danger."

"In danger?" she whispered.

"It is true, but beneath my roof he is safe. There is a matter of vital urgency, however, in which you can assist him."

"I?" she exclaimed.

"No one but you." Ormuz Khan raised his slender hand gracefully. "I beg you, do not misunderstand me. In the first place, would Mr. Harley have asked you to visit him at my home, if he had not been well assured that you could do so with propriety? In the second place, should I, who respect you more deeply than any woman in the world, consent to your coming unchaperoned? Miss Abingdon, you know me better. I beg of you in Mr. Harley's name and in my own, prevail upon Mrs. McMurdoch to accept the invitation which I bring to lunch with me at Hillside, my Surrey home."

He spoke with the deep respect of a courtier addressing his queen. His low musical voice held a note that was almost a note of adoration. Phil Abingdon withdrew her gaze from the handsome ivory face, and strove for mental composure before replying.

Subtly, insidiously, the man had cast his spell upon her. Of this she was well aware. In other words, her thoughts were not entirely her own, but in a measure were promptings from that powerful will.

Indeed, her heart was beating wildly at the mere thought that she was to see Paul Harley again that very day. She had counted the hours since their last meeting, and knew exactly how many had elapsed. Because each one had seemed like twelve, she had ceased to rebel against this sweet weakness, which, for the first time in her life, had robbed her of some of her individuality, and had taught her that she was a woman to whom mastery by man is exquisite slavery. Suddenly she spoke.

"Of course I will come, Your Excellency," she said. "I will see Mrs. McMurdoch at once, but I know she will not refuse."

"Naturally she will not refuse, Miss Abingdon," he returned In a grave voice. "The happiness of so many people is involved."

"It is so good of you," she said, standing up. "I shall never forget your kindness."

He rose, bowing deeply, from a European standpoint too deeply.

"Kindness is a spiritual investment," he said, "which returns us interest tenfold. If I can be sure of Mrs. McMurdoch's acceptance, I will request permission to take my leave now, for I have an urgent business appointment to keep, after which I will call for you. Can you be ready by noon?"

"Yes, we shall be ready."

Phil Abingdon held out her hand in a curiously hesitant manner. The image of Paul Harley had become more real, more insistent. Her mind was in a strangely chaotic state, so that when the hand of Ormuz Khan touched her own, she repressed a start and laughed in an embarrassed way.

She knew that her heart was singing, but under the song lay something cold, and when Ormuz Khan had bowed himself from the room, she found herself thinking, not of the newly departed visitor, nor even of Paul Harley, but of her dead father. In spite of the sunshine which flooded the room, her flesh turned cold and she wondered if the uncanny Persian possessed some strange power.

Clearly as though he had stood beside her, she seemed to hear the beloved voice of her father. It was imagination, of course, she knew this; but it was uncannily real.

She thought that he was calling her, urgently, beseechingly:

"Phil.... Phil...."

XXIV. THE SCREEN OF GOLD

Paul Harley raised his aching head and looked wearily about him. At first, as might be expected, he thought that he was dreaming. He lay upon a low divan and could only suppose that he had been transported to India.

Slowly, painfully, memory reasserted itself and he realized that he had been rendered unconscious by the blow of a sandbag or some similar weapon while telephoning from the station master's office at Lower

Claybury. How long a time had elapsed since that moment he was unable to judge, for his watch had been removed from his pocket. He stared about him with a sort of fearful interest. He lay in a small barely furnished room having white distempered walls, wholly undecorated. Its few appointments were Oriental, and the only window which it boasted was set so high as to be well out of reach. Moreover, it was iron-barred, and at the moment admitted no light, whether because it did not communicate with the outer world, or because night was fallen, he was unable to tell.

There were two doors in the room, one of very massive construction, and the other a smaller one. The place was dimly lighted by a brass lantern which hung from the ceiling. Harley stood up, staggered slightly, and then sat down again.

"My God," he groaned and raised his hand to his head.

For a few moments he remained seated, victim of a deadly nausea. Then, clenching his jaws grimly, again he stood up, and this time succeeded in reaching the heavy door.

As he had supposed, it was firmly locked, and a glance was sufficient to show him that his unaided effort could never force it. He turned his attention to the smaller door, which opened at his touch, revealing a sleeping apartment not unlike a monk's cell, adjoining which was a tiny bathroom. Neither rooms boasted windows, both being lighted by brass lanterns.

Harley examined them and their appointments with the utmost care, and then returned again to the outer room, one feature of which, and quite the most remarkable, he had reserved for special investigation.

This was a massive screen of gilded iron scroll work, which occupied nearly the whole of one end of the room. Beyond the screen hung a violet-coloured curtain of Oriental fabric; but so closely woven was the metal design that although he could touch this curtain with his finger at certain points, it proved impossible for him to move it aside in any way.

He noted that its lower fringe did not quite touch the door. By stooping down, he could see a few feet into some room beyond. It was in darkness, however, and beyond the fact that it was carpeted with a rich Persian rug, he learned but little from his scrutiny. The gilded screen was solid and immovable.

Nodding his head grimly, Harley felt in his pockets for pipe and pouch, wondering if these, too, had been taken from him. They had not, however, and the first nausea of his awakening having passed, he filled and lighted his briar and dropped down upon the divan to consider his position.

That it was fairly desperate was a fact he was unable to hide from himself, but at least he was still alive, which was a matter at once for congratulation and surprise.

He had noticed before, in raising his hand to his head, that his forehead felt cold and wet, and now, considering the matter closely, he came to the conclusion that an attempt had been made to aid his recovery, by some person or persons who must have retired at the moment that he had shown signs of returning consciousness.

His salvation, then, was not accidental but deliberate. He wondered what awaited him and why his life had been spared. That he had walked blindly into a trap prepared for him by that mysterious personality known as Fire-Tongue, he no longer could doubt. Intense anxiety and an egotistical faith in his own acumen had led him to underestimate the cleverness of his enemies, a vice from which ordinarily he was free.

From what hour they had taken a leading interest in his movements, he would probably never know, but that they had detected Paul Harley beneath the vendor of "Old Moore's Almanac" was certain enough. What a fool he had been!

He reproached himself bitterly. Ordinary common sense should have told him that the Hindu secretary had given those instructions to the chauffeur in the courtyard of the Savoy Hotel for his, Paul Harley's, special benefit. It was palpable enough now. He wondered how he had ever fallen into such a trap, and biting savagely upon his pipe, he strove to imagine what ordeal lay ahead of him.

So his thoughts ran, drifting from his personal danger, which he knew to be great, to other matters, which he dreaded to consider, because they meant far more to him than his own life. Upon these bitter reflections a slight sound intruded, the first which had disturbed the stillness about him since the moment of his awakening.

Someone had entered the room beyond the gilded screen, and now a faint light showed beneath the fringe of the curtain. Paul Harley sat quite still, smoking and watching.

He had learned to face the inevitable with composure, and now, apprehending the worst, he waited, puffing at his pipe. Presently he detected the sound of someone crossing the room toward him, or rather toward the screen. He lay back against the mattress which formed the back of the divan, and watched the gap below the curtain.

Suddenly he perceived a pair of glossy black boots. Their wearer was evidently standing quite near the screen, possibly listening. Harley had an idea that some second person stood immediately behind the first. Of this idea he presently had confirmation. He was gripping the stem of his pipe very tightly and any one who could have seen him sitting there must have perceived that although his face wore an unusual pallor, he was composed and entirely master of himself.

A voice uttered his name:

"Mr. Paul Harley."

He could not be sure, but he thought it was the voice of Ormuz Khan's secretary. He drew his pipe from between his teeth, and:

"Yes, what do you want with me?" he asked.

"Your attention, Mr. Harley, for a few moments, if you feel sufficiently recovered."

"Pray proceed," said Harley.

Of the presence of a second person beyond the screen he was now assured, for he had detected the sound of whispered instructions; and sinking lower and lower upon the divan, he peered surreptitiously under the border of the curtain, believing it to be more than probable that his movements were watched.

This led to a notable discovery. A pair of gray suede shoes became visible a few inches behind the glossy black boots—curiously small shoes with unusually high heels. The identity of their wearer was beyond dispute to the man who had measured that delicate foot.

Ormuz Khan stood behind the screen!

XXV. AN ENGLISHMAN'S HONOUR

"You have been guilty of a series of unfortunate mistakes, Mr. Harley," continued the speaker. "Notably, you have relied upon the clumsy device of disguise. To the organization in which you have chosen to interest yourself, this has provided some mild amusement. Your pedlar of almanacs was a clever impersonation, but fortunately your appearance at the Savoy had been anticipated, and no one was deceived."

Paul Harley did not reply. He concluded, quite correctly, that the organization had failed to detect himself in the person of the nervous cobbler. He drew courage from this deduction. Fire-Tongue was not omniscient.

"It is possible," continued the unseen speaker, in whom Harley had now definitely recognized Ormuz Khan's secretary, "that you recently overheard a resolution respecting yourself. Your death, in fact, had been determined upon. Life and death being synonymous, the philosopher contemplates either with equanimity."

"I am contemplating the latter with equanimity at the moment," said Harley, dryly.

"The brave man does so," the Hindu continued, smoothly. "The world only seems to grow older; its youth is really eternal, but as age succeeds age, new creeds must take the place of the old ones which are burned out. Fire, Mr. Harley, sweeps everything from its path irresistibly. You have dared to stand in the path of a fiery dawn; therefore, like all specks of dust which clog the wheels of progress, you must be brushed aside."

Harley nodded grimly, watching a ring of smoke floating slowly upward.

"It is a little thing to those who know the truth," the speaker resumed. "To the purblind laws of the West it may seem a great thing. We seek in Rome to do as Rome does. We judge every man as we find him. Therefore, recognizing that your total disappearance might compromise our movements in the near future, we have decided to offer you an alternative. This offer is based upon the British character. Where the oath of some men is a thing of smoke, the word of honour of an Englishman we are prepared to accept."

"Many thanks," murmured Harley. "On behalf of Great Britain I accept the compliment."

"We have such faith in the completeness of our plans, and in the nearness of the hour of triumph, that if you will pledge yourself to silence, in writing, you will not be molested in any way. You occupy at the moment the apartment reserved for neophytes of a certain order. But we do not ask you to become a neophyte. Disciples must seek us, we do not seek disciples. We only ask for your word that you will be silent."

"It is impossible," said Harley, tersely.

"Think well of the matter. It may not seem so impossible to-morrow."

"I decline definitely."

"You are sustaining yourself with false hopes, Mr. Harley. You think you have clues which will enable you to destroy a system rooted in the remote past. Also you forget that you have lost your freedom."

Paul Harley offered no further answer to the speaker concealed behind the violet curtain.

"Do not misunderstand us," the voice continued. "We bind you to nothing but silence."

"I refuse," said Harley, sharply. "Dismiss the matter."

"In spite of your refusal, time for consideration will be given to you."

Faintly Paul Harley detected the sounds made by Ormuz Khan and his secretary in withdrawing. The light beneath the curtain disappeared.

For perhaps a space of two hours, Paul Harley sat smoking and contemplating the situation from every conceivable angle. It was certainly desperate enough, and after a time he rose with a weary sigh, and made a second and more detailed examination of the several apartments.

It availed him nothing, but one point he definitely established. Escape was impossible, failing outside assistance. A certain coldness in the atmosphere, which was perceptible immediately beneath the barred window, led him to believe that this communicated with the outer air.

He was disposed to think that his unconsciousness had lasted less than an hour, and that it was still dark without. He was full of distrust. He no longer believed his immediate death to have been decided upon. For some reason it would seem that the group wished him to live, at any rate, temporarily. But now a complete theory touching the death of Sir Charles Abingdon had presented itself to his mind. Knowing little, but suspecting much of the resources of Fire-Tongue, he endeavoured to avoid contact with anything in the place.

Night attire was provided in the sleeping chamber, but he did not avail himself of this hospitality. Absolute silence reigned about him. Yet so immutable are Nature's laws, that presently Paul Harley sank back upon the mattresses, and fell asleep.

He awoke, acutely uncomfortable and ill-rested. He found a shaft of light streaming into the room, and casting shadows of the iron bars upon the opposite wall. The brass lantern still burned above him, and the silence remained complete as when he had fallen asleep. He stood up yawning and stretching himself.

At least, it was good to be still alive. He was vaguely conscious of the fact that he had been dreaming of Phil Abingdon, and suppressing a sigh, he clenched his teeth grimly and entered the little bathroom. There proved to be a plentiful supply of hot and cold water. At this he sniffed suspiciously, but at last:

"I'll risk it," he muttered.

He undressed and revelled in the joy of a hot bath, concluding with a cold plunge. A razor and excellent toilet requisites were set upon the dressing table, and whilst his imagination whispered that the soap might be poisoned and the razor possess a septic blade, he shaved, and having shaved, lighted his pipe and redressed himself at leisure.

He had nearly completed his toilet when a slight sound in the outer room arrested his attention. He turned sharply, stepping through the doorway.

A low carved table, the only one which the apartment boasted, displayed an excellent English breakfast laid upon a spotless cover.

"Ah," he murmured, and by the sight was mentally translated to that celebrated apartment of the palace at Versailles, where Louis XIV and his notorious favourite once were accustomed to dine, alone, and unsuitably dressed, the courses being served in just this fashion.

Harley held his pipe in his hand, and contemplated the repast. It was only logical to suppose it to be innocuous, and a keen appetite hastened the issue. He sidetracked his suspicion, and made an excellent breakfast. So the first day of his captivity began.

Growing used to the stillness about him, he presently began to detect, as the hours wore on, distant familiar sounds. Automobiles on the highroad, trains leaving and entering a tunnel which he judged to be from two to three miles distant; even human voices at long intervals.

The noises of an English countryside crept through the barred windows. Beyond a doubt he was in the house known as Hillside. Probably at night the lights of London could be seen from the garden. He was within ordinary telephone call of Chancery Lane. Yet he resumed his pipe and smiled philosophically. He had hoped to see the table disappear beneath the floor. As evidence that he was constantly watched, this had occurred during a brief visit which he had made to the bedroom in quest of matches.

When he returned the table was in its former place, but the cover had been removed. He carefully examined the floor beneath it, and realized that there was no hope of depressing the trap from above. Then, at an hour which he judged to be that of noon, the same voice addressed him from beyond the gilded screen.

"Mr. Paul Harley?"

"Yes, what have you to say?"

"By this time, Mr. Harley, you must have recognized that opposition is futile. At any moment we could visit death upon you. Escape, on the other hand, is out of the question. We desire you no harm. For diplomatic reasons, we should prefer you to live. Our cause is a sacred one. Do not misjudge it by minor incidents. A short statement and a copy of your English testament shall be placed upon the table, if you wish."

"I do not wish," Paul Harley returned.

"Is that your last word, Mr. Harley? We warn you that the third time of asking will be the last time."

"This is my last word."

"Your own life is not the only stake at issue."

"What do you mean?"

"You will learn what we mean, if you insist upon withholding your consent until we next invite it."

"Nevertheless, you may regard it as withheld, definitely and finally."

Silence fell, and Paul Harley knew himself to be once more alone. Luncheon appeared upon the table whilst he was washing in the bathroom. Remembering the change in the tone of the unseen speaker's voice, he avoided touching anything.

From the divan, through half-closed eyes, he examined every inch of the walls, seeking for the spy-hole through which he knew himself to be watched. He detected it at last: a little grating, like a ventilator, immediately

above him where he sat. This communicated with some room where a silent watcher was constantly on duty!

Paul Harley gave no sign that he had made this discovery. But already his keen wits were at work upon a plan. He watched the bar of light fading, fading, until, judging it to be dinner time, he retired discreetly.

When he returned, he found dinner spread upon the table.

He wondered for what ordeal the neophyte was prepared in this singular apartment. He wondered how such neophytes were chosen, and to what tests they were submitted before being accepted as members of the bloodthirsty order. He could not even surmise.

Evidently no neophyte had been accepted on the previous night, unless there were other like chambers in the house. The occupants of the shuttered cars must therefore have been more advanced members. He spent the night in the little cell-like bedchamber, and his second day of captivity began as the first had begun.

For his dinner he had eaten nothing but bread and fruit. For his breakfast he ate an egg and drank water from the tap in the bathroom. His plan was now nearing completion. Only one point remained doubtful.

At noon the voice again addressed him from behind the gilded screen:

"Mr. Paul Harley?"

"Yes?"

"Your last opportunity has come. For your own future or for that of the world you seem to care little or nothing. Are you still determined to oppose our wishes?

"I am."

"You have yet an hour. Your final decision will be demanded of you at the end of that time."

Faint sounds of withdrawal followed these words and Harley suddenly discovered himself to be very cold. The note of danger had touched him. For long it had been silent. Now it clamoured insistently. He knew beyond all doubt that he was approaching a crisis in his life. At its nature he could not even guess.

He began to pace the room nervously, listening for he knew not what. His mind was filled with vague imaginings; when at last came an overture to the grim test to be imposed upon him.

A slight metallic sound drew his glance in the direction of the gilded screen. A sliding door of thick plate glass had been closed behind it, filling the space between the metal work and the curtain. Then—the light in the brass lantern became extinguished.

Standing rigidly, fists clenched, Paul Harley watched the curtain. And as he watched, slowly it was drawn aside. He found himself looking into a long room which appeared to be practically unfurnished.

The floor was spread with rugs and at the farther end folding doors had been opened, so that he could see into a second room, most elegantly appointed in Persian fashion. Here were silver lanterns, and many silken cushions, out of which, as from a sea of colour, arose slender pillars, the scheme possessing an air of exotic luxury peculiarly Oriental.

Seated in a carved chair over which a leopard skin had been thrown, and talking earnestly to some invisible companion, whose conversation seemed wholly to enthrall her, was Phil Abingdon!

XXVI. THE ORCHID OF SLEEP

"My God!" cried Innes, "here is proof that the chief was right!"

Wessex nodded in silent agreement. On the table lay the report of Merton, the analyst, concerning the stains upon the serviette which Harley had sent from the house of the late Sir Charles Abingdon. Briefly, it stated that the serviette had been sprinkled with some essential oil, the exact character of which Merton had found himself unable to determine, its perfume, if it ever possessed any, having disappeared. And the minute quantity obtainable from the linen rendered ordinary tests difficult to apply. The analyst's report, however, concluded as follows:

"Mr. Harley, having foreseen these difficulties, and having apparently suspected that the oil was of Oriental origin, recommended me, in the note which he enclosed with the serviette, to confer with Dr. Warwick Grey. I send a copy of a highly interesting letter which I have received from Doctor Grey, whose knowledge of Eastern poison is unparalleled, and to whose opinion I attach immense importance."

It was the contents of this appended letter which had inspired Innes's remarks. Indeed, it contained matter which triumphantly established Paul Harley's theory that Sir Charles Abingdon had not died from natural causes. The letter was as follows:

'No.—— Harley Street London, W. 1.

'MY DEAR MERTON:

'I am indebted to you and to Mr. Harley for an opportunity of examining the serviette, which I return herewith. I agree that the oil does not respond to ordinary tests, nor is any smell perceptible. But you have noticed in your microscopic examination of the stains that there is a peculiar crystalline formation upon the surface. You state that this is quite unfamiliar to you, which is not at all strange, since outside of the Himalayan districts of Northwest India I have never met with it myself.

'Respecting the character of the oil employed, however, I am in no doubt, and I actually possess a dried specimen of the flower from which it is expressed. This is poetically known among the Mangars, one of the fighting tribes or Nepal, as the Bloom or Orchid of Sleep.

'It is found upon the lower Himalayan slopes, and bears a close resemblance to the white odontoglossum of commerce, except that the flower is much smaller. Its perfume attracts insects and sometimes small animals and reptiles, although inhalation seems to induce instant death. It may be detected in its natural state by the presence of hundreds of dead flies and insects upon the ground surrounding the plant. It is especially fatal to nocturnal insects, its perfume being stronger at night.

'Preparation of the oil is an art peculiar to members of an obscure sect established in that district, by whom it is said to be employed for the removal of enemies.

'An article is sprinkled with it, and whilst the perfume, which is reported to resemble that of cloves, remains perceptible, to inhale it results in immediate syncope, although by what physiological process I have never been enabled to determine.

'With the one exception which I have mentioned, during my stay in Nepal and the surrounding districts I failed to obtain a specimen of this orchid. I have twice seen the curious purple stain upon articles of clothing worn by

natives who had died suddenly and mysteriously. The Mangars simply say, "He has offended someone. It is the flower of sleep."

'I immediately recognized the colour of the stains upon the enclosed serviette, and also the curious crystalline formation on their surface. The identity of the "someone" to whom the Mangars refer, I never established. I shall welcome any particulars respecting the history of the serviette.

'Very truly yours,

'WARWICK GREY.'

"Sir Charles Abingdon was poisoned," said Wessex in a hushed voice. "For the girl's sake I hate the idea, but we shall have to get an exhumation order."

"It is impossible," returned Innes, shortly. "He was cremated."

"Good heavens," murmured Wessex, "I never knew."

"But after all," continued Inures, "it is just as well for everyone concerned. The known facts are sufficient to establish the murder, together with the report of Dr. Warwick Grey. But, meanwhile, are we any nearer to learning the identity of the murderer?"

"We are not! " said Wessex, grimly. "And what's more, when I get to Scotland Yard, I have got to face the music. First Mr. Harley goes, and now Nicol Brinn has disappeared!"

"It's almost unbelievable!"

"I took him for a white man," said the detective, earnestly. "I accepted his parole for twenty-four hours. The twenty-four hours expired about noon to-day, but since he played that trick on Stokes last night and went out of his chambers, he has vanished utterly."

Innes stood up excitedly.

"Your ideas may be all wrong, Wessex!" he cried. "Don't you see that he may have gone the same way as the chief?"

"He was mightily anxious to get out, at any rate."

"And you have no idea where he went?"

"Not the slightest. Following his performance of last night, of course I was compelled to instal a man in the chambers, and this morning someone rang up from the house of Lord Wolverham; he is commanding officer of one of the Guards battalions, I believe. It appears that Mr. Nicol Brinn not

only locked up a representative of the Criminal Investigation Department, but also stole a Rolls Royce car from outside the Cavalry Club!"

"What!" cried Innes. "Stole a car?"

"Stole Lord Wolverham's car and calmly drove away in it. We have failed to trace both car and man!" The detective inspector sighed wearily. "Well, I suppose I must get along to the Yard. Stokes has got the laugh on me this time."

Wearing a very gloomy expression, the detective inspector proceeded on foot to New Scotland Yard, and being informed on his arrival upstairs that the Assistant Commissioner was expecting him, he entered the office of that great man.

The Assistant Commissioner, who had palpably seen military service, was a big man with very tired eyes, and a quiet, almost apologetic manner.

"Ah, Detective Inspector," he said, as Wessex entered. "I wanted to see you about this business of Mr. Nicol Brinn."

"Yes, sir," replied Wessex; "naturally."

"Now," the Assistant Commissioner turned wearily in his chair, and glanced up at his subordinate—"your accepting the parole of a suspect, under the circumstances, was officially improper, but I am not blaming you —I am not blaming you for a moment. Mr. Nicol Brinn's well-known reputation justified your behaviour." He laid one large hand firmly upon the table. "Mr. Nicol Brinn's absence alters the matter entirely."

"I am well aware of it," murmured the inspector. "Although," continued the Assistant Commissioner, "Mr. Brinn's record leads me to believe that he will have some suitable explanation to offer, his behaviour, you will admit, is that of a guilty man?"

"It is, sir; it certainly is."

"The Press, fortunately, has learned nothing of this unpleasant business, particularly unpleasant because it involves such well-known people. You will see to it, Detective Inspector, that all publicity is avoided if possible. Meanwhile, as a matter of ordinary departmental routine, you will circulate Mr. Brinn's description through the usual channels, and—" the Assistant Commissioner raised his eyebrows slightly.

"You mean that?" asked Wessex.

"Certainly. He must be arrested by the first officer who recognizes him."

"Very good, sir. I will move in the matter at once."

"Do so, please." The Assistant Commissioner sighed wearily, as one of his telephones set up a muted buzzing. "That is all for the moment, I think. Good morning."

Detective Inspector Wessex came out, quietly closing the door behind him. He felt that he had been let down very lightly. But nevertheless he was unpleasantly warm, and as he walked slowly along the corridor he whistled softly, and:

"Arrest of Mr. Nicol Brinn," he muttered. "What a headline, if they ever get it!"

XXVII. AT HILLSIDE

Phil Abingdon arrived at Hillside in a state of mind which she found herself unable to understand. Mrs. McMurdoch, who had accepted the invitation under protest, saying that if Doctor McMurdoch had been at home he would certainly have disapproved, had so utterly fallen under the strange spell of Ormuz Khan, that long before they had come to Hillside she was hanging upon his every word in a way which was almost pathetic to watch.

On the other hand, Phil Abingdon had taken up a definite attitude of defense; and perceiving this, because of his uncanny intuitiveness, the Persian had exerted himself to the utmost, more often addressing Phil than her companion, and striving to regain that mastery of her emotions which he had formerly achieved, at least in part.

Her feelings, however, were largely compounded of fear, and fear strengthened her defense. The repulsive part of Ormuz Khan's character became more apparent to her than did the fascination which she had once experienced. She distrusted him, distrusted him keenly. She knew at the bottom of her heart that this had always been so, but she had suffered his attentions in much the same spirit as that which imbues the naturalist who studies the habits of a poisonous reptile.

She knew that she was playing with fire, and in this knowledge lay a dangerous pleasure. She had the utmost faith in her own common sense, and was ambitious to fence with edged tools.

When at last the car was drawn up before the porch of Hillside, and Ormuz Khan, stepping out, assisted the ladies to alight, for one moment Phil Abingdon hesitated, although she knew that it was already too late to do so. They were received by Mr. Rama Dass, his excellency's courteous secretary, whom she had already met, and whom Ormuz Khan presented to Mrs. McMurdoch. Almost immediately:

"You have missed Mr. Harley by only a few minutes," said Rama Dass.

"What!" exclaimed Phil, her eyes opening very widely.

"Oh, there is no occasion for alarm," explained the secretary in his urbane manner. "He has ventured as far as Lower Claybury station. The visit was unavoidable. He particularly requested that we should commence luncheon, but hoped to be back before we should have finished."

Phil Abingdon glanced rapidly from the face of the speaker to that of Ormuz Khan. But her scrutiny of those unreadable countenances availed her nothing. She was conscious of a great and growing uneasiness; and Mrs. McMurdoch, misunderstanding the expression upon her face, squeezed her arm playfully.

"Cheer up, dear" she whispered; "he will be here soon!"

Phil knew that her face had flushed deeply. Partly she was glad of her emotions, and partly ashamed. This sweet embarrassment in which there was a sort of pain was a new experience, but one wholly delightful. She laughed, and accepting the arm of Ormuz Khan, walked into a very English-looking library, followed by Rama Dass and Mrs. McMurdoch. The house, she thought, was very silent, and she found herself wondering why no servants had appeared.

Rama Dass had taken charge of the ladies' cloaks in the hall, and in spite of the typical English environment in which she found herself, Phil sat very near to Mrs. McMurdoch on a settee, scarcely listening to the conversation, and taking no part in it.

For there was a strange and disturbing air of loneliness about Hillside. She would have welcomed the appearance of a butler or a parlourmaid, or any representative of the white race. Yes: there lay the root of the matter—this feeling of aloofness from all that was occidental, a feeling which the English appointments of the room did nothing to dispel. Then a gong sounded and the party went in to lunch.

A white-robed Hindu waited at table, and Phil discovered his movements to be unpleasantly silent. There was something very unreal about it all. She found herself constantly listening for the sound of an approaching car, of a footstep, of a voice, the voice of Paul Harley. This waiting presently grew unendurable, and:

"I hope Mr. Harley is safe," she said, in a rather unnatural tone. "Surely he should have returned by now?"

Ormuz Khan shrugged his slight shoulders and glanced at a diamond-studded wrist watch which he wore.

"There is nothing to fear," he declared, in his soft, musical voice. "He knows how to take care of himself. And"—with a significant glance of his long, magnetic eyes—"I am certain he will return as speedily as possible."

Nevertheless, luncheon terminated, and Harley had not appeared.

"You have sometimes expressed a desire," said Ormuz Khan, "to see the interior of a Persian house. Permit me to show you the only really characteristic room which I allow myself in my English home."

Endeavouring to conceal her great anxiety, Phil allowed herself to be conducted by the Persian to an apartment which realized her dreams of that Orient which she had never visited.

Three beautiful silver lanterns depended from a domed ceiling in which wonderfully woven tapestry was draped. The windows were partly obscured by carved wooden screens, and the light entered through little panels of coloured glass. There were cushioned divans, exquisite pottery, and a playful fountain plashing in a marble pool.

Ormuz Khan conducted her to a wonderfully carven chair over which a leopard's skin was draped and there she seated herself. She saw through a wide doorway before her a long and apparently unfurnished room dimly lighted. At the farther end she could vaguely discern violet-coloured draperies. Ormuz Khan gracefully threw himself upon a divan to the right of this open door.

"This, Miss Abingdon," he said, "is a nearly exact reproduction of a room of a house which I have in Ispahan. I do not claim that it is typical, but does its manner appeal to you?"

"Immensely," she replied, looking around her.

She became aware of a heavy perfume of hyacinths, and presently observed that there were many bowls of those flowers set upon little tables,

and in niches in the wall.

"Yet its atmosphere is not truly of the Orient."

"Are such apartments uncommon, then, in Persia?" asked Phil, striving valiantly to interest herself in the conversation.

"I do not say so," he returned, crossing one delicate foot over the other, in languorous fashion. "But many things which are typically of the Orient would probably disillusion you, Miss Abingdon."

"In what way?" she asked, wondering why Mrs. McMurdoch had not joined them.

"In many subtle ways. The real wonder and the mystery of the East lie not upon the surface, but beneath it. And beneath the East of to-day lies the East of yesterday."

The speaker's expression grew rapt, and he spoke in the mystic manner which she knew and now dreaded. Her anxiety for the return of Paui Harley grew urgent—a positive need, as, meeting the gaze of the long, magnetic eyes, she felt again, like the touch of cold steel, all the penetrating force of this man's will. She was angrily aware of the fact that his gaze was holding hers hypnotically, that she was meeting it contrary to her wish and inclination. She wanted to look away but found herself looking steadily into the coal-black eyes of Ormuz Khan.

"The East of yesterday"—his haunting voice seemed to reach her from a great distance—"saw the birth of all human knowledge and human power; and to us the East of yesterday is the East of today."

Phil became aware that a sort of dreamy abstraction was creeping over her, when in upon this mood came a sound which stimulated her weakening powers of resistance.

Dimly, for all the windows of the room were closed, she heard a car come up and stop before the house. It aroused her from the curious condition of lethargy into which she was falling. She turned her head sharply aside, the physical reflection of a mental effort to remove her gaze from the long, magnetic eyes of Ormuz Khan. And:

"Do you think that is Mr. Harley?" she asked, and failed to recognize her own voice.

"Possibly," returned the Persian, speaking very gently.

With one ivory hand he touched his knee for a moment, the only expression of disappointment which he allowed himself.

"May I ask you to go and enquire?" continued Phil, now wholly mistress of herself again. "I am wondering, too, what can have become of Mrs. McMurdoch."

"I will find out," said Ormuz Khan.

He rose, his every movement possessing a sort of feline grace. He bowed and walked out of the room. Phil Abingdon heard in the distance the motor restarted and the car being driven away from Hillside. She stood up restlessly.

Beneath the calm of the Persian's manner she had detected the presence of dangerous fires. The silence of the house oppressed her. She was not actually frightened yet, but intuitively she knew that all was not well. Then came a new sound arousing active fear at last.

Someone was rapping upon one of the long, masked windows! Phil Abingdon started back with a smothered exclamation.

"Quick!" came a high, cool voice, "open this window. You are in danger."

The voice was odd, peculiar, but of one thing she was certain. It was not the voice of an Oriental. Furthermore, it held a note of command, and something, too, which inspired trust.

She looked quickly about her to make sure that she was alone. And then, running swiftly to the window from which the sound had come, she moved a heavy gilded fastening which closed it, and drew open the heavy leaves.

A narrow terrace was revealed with a shrubbery beyond; and standing on the terrace was a tall, thin man wearing a light coat over evening dress. He looked pale, gaunt, and unshaven, and although the regard of his light eyes was almost dreamy, there was something very tense in his pose.

"I am Nicol Brinn," said the stranger. "I knew your father. You have walked into a trap. I am here to get you out of it. Can you drive?"

"Do you mean an automobile?" asked Phil, breathlessly.

"A Rolls Royce."

"Yes."

"Come right out."

"My furs! my hat!"

"Something bigger is at stake."

It was all wildly bizarre, almost unbelievable. Phil Abingdon had experienced in her own person the insidious power of Ormuz Khan. She now found herself under the spell of a personality at least as forceful,

although in a totally different way. She found herself running through a winding path amid bushes, piloted by this strange, unshaven man, to whom on sight she had given her trust unquestioningly!

"When we reach the car," he said over his shoulder, "ask no questions—head for home, and don't stop for anything—on two legs or on four. That's the first thing—most important; then, when you know you're safe, telephone Scotland Yard to send a raid squad down by road, and do it quick."

XXVIII. THE CHASE

The events which led to the presence of Mr. Nicol Brinn at so opportune a moment were—consistent with the character of that remarkable man—of a sensational nature.

Having commandeered the Rolls Royce from the door of the Cavalry Club, he had immediately, by a mental process which many perils had perfected, dismissed the question of rightful ownership from his mind. The fact that he might be intercepted by police scouts he refused to entertain. The limousine driven by the Hindu chauffeur was still in sight, and until Mr. Nicol Brinn had seen it garaged, nothing else mattered, nothing else counted, and nothing else must be permitted to interfere.

Jamming his hat tightly upon his head, he settled down at the wheel, drawing up rather closer to the limousine as the chase lay through crowded thoroughfares and keeping his quarry comfortably in sight across Westminster Bridge and through the outskirts of London.

He had carefully timed the drive to the unknown abode of Fire-Tongue, and unless it had been prolonged, the more completely to deceive him, he had determined that the house lay not more than twenty miles from Piccadilly.

When Mitcham was passed, and the limousine headed straight on into Surrey, he decided that there had been no doubling, but that the house to which he had been taken lay in one of these unsuspected country backwaters, which, while they are literally within sight of the lights of

London, have nevertheless a remoteness as complete as secrecy could desire.

It was the deserted country roads which he feared, for if the man ahead of him should suspect pursuit, a difficult problem might arise.

By happy chance Nicol Brinn, an enthusiastic motorist, knew the map of Surrey as few Englishmen knew it. Indeed, there was no beauty spot within a forty-mile radius of London to which he could not have driven by the best and shortest route, at a moment's notice. This knowledge aided him now.

For presently at a fork in the road he saw that the driver of the limousine had swung to the left, taking the low road, that to the right offering a steep gradient. The high road was the direct road to Lower Claybury, the low road a detour to the same.

Nicol Brinn mentally reviewed the intervening countryside, and taking a gambler's chance, took the Rolls Royce up the hill. He knew exactly what he was about, and he knew that the powerful engine would eat up the slope with ease.

Its behaviour exceeded his expectations, and he found himself mounting the acclivity at racing speed. At its highest point, the road, skirting a hilltop, offered an extensive view of the valley below. Here Nicol Brinn pulled up and, descending, watched and listened.

In the stillness he could plainly hear the other automobile humming steadily along the lowland road below. He concentrated his mind upon the latter part of that strange journey, striving to recall any details which had marked it immediately preceding the time when he had detected the rustling of leaves and knew that they had entered a carriage drive.

Yes, there had been a short but steep hill; and immediately before this the car had passed over a deeply rutted road, or—he had a sudden inspiration—over a level crossing.

He knew of just such a hilly road immediately behind Lower Claybury station. Indeed, it was that by which he should be compelled to descend if he continued to pursue his present route to the town. He could think of no large, detached house, the Manor Park excepted, which corresponded to the one which he sought. But that in taking the high road he had acted even more wisely than he knew, he was now firmly convinced.

He determined to proceed as far as the park gates as speedily as possible. Therefore, returning to the wheel, he sent the car along the now level road

at top speed, so that the railings of the Manor Park, when presently he found himself skirting the grounds, had the semblance of a continuous iron fence wherever the moonlight touched them.

He passed the head of the road dipping down to Lower Claybury, but forty yards beyond pulled up and descended. Again he stood listening, and:

"Good!" he muttered.

He could hear the other car labouring up the slope. He ran along to the corner of the lane, and, crouching close under the bushes, waited for its appearance. As he had supposed, the chauffeur turned the car to the right.

"Good!" muttered Nicol Brinn again.

There was a baggage-rack immediately above the number plate. Upon this Nicol Brinn sprang with the agility of a wildcat, settling himself upon his perilous perch before the engine had had time to gather speed.

When presently the car turned into the drive of Hillside, Nicol Brinn dropped off and dived into the bushes on the right of the path. From this hiding place he saw the automobile driven around the front of the house to the garage, which was built out from the east wing. Not daring to pursue his investigations until the chauffeur had retired, he sought a more comfortable spot near a corner of the lawn and there, behind a bank of neglected flowers, lay down, watching the man's shadowy figure moving about in the garage.

Although he was some distance from the doors he could see that there was a second car in the place—a low, torpedo-bodied racer, painted battleship gray. This sight turned his thoughts in another direction.

Very cautiously he withdrew to the drive again, retracing his steps to the lane, and walking back to the spot where he had left the Rolls Royce, all the time peering about him to right and left. He was looking for a temporary garage for the car, but one from which, if necessary, he could depart in a hurry. The shell of an ancient barn, roofless and desolate, presently invited inspection and, as a result, a few minutes later Colonel Lord Wolverham's luxurious automobile was housed for the night in these strange quarters.

When Nicol Brinn returned to Hillside, he found the garage locked and the lights extinguished. Standing under a moss-grown wall which sheltered him from the house, from his case he selected a long black cigar, lighted it with care and, having his hands thrust in the pockets of his light overcoat and the cigar protruding aggressively from the left corner of his mouth, he

moved along to an angle of the wall and stared reflectively at the silent house.

A mental picture arose of a secret temple in the shadow of the distant Himalayas. Was it credible that this quiet country house, so typical of rural England, harboured that same dread secret which he had believed to be locked away in those Indian hills? Could he believe that the dark and death-dealing power which he had seen at work in the East was now centred here, within telephone-call of London?

The fate of Sir Charles Abingdon and of Paul Harley would seem to indicate that such was the case. Beyond doubt, the document of which Rama Dass had spoken was some paper in the possession of the late Sir Charles. Much that had been mysterious was cleared up. He wondered why it had not occurred to him from the first that Sir Charles's inquiry, which he had mentioned to Paul Harley, respecting Fire-Tongue, had been due to the fact that the surgeon had seen the secret mark upon his arm after the accident in the Haymarket. He remembered distinctly that his sleeve had been torn upon that occasion. He could not imagine, however, what had directed the attention of the organization to Sir Charles, and for what reason his death had been decided upon.

He rolled his cigar from corner to corner of his mouth, staring reflectively with lack-lustre eyes at the silent house before him. In the moonlight it made a peaceful picture enough. A cautious tour of the place revealed a lighted window upon the first floor. Standing in the shadow of an old apple tree, Nicol Brinn watched the blind of this window minute after minute, patiently waiting for a shadow to appear upon it; and at last his patience was rewarded.

A shadow appeared—the shadow of a woman!

Nicol Brinn dropped his cigar at his feet and set his heel upon it. A bitter-sweet memory which had been with him for seven years arose again in his mind. There is a kind of mountain owl in certain parts of northern India which possesses a curiously high, plaintive note. He wondered if he could remember and reproduce that note.

He made the attempt, repeating the cry three times. At the third repetition the light in the first floor window went out. He heard the sound of the window being gently opened. Then a voice—a voice which held the sweetest music in the world for the man who listened below—spoke softly:

"Nicol!"

"Naida!" he called. "Come down to me. You must. Don't answer. I will wait here."

"Promise you will let me return!"

He hesitated.

"Promise!"

"I promise."

XXIX. THE CATASTROPHE

The first faint spears of morning creeping through the trees which surrounded Hillside revealed two figures upon a rustic bench in the little orchard adjoining the house. A pair incongruous enough—this dark-eyed Eastern woman, wrapped in a long fur cloak, and Nicol Brinn, gaunt, unshaven, fantastic in his evening dress, revealed now in the gray morning light.

"Look!" whispered Naida. "It is the dawn. I must go!"

Nicol Brinn clenched his teeth tightly but made no reply.

"You promised," she said, and although her voice was very tender she strove to detach his arm, which was locked about her shoulders.

He nodded grimly.

"I'll keep my word. I made a contract with hell with my eyes open, and I'll stick to it." He stood up suddenly. "Go back, Naida!" he said. "Go back! You have my promise, now, and I'm helpless. But at last I see a way, and I'm going to take it."

"What do you mean?" she cried, standing up and clutching his arm.

"Never mind." His tone was cool again. "Just go back."

"You would not—" she began.

"I never broke my word in my life, and even now I'm not going to begin. While you live I stay silent."

In the growing light Naida looked about her affrightedly. Then, throwing her arms impulsively around Brinn, she kissed him—a caress that was passionate but sexless; rather the kiss of a mother who parts with a beloved

son than that which a woman bestows upon the man she loves; an act of renunciation.

He uttered a low cry and would have seized her in his arms but, lithely evading him, she turned, stifling a sob, and darted away through the trees toward the house.

For long he stood looking after her, fists clenched and his face very gray in the morning light. Some small inner voice told him that his new plan, and the others which he had built upon it, must crumble and fall as a castle of sand. He groaned and, turning aside, made his way through the shrubbery to the highroad.

He was become accessory to a murder; for he had learned for what reason and by what means Sir Charles Abingdon had been assassinated. He had even learned the identity of his assassin; had learned that the dreaded being called Fire-Tongue in India was known and respected throughout the civilized world as His Excellency Ormuz Khan!

Paul Harley had learned these things also, and now at this very hour Paul Harley lay a captive in Hillside. Naida had assured him that Paul Harley was alive and safe. It had been decided that his death would lead to the destruction of the movement, but pressure was being brought upon him to ensure his silence.

Yes, he, Nicol Brinn, was bound and manacled to a gang of assassins; and because his tongue was tied, because the woman he loved better than anything in the world was actually a member of the murderous group, he must pace the deserted country lanes inactive; he must hold his hand, although he might summon the resources of New Scotland Yard by phoning from Lower Claybury station!

Through life his word had been his bond, and Nicol Brinn was incapable of compromising with his conscience. But the direct way was barred to him. Nevertheless, no task could appal the inflexible spirit of the man, and he had registered a silent vow that Ormuz Khan should never leave England alive.

Not a soul was astir yet upon the country roads, and sitting down upon a grassy bank, Nicol Brinn lighted one of his black cigars, which in times of stress were his food and drink, upon which if necessary he could carry-on for forty-eight hours upon end.

In connection with his plan for coercing Harley, Ormuz Khan had gone to London by rail on the previous night, departing from Lower Claybury station at about the time that Colonel Lord Wolverham came out of the Cavalry Club to discover his Rolls Royce to be missing. This same Rolls Royce was now a source of some anxiety to Nicol Brinn, for its discovery by a passing labourer in the deserted barn seemed highly probable.

However, he had matters of greater urgency to think about, not the least of these being the necessity of concealing his presence in the neighbourhood of Hillside. Perhaps his Sioux-like face reflected a spirit allied in some respects to that of the once great Indian tribe.

His genius for taking cover, perfected upon many a big-game expedition, enabled him successfully to accomplish the feat; so that, when the limousine, which he had watched go by during the morning, returned shortly after noon, the lack-lustre eyes were peering out through the bushes near the entrance to the drive.

Instinct told him that the pretty girl with whom Ormuz Khan was deep in conversation could be none other than Phil Abingdon, but the identity of her companion he could not even guess. On the other hand, that this poisonously handsome Hindu, who bent forward so solicitously toward his charming travelling companion, was none other than the dreaded Fire-Tongue, he did not doubt.

He returned to a strategic position which he had discovered during the night. In a measure he was nonplussed. That the presence of the girl was primarily associated with the coercion of Paul Harley, he understood; but might it not portend something even more sinister?

When, later, the limousine departed again, at great risk of detection he ran across a corner of the lawn to peer out into the lane, in order that he might obtain a glimpse of its occupant. This proved to be none other than Phil Abingdon's elderly companion. She had apparently been taken ill, and a dignified Hindu gentleman, wearing gold-rimmed pince-nez, was in attendance.

Nicol Brinn clenched his jaws hard. The girl had fallen into a trap. He turned rapidly, facing the house. Only at one point did the shrubbery approach the wall, but for that point he set out hot foot, passing from bush to bush with Indian cleverness, tense, alert, and cool in despite of his long vigil.

At last he came to the shallow veranda with its four sightless windows backed by fancifully carven screens. He stepped up to the first of these and pressed his ear against the glass.

Fate was with him, for almost immediately he detected a smooth, musical voice speaking in the room beyond. A woman's voice answered and, listening intently, he detected the sound of a closing door.

Thereupon he acted: with the result, as has appeared, that Phil Abingdon, hatless, without her furs, breathless and more frightened than she had ever been in her life, presently found herself driving a luxurious Rolls Royce out of a roofless barn on to the highroad, and down the slope to Claybury station.

It was at about this time, or a little later, that Paul Harley put into execution a project which he had formed. The ventilator above the divan, which he had determined to be the spy-hole through which his every movement was watched, had an ornamental framework studded with metal knobs. He had recently discovered an electric bell-push in the centre panel of the massive door of his prison.

Inwardly on fire, imagining a thousand and one horrors centring about the figure of Phil Abingdon, but retaining his outward calm by dint of a giant effort, he pressed this bell and waited.

Perhaps two minutes elapsed. Then the glass doors beyond the gilded screen were drawn open, and the now-familiar voice spoke:

"Mr. Paul Harley?"

"Yes," he replied, "I have made my final decision."

"And that is?

"I agree."

"You are wise," the voice replied. "A statement will be placed before you for signature. When you have signed it, ring the bell again, and in a few minutes you will be free."

Vaguely he detected the speaker withdrawing. Thereupon, heaving a loud sigh, he removed his coat, looked about him as if in quest of some place to hang it, and finally, fixing his gaze upon the studded grating, stood upon the divan and hung his coat over the spy-hole! This accomplished, he turned.

The table was slowly sinking through the gap in the floor beneath.

Treading softly, he moved forward and seated himself cross-legged upon it! It continued to descend, and he found himself in absolute darkness.

Nicol Brinn ran on to the veranda and paused for a moment to take breath. The window remained open, as Phil Abingdon had left it. He stepped into the room with its elegant Persian appointments. It was empty. But as he crossed the threshold, he paused, arrested by the sound of a voice.

"A statement will be placed before you," said the voice, "and when you have signed it, in a few minutes you will be free."

Nicol Brinn silently dropped flat at the back of a divan, as Rama Dass, coming out of the room which communicated with the golden screen, made his way toward the distant door. Having one eye raised above the top of the cushions, Nicol Brinn watched him, recognizing the man who had accompanied the swooning lady. She had been deposited, then, at no great distance from the house.

He was to learn later that poor Mrs. McMurdoch, in her artificially induced swoon, had been left in charge of a hospitable cottager, while her solicitous Oriental escort had sped away in quest of a physician. But at the moment matters of even greater urgency engaged his attention.

Creeping forward to the doorway by which Rama Dass had gone out, Nicol Brinn emerged upon a landing from which stairs both ascended and descended. Faint sounds of footsteps below guided him, and although from all outward seeming he appeared to saunter casually down, his left hand was clutching the butt of a Colt automatic.

He presently found himself in a maze of basements—kitchens of the establishment, no doubt. The sound of footsteps no longer guided him. He walked along, and in a smaller deserted pantry discovered the base of a lift shaft in which some sort of small elevator worked. He was staring at this reflectively, when, for the second time in his adventurous career, a silken cord was slipped tightly about his throat!

He was tripped and thrown. He fought furiously, but the fatal knee pressure came upon his spine so shrewdly as to deprive him of the strength to raise his hands.

"My finish!" were the words that flashed through his mind, as sounds like the waves of a great ocean beat upon his ears and darkness began to descend.

Then, miraculously, the pressure ceased; the sound of great waters subsided; and choking, coughmg, he fought his way back to life, groping

like a blind man and striving to regain his feet.

"Mr. Brinn!" said a vaguely familiar voice. "Mr. Brinn!"

The realities reasserted themselves. Before him, pale, wide-eyed, and breathing heavily, stood Paul Harley; and prone upon the floor of the pantry lay Rama Dass, still clutching one end of the silken rope in his hand!

"Mr. Harley!" gasped Brinn. "My God, sir!" He clutched at his bruised throat. "I have to thank you for my hfe."

He paused, looking down at the prone figure as Harley, dropping upon his knees, turned the man over.

"I struck him behind the ear," he muttered, "and gave him every ounce. Good heavens!"

He had slipped his hand inside Rama Dass's vest, and now he looked up, his face very grim.

"Good enough!" said Brinn, coolly. "He asked for it; he's got it. Take this." He thrust the Colt automatic into Harley's hand as the latter stood up again.

"What do we do now?" asked Harley.

"Search the house," was the reply. "Everything coloured you see, shoot, unless I say no."

"Miss Abingdon?"

"She's safe. Follow me."

Straight up two flights of stairs led Nicol Brinn, taking three steps at a stride. Palpably enough the place was deserted. Ormuz Khan's plans for departure were complete.

Into two rooms on the first floor they burst, to find them stripped and bare. On the threshold of the third Brinn stopped dead, and his gaunt face grew ashen. Then he tottered across the room, arms outstretched.

"Naida," he whispered. "My love, my love!"

Paul Harley withdrew quietly. He had begun to walk along the corridor when the sound of a motor brought him up sharply. A limousine was being driven away from the side entrance! Not alone had he heard that sound. His face deathly, and the lack-lustre eyes dully on fire, Nicol Brinn burst out of the room and, not heeding the presence of Harley, hurled himself down the stairs. He was as a man demented, an avenging angel.

"There he is!" cried Harley—"heading for the Dover Road!"

Nicol Brinn, at the wheel of the racer—the same in which Harley had made his fateful journey and which had afterward been concealed in the garage at Hillside—scarcely nodded.

Nearer they drew to the quarry, and nearer. Once—twice—and again, the face of Ormuz Khan peered out of the window at the rear of the limousine.

They drew abreast; the road was deserted. And they passed slightly ahead.

Paul Harley glanced at the granite face of his companion with an apprehension he was unable to conceal. This was a cool madman who drove. What did he intend to do?

Inch by inch, Nicol Brinn edged the torpedo body nearer to the wheels of the racing limousine. The Oriental chauffeur drew in ever closer to the ditch bordering the roadside. He shouted hoarsely and was about to apply the brakes when the two cars touched!

A rending crash came—a hoarse scream—and the big limousine toppled over into the ditch.

Harley felt himself hurled through space.

"Shall I follow on to Lower Claybury, sir?" asked Inspector Wessex, excitedly.

Phil Abingdon's message had come through nearly an hour before, and a party had been despatched in accordance with Brinn's instructions. Wessex had returned to New Scotland Yard too late to take charge, and now, before the Assistant Commissioner had time to reply, a 'phone buzzed.

"Yes?" said the Assistant Commissioner, taking up one of the several instruments: "What!"

Even this great man, so justly celebrated for his placid demeanour, was unable to conceal his amazement.

"Yes," he added. "Let him come up!" He replaced the receiver and turning to Wessex: "Mr. Nicol Brinn is here!" he informed him.

"What's that!" cried the inspector, quite startled out of his usual deferential manner.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor. Came a rap at the door.

"Come in," said the Assistant Commissioner.

The door was thrown open and Nicol Brinn entered. One who knew him well would have said that he had aged ten years. Even to the eye of Wessex

he looked an older man. He wore a shoddy suit and a rough tweed cap and his left arm was bandaged.

"Gentlemen," he said, without other greeting, "I'm here to make a statement. I desire that a shorthand-writer attend to take it down."

He dropped weakly into a chair which Wessex placed for him. The Assistant Commissioner, doubtless stimulated by the manner of his extraordinary visitor, who now extracted a cigar from the breast pocket of his ill-fitting jacket and nonchalantly lighted it, successfully resumed his well-known tired manner, and, pressing a bell:

"One shall attend, Mr. Brinn," he said.

A knock came at the door and a sergeant entered.

"Send Ferris," directed the Assistant Commissioner. "Quickly."

Two minutes later a man came in carrying a note book and fountain pen. The Assistant Commissioner motioned him to a chair, and:

"Pray proceed, Mr. Brinn," he said.

XXX. NICOL BRINN'S STORY OF THE CITY OF FIRE

"The statement which I have to make, gentlemen, will almost certainly appear incredible to you. However, when it has been transcribed I will sign it. And I am going to say here and now that there are points in the narrative which I am in a position to substantiate. What I can't prove you must take my word for. But I warn you that the story is tough.

"I have a certain reputation for recklessness. I don't say it may not be inherent; but if you care to look the matter up, you will find that the craziest phase of my life is that covering the last seven years. The reason why I have courted death during that period I am now about to explain.

"Although my father was no traveller, I think I was born with the wanderlust. I started to explore the world in my Harvard vacations, and when college days were over I set about the business whole-heartedly. Where I went and what I did, up to the time that my travels led me to India, is of no interest to you or to anybody else, because in India I found heaven and hell—a discovery enough to satisfy the most adventurous man alive.

"At this present time, gentlemen, I am not going to load you with geographical details. The exact spot at which my life ended, in a sense which I presently hope to make clear, can be located at leisure by the proper authorities, to whom I will supply a detailed map which I have in my possession. I am even prepared to guide the expedition, if the Indian Government considers an expedition necessary and cares to accept my services. It's good enough for you to know that pig-sticking and tiger-hunting having begun to pall upon me somewhat, I broke away from Anglo-Indian hospitality, and headed up country, where the Himalayas beckoned. I had figured on crossing at a point where no man has crossed yet, but that project was interrupted, and I'm here to tell you why.

"Up there in the northwest provinces they told me I was crazy when I outlined, one night in a mess, of which I was a guest at the time, my scheme for heading northeast toward a tributary of the Ganges which would bring me to the neighbourhood of Khatmandu, right under the shadow of Everest.

"'Once you leave Khatmandu,' said the mess president, 'you are outside the pale as far as British influence is concerned. I suppose you understand that?'

"I told him I quite understood it.

"'You can't reach Tibet that way,' he said.

"'Never mind, sir,' I answered. 'I can try, if I feel like it.'

"Three days later I set out. I am not superstitious, and if I take a long time to make a plan, once I've made it I generally stick to it. But right at the very beginning of my expedition I had a warning, if ever a man had one. The country through which my route lay is of very curious formation. If you can imagine a section of your own west country viewed through a giant magnifying glass, you have some sort of picture of the territory in which I found myself.

"Gigantic rocks stand up like monstrous tors, or towers, sometimes offering sheer precipices of many hundreds of feet in height. On those sides of these giant tors, however, which are less precipitous, miniature forests are sometimes found, and absolutely impassable jungles.

"Bordering an independent state, this territory is not at all well known, but I had secured as a guide a man named Vadi—or that was the name he gave me whom I knew to be a high-caste Brahmin of good family. He had been with me for some time, and I thought I could trust him. Therefore,

once clear of British territory, I took him into my confidence respecting the real object of my journey.

"This was not primarily to scale a peak of the Himalayas, nor even to visit Khatmandu, but to endeavour to obtain a glimpse of the Temple of Fire!

"That has excited your curiosity, gentlemen. I don't suppose any one here has ever heard of the Temple of Fire.

"By some it is regarded as a sort of native legend but it is more than a legend. It is a fact. For seven years I have known it to be a fact, but my tongue has been tied. Listen. Even down in Bombay, the coming of the next great Master is awaited by certain of the natives; and for more than ten years now it has been whispered from end to end of India that he was about to proclaim himself, that disciples moved secretly among the people of every province, and that the unknown teacher in person awaited his hour in a secret temple up near the Tibetan frontier.

"A golden key opens many doors, gentlemen, and at the time of which I am speaking I had obtained more information respecting this secret religion or cult than any other member of the white races had ever collected, or so I thought at the time. I had definite evidence to show that the existence of this man, or demi-god—for by some he was said to possess superhuman powers—was no myth, but an actual fact.

"The collecting of this data was extremely perilous, and one of my informants, with whom I had come in contact while passing through the central provinces, died mysteriously the night before I left Nagpur. I wondered very much on my way north why I was not molested, for I did not fail to see that the death of the man in Nagpur was connected with the fact that he had divulged to me some of the secrets of the religion of Fire-Tongue. Indeed, it was from him that I first learned the name of the high priest of the cult of Fire. Why I was not molested I learned later.

"But to return to Vadi, my Brahmin guide. We had camped for the night in the shadow of one of those giant tors which I have mentioned. The bearers were seated around their fire at some little distance from us, and Vadi and I were consulting respecting our route in the morning, when I decided to take him into my confidence. Accordingly:

"'Vadi,' I said, 'I know for a positive fact that we are within ten miles of the secret Temple of Fire.'

"I shall never forget the look in his eyes, with the reflection of the firelight dancing in them; but he never moved a muscle.

"'The sahib is wise,' he replied.

"'So is Vadi,' said I. 'Therefore he knows how happy a thousand pounds of English money would make him. It is his in return for a sight of the Temple.'

"Still as a carven image, he squatted there watching me, unmoving, expressionless. Then:

"'A man may die for nothing,' he returned, softly. 'Why should the sahib pay a thousand pounds?'

"'Why should the sahib die?' said I.

"'It is forbidden for any to see the Temple, even from a distance.'

"'But if no one ever knows that I have seen it?'

"'Fire-Tongue knows everything,' he replied, and as he pronounced the name, he performed a curious salutation, touching his forefinger with the tip of his tongue, and then laying his hand upon his brow, upon his lips, and upon his breast, at the same time bowing deeply. 'His vengeance is swift and terrible. He wills a man to die, and the man is dead. None save those who have passed through the tests may set eyes upon his temple, nor even speak his name.'

"This conversation took place, as I have already mentioned, in the shadow of one of those strange stone hillocks which abounded here, and it was at this point that I received a warning which might have deterred many men, since it was inexplicable and strangely awesome.

"My attention was drawn to the phenomenon by a sudden cessation of chatter amongst the bearers seated around their fire. I became aware that an absolute stillness had fallen, and in the eyes of the Brahmin who sat facing me I saw a look of exaltation, of wild fanaticism.

"I jerked my head around, looking back over my shoulder, and what I saw I shall never forget, nor to this day have I been able to explain the means by which the illusion was produced.

"Moving downward toward me through the jungle darkness, slowly, evenly, but at a height above the ground of what I judged to be about fifteen feet, was a sort of torch or flambeau, visible because it was faintly luminous; and surmounting it was a darting tongue of blue flame!

"At the moment that I set eyes upon this apparently supernatural spectacle the bearers, crying some word in Hindustani which I did not understand, rose and fled in a body.

"I may say here that I never saw any of them again; although, considering that they took nothing with them, how they regained the nearest village is a mystery which I have never solved.

"Gentlemen, I know the East as few of my fellow-citizens know it. I know something of the powers which are latent in some Orientals and active in others. That my Brahmin guide was a hypnotist and an illusionist, I have since thought.

"For, even as the pattering footsteps of the bearers grew faint in the distance, the fiery torch disappeared as if by magic, and a silken cord was about my throat!

"As I began a desperate fight for life, I realized that, whatever else Vadi might be, he was certainly an expert thug. The jungle, the rocks, seemed to swim around me as I crashed to the ground and felt the Brahmin's knee in the small of my back."

XXXI. STORY OF THE CITY OF FIRE (CONTINUED)

"How I managed to think of any defense against such an attack, and especially in the circumstances, is a matter I have often wondered about since. How, having thought of it, I succeeded in putting it into execution, is probably more wonderful still. But I will just state what happened.

"You may observe that I have large hands. Their size and strength served me well on this occasion At the moment that the rope tightened about my throat I reached up and grasped the Brahmin's left thumb. Desperation gave me additional strength, and I snapped it like a stick of candy.

"Just in the nick of time I felt the cord relax, and, although the veins in my head seemed to be bursting, I managed to get my fingers under that damnable rope. To this very hour I can hear Vadi's shriek of pain as I broke his thumb, and it brings the whole scene back to me.

"Clutching the rope with my left hand, I groaned and lay still. The Brahmin slightly shifted his position, which was what I wanted him to do.

The brief respite had been sufficient. As he moved, I managed to draw my knees up, very slightly, for he was a big, heavy man, but sufficiently to enable me to throw him off and roll over.

"Then, gentlemen, I dealt with him as he had meant to deal with me; only I used my bare hands and made a job of it.

"I stood up, breathing heavily, and looked down at him where he lay in the shadows at my feet. Dusk had come with a million stars, and almost above my head were flowering creepers festooned from bough to bough. The two campfires danced up and cast their red light upon the jagged rocks of the hillock, which started up from the very heart of the thicket, to stand out like some giant pyramid against the newly risen moon.

"There were night things on the wing, and strange whispering sounds came from the forests clothing the hills. Then came a distant, hollow booming like the sound of artillery, which echoed down the mountain gorges and seemed to roll away over the lowland swamps and die, inaudible, by the remote river. Yet I stood still, looking down at the dead man at my feet. For this strange, mysterious artillery was a phenomenon I had already met with on this fateful march—weird enough and inexplicable, but no novelty to me, for I had previously met with it in the Shan Hills of Burma.

"I was thinking rapidly. It was clear enough now why I had hitherto been unmolested. To Vadi the task had been allotted by the mysterious organization of which he was a member, of removing me quietly and decently, under circumstances which would lead to no official inquiry. Although only animals, insects, and reptiles seemed to be awake about me, yet I could not get rid of the idea that I was watched.

"I remembered the phantom light, and that memory was an unpleasant one. For ten minutes or more I stood there watching and listening, but nothing molested me, nothing human approached. With a rifle resting across my knees, I sat down in the entrance to my tent to await the dawn.

"Later in the night, those phantom guns boomed out again, and again their booming died away in the far valleys. The fires burned lower and lower, but I made no attempt to replenish them; and because I sat there so silent, all kinds of jungle creatures crept furtively out of the shadows and watched me with their glittering eyes. Once a snake crossed almost at my

feet, and once some large creature of the cat species, possibly a puma, showed like a silhouette upon the rocky slopes above.

"So the night passed, and dawn found me still sitting there, the dead man huddled on the ground not three paces from me. I am a man who as a rule thinks slowly, but when the light came my mind was fully made up.

"From the man who had died in Nagpur I had learned more about the location of the City of Fire than I had confided to Vadi. In fact, I thought I could undertake to find the way. Upon the most important point of all, however, I had no information: that is to say, I had no idea how to obtain entrance to the place; for I had been given to understand that the way in was a secret known only to the initiated.

"Nevertheless, I had no intention of turning back; and, although I realized that from this point onward I must largely trust to luck, I had no intention of taking unnecessary chances. Accordingly, I dressed myself in Vadi's clothes, and, being very tanned at this time, I think I made a fairly creditable native.

"Faintly throughout the night, above the other sounds of the jungle, I had heard that of distant falling water. Now, my informant at Nagpur, in speaking of the secret temple, had used the words:

"'Whoever would see the fire must quit air and pass through water.'

"This mysterious formula he had firmly declined to translate into comprehensible English; but during my journey I had been considering it from every angle, and I had recently come to the conclusion that the entrance to this mysterious place was in some way concealed by water. Recollecting the gallery under Niagara Falls, I wondered if some similar natural formation was to be looked for here.

"Now, in the light of the morning sun, looking around me from the little plateau upon which I stood, and remembering a vague description of the country which had been given to me, I decided that I was indeed in the neighbourhood of the Temple of Fire.

"We had followed a fairly well-defined path right to this plateau, and that it was nothing less than the high road to the citadel of Fire-Tongue, I no longer doubted. Beneath me stretched a panorama limned in feverish greens and unhealthy yellows. Scarlike rocks triated the jungle clothing the foothills, and through the dancing air, viewed from the arid heights, they had the appearance of running water.

"Swamps to the southeast showed like unhealing wounds upon the face of the landscape. Beyond them spread the lower river waters, the bank of the stream proper being discernible only by reason of a greater greenness in the palm-tops. Venomous green slopes beyond them again, a fringe of dwarf forest, and the brazen skyline.

"On the right, and above me yet, the path entered a district of volcanic rocks, gnarled, twisted, and contorted as with the agonies of some mighty plague which in a forgotten past had seized on the very bowels of the world and had contorted whole mountains and laid waste vast forests and endless plains. Above, the sun, growing hourly more cruel; ahead, more plague-twisted rocks and the scars dancing like running water; and all around the swooning stillness of the tropics.

"The night sounds of the jungle had ceased, giving place to the ceaseless humming of insects. North, south, east, and west lay that haze of heat, like a moving mantle clothing hills and valleys. The sound of falling water remained perceptible.

"And now, gentlemen, I must relate a discovery which I had made in the act of removing Vadi's clothing. Upon his right forearm was branded a mark resembling the apparition which I had witnessed in the night, namely, a little torch, or flambeau, surmounted by a tongue of fire. Even in the light of the morning, amid that oppressive stillness, I could scarcely believe in my own safety, for that to Vadi the duty of assassinating me had been assigned by this ever-watchful, secret organization, whose stronghold I had dared to approach, was a fact beyond dispute.

"Since I seemed to be quite alone on the plateau, I could only suppose that the issue had been regarded as definitely settled, that no doubt had been entertained by Vadi's instructors respecting his success. The plateau upon which I stood was one of a series of giant steps, and on the west was a sheer descent to a dense jungle, where banks of rotten vegetation, sun-dried upon the top, lay heaped about the tree stems.

"Dragging the heavy body of Vadi to the brink of this precipice, I toppled it over, swaying dizzily as I watched it crash down into the poisonous undergrowth two hundred feet below.

"I made a rough cache, where I stored the bulk of my provisions; and, selecting only such articles as I thought necessary for my purpose, I set out again northward, guided by the sound of falling water, and having my face

turned toward the silver pencillings in the blue sky, which marked the giant peaks of the distant mountains.

"At midday the heat grew so great that a halt became imperative. The path was still clearly discernible; and in a little cave beside it, which afforded grateful shelter from the merciless rays of the sun, I unfastened my bundle and prepared to take a frugal lunch.

"I was so employed, gentlemen, when I heard the sound of approaching footsteps on the path behind me—the path which I had recently traversed.

"Hastily concealing my bundle, I slipped into some dense undergrowth by the entrance to the cave, and crouched there, waiting and watching. I had not waited very long before a yellow-robed mendicant passed by, carrying a bundle not unlike my own, whereby I concluded that he had come some distance. There was nothing remarkable in his appearance except the fact of his travelling during the hottest part of the day. Therefore I did not doubt that he was one of the members of the secret organization and was bound for headquarters.

"I gave him half an hour's start and then resumed my march. If he could travel beneath a noonday sun, so could I.

"In this fashion I presently came out upon a larger and higher plateau, carpeted with a uniform, stunted undergrowth, and extending, as flat as a table, to the very edge of a sheer precipice, which rose from it to a height of three or four hundred feet—gnarled, naked rock, showing no vestige of vegetation.

"By this time the sound of falling water had become very loud, and as I emerged from the gorge through which the path ran on to this plateau I saw, on the further side of this tableland, the yellow robe of the mendicant. He was walking straight for the face of the precipice, and straight for the spot at which, from a fissure in the rock, a little stream leapt out, to fall sheerly ten or fifteen feet into a winding channel, along which it bubbled away westward, doubtless to form a greater waterfall beyond.

"The mendicant was fully half a mile away from me, but in that clear tropical air was plainly visible; and, fearing that he might look around, I stepped back into the comparative shadow of the gorge and watched.

"Gentlemen, I saw a strange thing. Placing his bundle upon his head, he walked squarely into the face of the waterfall and disappeared!"

XXXII. STORY OF THE CITY OF FIRE (CONTINUED)

"'Quitting air, must pass through water.' The meaning of those words became apparent enough. I stood at the foot of the waterfall, looking up at the fissure from which it issued.

"Although the fact had been most artistically disguised, I could not doubt that this fissure was artificial. A tunnel had been hewn through the rock, and a mountain stream diverted into it. Indeed, on close inspection, I saw that it was little more than a thin curtain of water, partly concealing what looked like the entrance of a cave.

"A great deal of mist arose from it. But I could see that, beyond a ducking, I had little to fear; and, stepping down into the bed of the little stream which frothed and bubbled pleasantly about my bare legs, I set my bundle on my head as the mendicant had done, and plunged through the waterfall, into a place of delicious coolness.

"A strange greenish light prevailed here and directly before me I saw a flight of stone steps leading upward through a tunnel in the rock. By the light of a pocket torch with which I had provided myself, I began to ascend the steps. These, as I have said, were hewn out of the solid rock, and as they numbered something like seven hundred, the labour expended upon the making of this extraordinary staircase must have been stupendous.

"At first the character of the surrounding tunnel suggested that it was, in part at least, a natural cavern. But as I mounted higher and higher, solid masonry appeared in places, some of it displaying unusual carvings, of a character with which I was quite unfamiliar. I concluded that it was very ancient.

"I should explain, gentlemen, that this ascending tunnel zigzagged in a peculiar fashion, which may have been due to the natural formation of the volcanic rock, or may have been part of the design of the original builder. I had ascended more than five hundred steps, and felt that a rest would shortly be necessary, when I reached a sort of cavern, or interior platform, from which seven corridors branched out like the spokes of a wheel. The top of this place was lost in shadows, which the ray of my torch failed to

penetrate; and here I paused, setting down my bundle and wondering what my next move should be.

"To the damp coolness of the lower stairs an oppressive heat had now succeeded, and I became aware of a continuous roaring sound, which I found myself unable to explain.

"Attached to a belt beneath my native dress I carried a Colt revolver; and therefore, leaving my rifle and bundle in a corner of the cavern, I selected one of these corridors more or less at random, and set out to explore. This corridor proved to slope very gently upward from the platform, and I could not fail to notice that at every step the heat grew greater and greater. A suffocating, sulphurous smell became perceptible also, and the roaring sound grew almost deafening. It became possible to discern the walls of the corridor ahead because of a sort of eerie bluish light which had now become visible.

"Gentlemen, I don't say that I hesitated in a physical sense: I went right on walking ahead. But a voice somewhere deep down inside me was whispering that this was the road to hell.

"At a point where the heat and the smell were almost unendurable the corridor was blocked by massive iron bars beyond which the reflection of some gigantic fire danced upon the walls of a vast cavern.

"The heat was so great that my garments, saturated by the curtain of water through which I had passed, were now bone dry, and I stood peering through those bars at a spectacle which will remain with me to the merciful day of my death.

"A hundred feet beneath me was a lake of fire! That is the only way I can describe it: a seething, bubbling lake of fire. And above, where the roof of the cavern formed a natural cone, was a square section formed of massive stone blocks, and quite obviously the handiwork of man. The bars were too hot to touch, and the heat was like that of a furnace, but while I stood, peering first upward and then downward, a thing happened which I almost hesitate to describe, for it sounds like an incident from a nightmare.

"Heralded by a rumbling sound which was perceptible above the roar of the fire below, the centre block in the roof slid open. A tremendous draught of air swept along the passage in which I was standing, and doubtless along other passages which opened upon this hell-pit.

"As if conjured up by magic, a monstrous column of blue flame arose, swept up scorchingly, and licked like the tongue of a hungry dragon upon the roof of the cavern. Instantly the trap was closed again; the tongue of fire dropped back into the lake from which it had arisen on the draught of air.

"And right past me where I stood, rigid with horror, looking through those bars, fell a white-robed figure—whether man or woman I could not determine! Down, down into the fiery pit, a hundred feet below!

"One long-drawn, dying shriek reached my ears.

"Of my return to the place at which I had left my bundle and rifle I retain absolutely not one recollection. I was aroused from a sort of stupor of horror by the sight of a faint light moving across the platform ahead of me, as I was about to emerge from the tunnel.

"It was the light of a lantern, carried by a man who might have been the double of that yellow-robed mendicant who had first unconsciously led me to this accursed place.

"I won't deny that, up to the moment of sighting him, my one idea had been to escape, to return, to quit this unholy spot. But now, as I watched the bearer of the lantern cross the platform and enter one of the seven corridors, that old, unquenchable thirst for new experiences got me by the throat again.

"As the light of the lantern was swallowed up in the passage, I found my bundle and rifle and set out to follow the man. Four paces brought me to the foot of more steps. I walked barefooted, frequently pausing to listen. There were many carvings upon the walls, but I had no leisure to examine them.

"Contrary to my anticipations, however, there were no branches in this zigzag staircase, which communicated directly with the top of the lofty plateau. When presently I felt the fresh mountain air upon my face, I wondered why I could perceive no light ahead of me. Yet the reason was simple enough.

"Since I had passed through that strange watergate to the City of Fire, the day had ended: it was night. And when, finding no further steps ahead of me, I passed along a level, narrow corridor for some ten paces and, looking upward, saw the stars, I was astounded.

"The yellow-robed man had disappeared, and I stood alone, looking down upon that secret city which I had come so far to see.

"I found myself standing in deep undergrowth, and, pressing this gently aside, I saw a wonderful spectacle. Away to my left was a great white marble building, which I judged to be a temple; and forming a crescent before it was a miniature town, each white-walled house surrounded by a garden. It was Damascus reduced to fairy dimensions, a spectacle quite unforgettable.

"The fact which made the whole thing awesome and unreal was the presence, along the top of the temple (which, like that of Hatshepsu at Deir elBahari, seemed to be hewn out of the living rock but was faced with white marble) of seven giant flambeaux, each surmounted by a darting tongue of blue flame!

"Legend had it that this was the temple built by Zoroaster and preserved intact by that wonderful secretiveness of the Orient through the generations, by a cult who awaited the coming of Zoroaster's successor, of that Fire-Tongue who was to redeem and revolutionize the world.

"I was afraid to move too far from the mouth of the tunnel, but nevertheless was anxious to obtain a good view of the little city at my feet. Gingerly I moved farther forward and forward, ever craning out for a glimpse of the buildings more immediately below me, forgetful of the fact that I walked upon the brink of a precipice.

"Suddenly my outstretched foot failed to touch ground. I clutched wildly at the bushes around me. Their roots were not firm in the shallow soil, and, enveloped like some pagan god in a mass of foliage, I toppled over the cliff and fell!"

XXXIII. STORY OF THE CITY OF FIRE (CONTINUED)

"My awakening was as strange as anything which had befallen me. I lay upon a silken bed in a pavilion which was furnished with exquisite, if somewhat barbaric, taste.

"A silken shaded lamp hung upon a golden chain near to my couch, but it was dimmed by the rosy light streaming in through the open door—a light which I believed to be that of dawn. I ached in every limb and felt weak and ill. There was a bandage about my head, too, but this great physical

weakness numbed my curiosity, and I just lay still, looking out through the doorway into a lovely garden. I could form no impression of what had happened, and the ceaseless throbbing in my head rendered any attempt to do so very painful.

"I was lying there, in this curious and apathetic state, when the curtains draped in the doorway were pulled more widely aside and a woman came in.

"Gentlemen, I will not endeavour to describe her, except to say that she was so darkly lovely that I doubted the evidence of my senses; tall and lithe, with the grace of some beautiful jungle creature.

"When she saw that I was awake, she paused and lowered her head in confusion. She wore a gossamer robe of sheeny golden silk, and, standing there with the light of the dawn behind her, she made a picture that I think would have driven a painter crazy.

"I am supposed to be an unimpressionable man, and perhaps it is true; but there at that moment, as the glance of her dark eyes met the wondering look in mine, I knew that my hour had come for good or ill.

"This is not the time nor the place for personal reminiscences. I am here for another purpose. One of those accidents which are really due to the hand of fate had precipitated me into the garden of the house of Naida, and she in her great compassion had tended me and sheltered me, keeping my presence secret from those who would have dealt with me in summary fashion, and, indeed, who were actually on the look-out for my arrival.

"Yes, so Naida informed me. To my great surprise she spoke almost perfect English, and that sort of understanding sprang up between us immediately which, in the case of a man and a beautiful woman thrown together as we were, can only terminate in one way.

"She was some sort of priestess of the temple which I had seen from the top of the cliff. What else she was I very shortly learned.

"In accordance with one of the many strange customs of the City of Fire, her personal servants, or rather slaves, were blind mutes! Gentlemen, I warned you that my story was tough. Doubtless you are beginning to appreciate the fact that I spoke no more than the truth.

"Naida, for such was her name, told me that the Brahmin, Vadi, who had acted as my guide, was one of the followers of the Prophet of Fire, to whom had been given the duty of intercepting me. His failure to report within a

certain time had resulted in two of the priests of this strange cult being sent out to obtain information. That these were the yellow-robed mendicants who had passed me in the mountains, I did not doubt.

"Their reports, so Naida informed me, had led to a belief that Vadi had perished with me; but as an extra measure of precaution, that very night—indeed, shortly after I had passed that way—a guard had been set upon the secret entrance. Therefore, even if my strength had permitted, I should have been unable to return by the way I had come.

"But indeed I was as weak as a child, and only to the presence of much foliage upon the acclivity down which I had rolled, and to the fact that I had fallen upon soft soil in a bed of flowers, can I ascribe my having failed to break my neck.

"In this way, gentlemen, I entered upon a brief period of my life at once more sweet and more bitter than any I had known. Next to that strange, invisible prophet whose name was Fire-Tongue, Naida held unquestioned sway in this secret city. Her house was separated from the others, and she travelled to and from the temple in a covered litter. To look upon her, as upon Fire-Tongue himself, was death. Women, I learned, were eligible for admission to this order, and these were initiated by Naida.

"As the days of my strange but delightful captivity wore on, I learned more and more of the weird people who, unseen, surrounded me. There were lodges of the Cult of Fire all over the East, all having power to make initiates and some to pass disciples into the higher grades. Those who aspired to the highest rank in the order, however, were compelled to visit this secret city in the Indian hills.

"Then at last I learned a secret which Naida had for long kept back from me. These followers of the new Zoroaster were polygamists, and she was the first or chief wife of the mysterious personage known as Fire-Tongue. I gathered that others had superseded her, and her lord and master rarely visited this marble house set amid its extensive gardens.

"Her dignities remained, however, and no one had aspired to dethrone her as high priestess of the temple. She evidently knew all the secrets of the organization, and I gathered that she was indispensable to the group who controlled it.

"Respecting Fire-Tongue himself, his origin, his appearance, she was resolutely silent, a second Acte, faithful to the last. That the ends of this cult

were not only religious but political, she did not deny, but upon this point she was very reticent. An elaborate system of espionage was established throughout the East, Near and Far, and death was the penalty of any breach of fidelity.

"Respecting the tests to which candidates were put, she spoke with more freedom. Those who, having reached the second grade, aspired to the first, were submitted to three very severe ones, to make trial of their courage, purity, and humility. Failure in any of these trials resulted in instant death, and the final test, the trial by fire, which took place in a subterranean chamber of the great temple, resulted in a candidate whose courage failed him being precipitated into that lake of flame which I have already described—a dreadful form of death, which by accident I had witnessed.

"Gentlemen, realizing what the existence of such an organization meant, what a menace to the peace of the world must lie here, what dreadful things were almost hourly happening about me at behest of this invisible monster known as Fire-Tongue, I yet confess—for I am here to speak the truth—that, although I had now fully recovered my strength, I lingered on in a delicious idleness, which you who hear me must find it hard to understand.

"I have the reputation of being a cold, hard man. So had Antony before he met Cleopatra. But seven years ago, under the Indian moon, I learned tolerance for the human weakness which forgets the world for the smiles of a woman.

"It had to end. Sooner or later, discovery was inevitable. One night I told Naida that I must go. Over the scene that followed I will pass in silence. It needed all the strength of a fairly straight, hard life to help me keep to my decision.

"She understood at last, and consented to release me. But there were obstacles—big ones. The snow on the lower mountain slopes had begun to melt, and the water-gate in the valley by which I had entered was now impassable. As a result, I must use another gate, which opened into a mountain path, but which was always guarded. At first, on hearing this, I gave myself up for lost, but Naida had a plan.

"Removing a bangle which she always wore, she showed me the secret mark of Fire-Tongue branded upon the creamy skin.

"'I will put this mark upon your arm,' she said. 'In no other way can you escape. I will teach you some of the passwords by which the brethren know

one another, and if you are ever questioned you will say that you were admitted to the order by the Master of the Bombay Lodge, news of whose death has just reached us.'

"'But,' said I, 'how can I hope to pass for an Oriental?'

"'It does not matter,' Naida replied. 'There are some who are not Orientals among us!'

"Gentlemen, those words staggered me, opening up a possibility which had seemed only shadowy before. But Naida, who had tremendous strength of character, definitely refused to discuss this aspect of the matter, merely assuring me that it was so.

"'Those who have successfully passed the ordeal of fire,' she said, 'are put under a vow of silence for one month, and from moon to moon must speak to no living creature. Therefore, once you bear the mark of the Fiery Tongue, you may safely pass the gate, except that there are certain signs which it is necessary you should know. Afterward, if you should ever be in danger of discovery anywhere in the East, you will remember the passwords, which I shall teach you.'

"So I was branded with the mark of Fire-Tongue, and I spent my last night with Naida learning from her lips the words by which members of this order were enabled to recognize one another. In vain I entreated Naida to accompany me. She would allow herself to love and be loved; but the vows of this singular priesthood were to her inviolable.

"She exacted an oath from me that I would never divulge anything which I had seen or heard in the City of Fire. She urged that I must leave India as quickly as possible. I had already learned that this remote society was closely in touch with the affairs of the outside world. And, because I knew I was leaving my heart behind there in the Indian hills, I recognized that this dreadful parting must be final.

"Therefore I scarcely heeded her when she assured me that, should I ever be in danger because of what had happened, a message in the Times of India would reach her. I never intended to insert such a message, gentlemen. I knew that it would need all my strength to close this door which I had opened.

"I will spare you and myself the details of our parting. I passed out from the City of Fire in the darkest hour of the night, through a long winding tunnel, half a mile in length. I had protested to Naida that the secret mark

might be painted upon my arm and not branded, but she had assured me that the latter was a necessity, and this now became evident; for, not only three times was it subjected to scrutiny, but by the last of the guards, posted near the outer end of the tunnel, it was tested with some kind of solution.

"Silence and the salutation with the moistened finger tips, together with the brand upon my arm, won me freedom from the abode of Fire-Tongue.

"From a village situated upon one of the tributaries of the Ganges I readily obtained a guide, to whom such silent, yellow-robed figures as mine were evidently not unfamiliar; and, crossing the east of Nepal, I entered Bengal, bearing a strange secret. I found myself in an empty world—a world which had nothing to offer me. For every step south took me farther from all that made life worth living."

XXXIV. NICOL BRINN'S STORY (CONCLUDED)

"The incidents of the next seven years do not concern you, gentlemen. I had one aim in life—to forget. I earned an unenviable reputation for foolhardy enterprises. Until this very hour, no man has known why I did the things that I did do. From the time that I left India until the moment when fate literally threw me in the way of the late Sir Charles Abingdon, I had heard nothing of the cult of Fire-Tongue; and in spite of Naida's assurance that its membership was not confined to Orientals, I had long ago supposed it to be a manifestation of local fanaticism, having no political or international significance.

"Then, lunching with the late Sir Charles after my accident in the Haymarket, he put to me a question which literally made me hold my breath.

"'Do you know anything of the significance of the term Fire-Tongue?' he asked.

"I am not accustomed to any display of feeling in public, and I replied in what I think was an ordinary tone:

"'In what connection, Sir Charles?'

"'Well,' said he, watching me oddly, 'I know you have travelled in India, and I wondered if you had ever come in contact with the legend which

prevails there, that a second Zoroaster has arisen, to preach the doctrine of eternal fire.'

"'I have heard it,' I replied, guardedly.

"'I thought it possible,' continued Sir Charles, 'and I am tempted to tell you of a curious experience which once befell me during the time that I was a guest of my late friend Colonel Banfield in Delhi. My reputation as an osteologist was not at that time so fully established as it later became, but I already had some reputation in this branch of surgery; and one evening a very dignified Hindu gentleman sought an interview with me, saying that a distinguished native noble, who was a guest of his, had met with a serious accident, and offering me a fee equivalent to nearly five hundred pounds to perform an operation which he believed to be necessary.

"'I assured him that my services were at his disposal, and blankly declined to accept so large a fee. He thereupon explained that the circumstances were peculiar. His friend belonged to a religious cult of an extremely high order. He would lose caste if it became known that he had been attended by a Christian surgeon; therefore my visit must be a secret one.

"'It made no difference,' I replied. 'I quite understood; and he might rely upon my discretion.

"'Accordingly I was driven in a car which was waiting to some house upon the outskirts of the city and conducted to a room where the patient had been carried. I saw him to be a singularly handsome young man, apparently about twenty-three years of age. His features were flawless, and he possessed light ivory skin and wavy jet-black hair. His eyes, which were very dark and almond-shaped, had a strange and arresting beauty. But there was something effeminate about him which repelled me, I cannot say in what way; nor did I approve of the presence of many bowls of hyacinths in the room.

"'However, I performed the operation, which, although slight, demanded some skill, and with the nature of which I will not trouble you. Intense anxiety was manifested by the young man's attendants, and one of these, a strikingly beautiful woman, insisted on remaining while the operation was performed.

"'She seemed more especially to concern herself with preserving intact a lock of the young man's jet-black hair, which was brushed in rather an odd

manner across his ivory forehead. Naturally enough, this circumstance excited my curiosity and, distracting the woman's attention for a moment—I asked her to bring me something from a table at the opposite side of the room—I lightly raised this wayward lock and immediately replaced it again.

"'Do you know what it concealed, Mr. Brinn?'

"I assured him that I did not.

"'A mark, apparently natural, resembling a torch surmounted by a tongue of fire!'

"I was amazed, gentlemen, by Sir Charles's story. He was given his fee and driven back to his quarters But that he had succeeded where I had failed, that he had actually looked upon Fire-Tongue in person, I could not doubt. I learned from this, too, that the Prophet of Fire did not always remain in his mountain stronghold, for Delhi is a long way from the Secret City.

"Strange though it must appear, at this time I failed to account for Sir Charles confiding this thing to me. Later, I realized that he must have seen the mark on my arm, although he never referred to it.

"Well, the past leapt out at me, as you see, and worse was to come. The death of Sir Charles Abingdon told me what I hated to know: that Fire-Tongue was in England!

"I moved at once. I inserted in the Times the prearranged message, hardly daring to hope that it would come to the eye of Naida; but it did! She visited me. And I learned that not only Sir Charles Abingdon, but another, knew of the mark which I bore!

"I was summoned to appear before the Prophet of fire!

"Gentlemen, what I saw and how I succeeded in finding out the location of his abode are matters that can wait. The important things are these: first, I learned why Sir Charles Abingdon had been done to death!

"The unwelcome attentions of the man known as Ormuz Khan led Sir Charles to seek an interview with him. I may say here and now that Ormuz Khan is Fire-Tongue! Oh! it's a tough statement—but I can prove it. Sir Charles practically forced his way into this man's presence—and immediately recognized his mysterious patient of years ago!

"He accused him of having set spies upon his daughter's movements—an accusation which was true—and forbade him to see her again. From that

hour the fate of Sir Charles was sealed. What he knew, the world must never know. He had recorded, in a private paper, all that he had learned. This paper was stolen from his bureau—and its contents led to my being summoned to the house of Fire-Tongue! It also spurred the organization to renewed efforts, for it revealed the fact that Sir Charles contemplated confiding the story to others.

"What were the intentions of the man Ormuz in regard to Miss Abingdon, I don't know. His entourage all left England some days ago—with three exceptions. I believe him to have been capable of almost anything. He was desperate. He knew that Ormuz Khan must finally and definitely disappear. It is just possible that he meant Miss Abingdon to disappear along with him!

"However, that danger is past. Mrs. McMurdoch, who to-day accompanied her to his house, was drugged by these past-masters in the use of poisons, and left unconscious in a cottage a few miles from Hillside, the abode of Ormuz.

"You will have observed, gentlemen, that I am somewhat damaged. However, it was worth it! That the organization of the Fire-Worshippers is destroyed I am not prepared to assert. But I made a discovery to-day which untied my hands. Hearing, I shall never know how, that Naida had had a secret interview with me, Fire-Tongue visited upon her the penalty paid seven years ago by my informant in Nagpur, by Sir Charles Abingdon, recently, by God alone knows how many scores—hundreds—in the history of this damnable group.

"I found her lying on a silken divan in the deserted house, her hands clasped over a little white flower like an odontoglossum, which lay on her breast. It was the flower of sleep—and she was dead.

"My seven years' silence was ended. One thing I could do for the world: remove Fire-Tongue—and do it with my own hands!

"Gentlemen, at the angle where the high road from Upper Claybury joins the Dover Road is the Merton Cottage Hospital. Mr. Harley is awaiting us there. He is less damaged than I am. A native chauffeur, whose name I don't know, is lying insensible in one of the beds—and in another is a dead man, unrecognizable, except for a birthmark resembling a torch on his forehead, his head crushed and his neck broken.

"That dead man is Fire-Tongue. I should like, Mr. Commissioner, to sign the statement."

THE END