Sax Rohmer Anthology Vol 3

by

Sax Rohmer

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Book Index

Brood of the Witch-Queen

Dope

The Green Eyes of Bâst

Quest of the Sacred Slipper

Tales of Chinatown

Brood of the Witch-Queen

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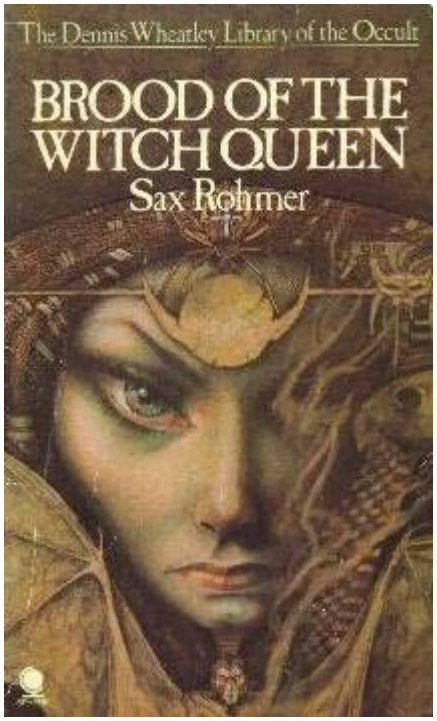

Contents

Prefatory Notice
I. Antony Ferrara
II. The Phantom Hands
III. The Ring of Thoth
IV. At Ferrara's Chambers
V. The Rustling Shadows

VI. The Beetles
VII. Sir Elwin Groves' Patient
VIII. The Secret of Dhoon
IX. The Polish Jewess
X. The Laughter
XI. Cairo
XII. The Mask of Set
XIII. The Scorpion Wind
XIV. Dr. Cairn Arrives
XV. The Witch-Queen
XVI. Lair of the Spiders
XVII. The Story of Ali Mohammed
XVIII. The Bats
XIX. Anthropomancy
XX. The Incense
XXI. The Magician
XXII. Myra
XXIII. The Face in the Orchid-House
XXIV. Flowering of the Lotus
XXV. Cairn meets Ferrara
XXVI. The Ivory Hand
XXVII. The Thug's Cord
XXVIII. The High Priest Hortotef
XXIX. The Wizard's Den
XXX. The Elemental
XXXI. The Book of Thoth

Prefatory Notice

The strange deeds of Antony Ferrara, as herein related, are intended to illustrate certain phases of Sorcery as it was formerly practised (according to numerous records) not only in Ancient Egypt but also in Europe, during the Middle Ages. In no case do the powers attributed to him exceed those which are claimed for a fully equipped Adept.

S. R.

I. Antony Ferrara

Robert Cairn looked out across the quadrangle. The moon had just arisen, and it softened the beauty of the old college buildings, mellowed the harshness of time, casting shadow pools beneath the cloisteresque arches to the west and setting out the ivy in stronger relief upon the ancient walls. The barred shadow on the lichened stones beyond the elm was cast by the hidden gate; and straight ahead, where, between a quaint chimney-stack and a bartizan, a triangular patch of blue showed like spangled velvet, lay the Thames. It was from there the cooling breeze came.

But Cairn's gaze was set upon a window almost directly ahead, and west below the chimneys. Within the room to which it belonged a lambent light played.

Cairn turned to his companion, a ruddy and athletic looking man, somewhat bovine in type, who at the moment was busily tracing out sections on a human skull and checking his calculations from Ross's *Diseases of the Nervous System*.

"Sime," he said, "what does Ferrara always have a fire in his rooms for at this time of the year?"

Sime glanced up irritably at the speaker. Cairn was a tall, thin Scotsman, clean-shaven, square jawed, and with the crisp light hair and grey eyes

which often bespeak unusual virility.

"Aren't you going to do any work?" he inquired pathetically. "I thought you'd come to give me a hand with my *basal ganglia*. I shall go down on that; and there you've been stuck staring out of the window!"

"Wilson, in the end house, has got a most unusual brain," said Cairn, with apparent irrelevance.

"Has he!" snapped Sime.

"Yes, in a bottle. His governor is at Bart's; he sent it up yesterday. You ought to see it."

"Nobody will ever want to put *your* brain in a bottle," predicted the scowling Sime, and resumed his studies.

Cairn relighted his pipe, staring across the quadrangle again. Then—

"You've never been in Ferrara's rooms, have you?" he inquired.

Followed a muffled curse, crash, and the skull went rolling across the floor.

"Look here, Cairn," cried Sime, "I've only got a week or so now, and my nervous system is frantically rocky; I shall go all to pieces on my nervous system. If you want to talk, go ahead. When you're finished, I can begin work."

"Right-oh," said Cairn calmly, and tossed his pouch across. "I want to talk to you about Ferrara."

"Go ahead then. What is the matter with Ferrara?"

"Well," replied Cairn, "he's queer."

"That's no news," said Sime, filling his pipe; "we all know he's a queer chap. But he's popular with women. He'd make a fortune as a nerve specialist."

"He doesn't have to; he inherits a fortune when Sir Michael dies."

"There's a pretty cousin, too, isn't there?" inquired Sime slyly.

"There is," replied Cairn. "Of course," he continued, "my governor and Sir Michael are bosom friends, and although I've never seen much of young Ferrara, at the same time I've got nothing against him. But—" he hesitated.

"Spit it out," urged Sime, watching him oddly.

"Well, it's silly, I suppose, but what does he want with a fire on a blazing night like this?"

Sime stared.

"Perhaps he's a throw-back," he suggested lightly. "The Ferraras, although they're counted Scotch—aren't they?—must have been Italian originally—"

"Spanish," corrected Cairn. "They date from the son of Andrea Ferrara, the sword-maker, who was a Spaniard. Cæsar Ferrara came with the Armada in 1588 as armourer. His ship was wrecked up in the Bay of Tobermory and he got ashore—and stopped."

"Married a Scotch lassie?"

"Exactly. But the genealogy of the family doesn't account for Antony's habits."

"What habits?"

"Well, look." Cairn waved in the direction of the open window. "What does he do in the dark all night, with a fire going?"

"Influenza?"

"Nonsense! You've never been in his rooms, have you?"

"No. Very few men have. But as I said before, he's popular with the women."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean there have been complaints. Any other man would have been sent down."

"You think he has influence—"

"Influence of some sort, undoubtedly."

"Well, I can see you have serious doubts about the man, as I have myself, so I can unburden my mind. You recall that sudden thunderstorm on Thursday?"

"Rather; quite upset me for work."

"I was out in it. I was lying in a punt in the backwater—you know, *our* backwater."

"Lazy dog."

"To tell you the truth, I was trying to make up my mind whether I should abandon bones and take the post on the *Planet* which has been offered me."

"Pills for the pen—Harley for Fleet? Did you decide?"

"Not then; something happened which quite changed my line of reflection."

The room was becoming cloudy with tobacco smoke.

"It was delightfully still," Cairn resumed. "A water rat rose within a foot of me and a kingfisher was busy on a twig almost at my elbow. Twilight was just creeping along, and I could hear nothing but faint creakings of sculls from the river and sometimes the drip of a punt-pole. I thought the river seemed to become suddenly deserted; it grew quite abnormally quiet—and abnormally dark. But I was so deep in reflection that it never occurred to me to move.

"Then the flotilla of swans came round the bend, with Apollo—you know Apollo, the king-swan?—at their head. By this time it had grown tremendously dark, but it never occurred to me to ask myself why. The swans, gliding along so noiselessly, might have been phantoms. A hush, a perfect hush, settled down. Sime, that hush was the prelude to a strange thing—an unholy thing!"

Cairn rose excitedly and strode across to the table, kicking the skull out of his way.

"It was the storm gathering," snapped Sime.

"It was something else gathering! Listen! It got yet darker, but for some inexplicable reason, although I must have heard the thunder muttering, I couldn't take my eyes off the swans. Then it happened—the thing I came here to tell you about; I must tell somebody—the thing that I am not going to forget in a hurry."

He began to knock out the ash from his pipe.

"Go on," directed Sime tersely.

"The big swan—Apollo—was within ten feet of me; he swam in open water, clear of the others; no living thing touched him. Suddenly, uttering a cry that chilled my very blood, a cry that I never heard from a swan in my life, he rose in the air, his huge wings extended—like a tortured phantom, Sime; I can never forget it—six feet clear of the water. The uncanny wail became a stifled hiss, and sending up a perfect fountain of water—I was deluged—the poor old king-swan fell, beat the surface with his wings—and was still."

"Well?"

"The other swans glided off like ghosts. Several heavy raindrops pattered on the leaves above. I admit I was scared. Apollo lay with one wing right in the punt. I was standing up; I had jumped to my feet when the thing occurred. I stooped and touched the wing. The bird was quite dead! Sime, I

pulled the swan's head out of the water, and—his neck was broken; no fewer than three vertebrae fractured!"

A cloud of tobacco smoke was wafted towards the open window.

"It isn't one in a million who could wring the neck of a bird like Apollo, Sime; but it was done before my eyes without the visible agency of God or man! As I dropped him and took to the pole, the storm burst. A clap of thunder spoke with the voice of a thousand cannon, and I poled for bare life from that haunted backwater. I was drenched to the skin when I got in, and I ran up all the way from the stage."

"Well?" rapped the other again, as Cairn paused to refill his pipe.

"It was seeing the firelight flickering at Ferrara's window that led me to do it. I don't often call on him; but I thought that a rub down before the fire and a glass of toddy would put me right. The storm had abated as I got to the foot of his stair—only a distant rolling of thunder.

"Then, out of the shadows—it was quite dark—into the flickering light of the lamp came somebody all muffled up. I started horribly. It was a girl, quite a pretty girl, too, but very pale, and with over-bright eyes. She gave one quick glance up into my face, muttered something, an apology, I think, and drew back again into her hiding-place."

"He's been warned," growled Sime. "It will be notice to quit next time."

"I ran upstairs and banged on Ferrara's door. He didn't open at first, but shouted out to know who was knocking. When I told him, he let me in, and closed the door very quickly. As I went in, a pungent cloud met me—incense."

"Incense?"

"His rooms smelt like a joss-house; I told him so. He said he was experimenting with *Kyphi*—the ancient Egyptian stuff used in the temples. It was all dark and hot; phew! like a furnace. Ferrara's rooms always were odd, but since the long vacation I hadn't been in. Good lord, they're disgusting!"

"How? Ferrara spent vacation in Egypt; I suppose he's brought things back?"

"Things—yes! Unholy things! But that brings me to something too. I ought to know more about the chap than anybody; Sir Michael Ferrara and the governor have been friends for thirty years; but my father is oddly

reticent—quite singularly reticent—regarding Antony. Anyway, have you heard about him, in Egypt?"

"I've heard he got into trouble. For his age, he has a devil of a queer reputation; there's no disguising it."

"What sort of trouble?"

"I've no idea. Nobody seems to know. But I heard from young Ashby that Ferrara was asked to leave."

"There's some tale about Kitchener—"

"*By* Kitchener, Ashby says; but I don't believe it."

"Well—Ferrara lighted a lamp, an elaborate silver thing, and I found myself in a kind of nightmare museum. There was an unwrapped mummy there, the mummy of a woman—I can't possibly describe it. He had pictures, too—photographs. I shan't try to tell you what they represented. I'm not thin-skinned; but there are some subjects that no man anxious to avoid Bedlam would willingly investigate. On the table by the lamp stood a number of objects such as I had never seen in my life before, evidently of great age. He swept them into a cupboard before I had time to look long. Then he went off to get a bath towel, slippers, and so forth. As he passed the fire he threw something in. A hissing tongue of flame leapt up—and died down again."

"What did he throw in?"

"I am not absolutely certain; so I won't say what I *think* it was, at the moment. Then he began to help me shed my saturated flannels, and he set a kettle on the fire, and so forth. You know the personal charm of the man? But there was an unpleasant sense of something—what shall I say?—sinister. Ferrara's ivory face was more pale than usual, and he conveyed the idea that he was chewed up—exhausted. Beads of perspiration were on his forehead."

"Heat of his rooms?"

"No," said Cairn shortly. "It wasn't that. I had a rub down and borrowed some slacks. Ferrara brewed grog and pretended to make me welcome. Now I come to something which I can't forget; it may be a mere coincidence, but—. He has a number of photographs in his rooms, good ones, which he has taken himself. I'm not speaking now of the monstrosities, the outrages; I mean views, and girls—particularly girls.

Well, standing on a queer little easel right under the lamp was a fine picture of Apollo, the swan, lord of the backwater."

Sime stared dully through the smoke haze.

"It gave me a sort of shock," continued Cairn. "It made me think, harder than ever, of the thing he had thrown in the fire. Then, in his photographic zenana, was a picture of a girl whom I am almost sure was the one I had met at the bottom of the stair. Another was of Myra Duquesne."

"His cousin?"

"Yes. I felt like tearing it from the wall. In fact, the moment I saw it, I stood up to go. I wanted to run to my rooms and strip the man's clothes off my back! It was a struggle to be civil any longer. Sime, if you had seen that swan die—"

Sime walked over to the window.

"I have a glimmering of your monstrous suspicions," he said slowly. "The last man to be kicked out of an English varsity for this sort of thing, so far as I know, was Dr. Dee of St. John's, Cambridge, and that's going back to the sixteenth century."

"I know; it's utterly preposterous, of course. But I had to confide in somebody. I'll shift off now, Sime."

Sime nodded, staring from the open window. As Cairn was about to close the outer door:

"Cairn," cried Sime, "since you are now a man of letters and leisure, you might drop in and borrow Wilson's brains for me."

"All right," shouted Cairn.

Down in the quadrangle he stood for a moment, reflecting; then, acting upon a sudden resolution, he strode over towards the gate and ascended Ferrara's stair.

For some time he knocked at the door in vain, but he persisted in his clamouring, arousing the ancient echoes. Finally, the door was opened.

Antony Ferrara faced him. He wore a silver-grey dressing gown, trimmed with white swansdown, above which his ivory throat rose statuesque. The almond-shaped eyes, black as night, gleamed strangely beneath the low, smooth brow. The lank black hair appeared lustreless by comparison. His lips were very red. In his whole appearance there was something repellently effeminate.

"Can I come in?" demanded Cairn abruptly.

"Is it—something important?" Ferrara's voice was husky but not unmusical.

"Why, are you busy?"

"Well—er—" Ferrara smiled oddly.

"Oh, a visitor?" snapped Cairn.

"Not at all."

"Accounts for your delay in opening," said Cairn, and turned on his heel. "Mistook me for the proctor, in person, I suppose. Good-night."

Ferrara made no reply. But, although he never once glanced back, Cairn knew that Ferrara, leaning over the rail, above, was looking after him; it was as though elemental heat were beating down upon his head.

II. The Phantom Hands

A week later Robert Cairn quitted Oxford to take up the newspaper appointment offered to him in London. It may have been due to some mysterious design of a hidden providence that Sime 'phoned him early in the week about an unusual case in one of the hospitals.

"Walton is junior house-surgeon there," he said, "and he can arrange for you to see the case. She (the patient) undoubtedly died from some rare nervous affection. I have a theory," etc.; the conversation became technical.

Cairn went to the hospital, and by courtesy of Walton, whom he had known at Oxford, was permitted to view the body.

"The symptoms which Sime has got to hear about," explained the surgeon, raising the sheet from the dead woman's face, "are—"

He broke off. Cairn had suddenly exhibited a ghastly pallor; he clutched at Walton for support.

"My God!"

Cairn, still holding on to the other, stooped over the discoloured face. It had been a pretty face when warm life had tinted its curves; now it was congested—awful; two heavy discolorations showed, one on either side of the region of the larynx.

"What on earth is wrong with you?" demanded Walton.

"I thought," gasped Cairn, "for a moment, that I knew—"

"Really! I wish you did! We can't find out anything about her. Have a good look."

"No," said Cairn, mastering himself with an effort—"a chance resemblance, that's all." He wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead.

"You look jolly shaky," commented Walton. "Is she like someone you know very well?"

"No, not at all, now that I come to consider the features; but it was a shock at first. What on earth caused death?"

"Asphyxia," answered Walton shortly. "Can't you see?"

"Someone strangled her, and she was brought here too late?"

"Not at all, my dear chap; nobody strangled her. She was brought here in a critical state four or five days ago by one of the slum priests who keep us so busy. We diagnosed it as exhaustion from lack of food—with other complications. But the case was doing quite well up to last night; she was recovering strength. Then, at about one o'clock, she sprang up in bed, and fell back choking. By the time the nurse got to her it was all over."

"But the marks on her throat?"

Walton shrugged his shoulders.

"There they are! Our men are keenly interested. It's absolutely unique. Young Shaw, who has a mania for the nervous system, sent a long account up to Sime, who suffers from a similar form of aberration."

"Yes; Sime 'phoned me."

"It's nothing to do with nerves," said Walton contemptuously. "Don't ask me to explain it, but it's certainly no nerve case."

"One of the other patients—"

"My dear chap, the other patients were all fast asleep! The nurse was at her table in the corner, and in full view of the bed the whole time. I tell you no one touched her!"

"How long elapsed before the nurse got to her?"

"Possibly half a minute. But there is no means of learning when the paroxysm commenced. The leaping up in bed probably marked the end and not the beginning of the attack."

Cairn experienced a longing for the fresh air; it was as though some evil cloud hovered around and about the poor unknown. Strange ideas, horrible ideas, conjectures based upon imaginings all but insane, flooded his mind darkly.

Leaving the hospital, which harboured a grim secret, he stood at the gate for a moment, undecided what to do. His father, Dr. Cairn, was out of London, or he would certainly have sought him in this hour of sore perplexity.

"What in Heaven's name is behind it all!" he asked himself.

For he knew beyond doubt that the girl who lay in the hospital was the same that he had seen one night at Oxford, was the girl whose photograph he had found in Antony Ferrara's rooms!

He formed a sudden resolution. A taxi-cab was passing at that moment, and he hailed it, giving Sir Michael Ferrara's address. He could scarcely

trust himself to think, but frightful possibilities presented themselves to him, repel them how he might. London seemed to grow dark, overshadowed, as once he had seen a Thames backwater grow. He shuddered, as though from a physical chill.

The house of the famous Egyptian scholar, dull white behind its rampart of trees, presented no unusual appearances to his anxious scrutiny. What he feared he scarcely knew; what he suspected he could not have defined.

Sir Michael, said the servant, was unwell and could see no one. That did not surprise Cairn; Sir Michael had not enjoyed good health since malaria had laid him low in Syria. But Miss Duquesne was at home.

Cairn was shown into the long, low-ceiled room which contained so many priceless relics of a past civilisation. Upon the bookcase stood the stately ranks of volumes which had carried the fame of Europe's foremost Egyptologist to every corner of the civilised world. This queerly furnished room held many memories for Robert Cairn, who had known it from childhood, but latterly it had always appeared to him in his daydreams as the setting for a dainty figure. It was here that he had first met Myra Duquesne, Sir Michael's niece, when, fresh from a Norman convent, she had come to shed light and gladness upon the somewhat, sombre household of the scholar. He often thought of that day; he could recall every detail of the meeting—

Myra Duquesne came in, pulling aside the heavy curtains that hung in the arched entrance. With a granite Osiris flanking her slim figure on one side and a gilded sarcophagus on the other, she burst upon the visitor, a radiant vision in white. The light gleamed through her soft, brown hair forming a halo for a face that Robert Cairn knew for the sweetest in the world.

"Why, Mr. Cairn," she said, and blushed entrancingly—"we thought you had forgotten us."

"That's not a little bit likely," he replied, taking her proffered hand, and there was that in his voice and in his look which made her lower her frank grey eyes. "I have only been in London a few days, and I find that Press work is more exacting than I had anticipated!"

"Did you want to see my uncle very particularly?" asked Myra.

"In a way, yes. I suppose he could not manage to see me—"

Myra shook her head. Now that the flush of excitement had left her face, Cairn was concerned to see how pale she was and what dark shadows

lurked beneath her eyes.

"Sir Michael is not seriously ill?" he asked quickly. "Only one of the visual attacks—"

"Yes—at least it began with one."

She hesitated, and Cairn saw to his consternation that her eyes became filled with tears. The real loneliness of her position, now that her guardian was ill, the absence of a friend in whom she could confide her fears, suddenly grew apparent to the man who sat watching her.

"You are tired out," he said gently. "You have been nursing him?"

She nodded and tried to smile.

"Who is attending?"

"Sir Elwin Groves, but—"

"Shall I wire for my father?"

"We wired for him yesterday!"

"What! to Paris?"

"Yes, at my uncle's wish."

Cairn started.

"Then—he thinks he is seriously ill, himself?"

"I cannot say," answered the girl wearily. "His behaviour is—queer. He will allow no one in his room, and barely consents to see Sir Elwin. Then, twice recently, he has awakened in the night and made a singular request."

"What is that?"

"He has asked me to send for his solicitor in the morning, speaking harshly and almost as though—he hated me…"

"I don't understand. Have you complied?"

"Yes, and on each occasion he has refused to see the solicitor when he has arrived!"

"I gather that you have been acting as night-attendant?"

"I remain in an adjoining room; he is always worse at night. Perhaps it is telling on my nerves, but last night—"

Again she hesitated, as though doubting the wisdom of further speech; but a brief scrutiny of Cairn's face, with deep anxiety to be read in his eyes, determined her to proceed.

"I had been asleep, and I must have been dreaming, for I thought that a voice was chanting, quite near to me."

"Chanting?"

"Yes—it was horrible, in some way. Then a sensation of intense coldness came; it was as though some icily cold creature fanned me with its wings! I cannot describe it, but it was numbing; I think I must have felt as those poor travellers do who succumb to the temptation to sleep in the snow."

Cairn surveyed her anxiously, for in its essentials this might be a symptom of a dreadful ailment.

"I aroused myself, however," she continued, "but experienced an unaccountable dread of entering my uncle's room. I could hear him muttering strangely, and—I forced myself to enter! I saw—oh, how can I tell you! You will think me mad!"

She raised her hands to her face; she was trembling. Robert Cairn took them in his own, forcing her to look up.

"Tell me," he said quietly.

"The curtains were drawn back; I distinctly remembered having closed them, but they were drawn back; and the moonlight was shining on to the bed."

"Bad; he was dreaming."

"But was *I* dreaming? Mr. Cairn, two hands were stretched out over my uncle, two hands that swayed slowly up and down in the moonlight!"

Cairn leapt to his feet, passing his hand over his forehead.

"Go on," he said.

"I—I cried out, but not loudly—I think I was very near to swooning. The hands were withdrawn into the shadow, and my uncle awoke and sat up. He asked, in a low voice, if I were there, and I ran to him."

"Yes."

"He ordered me, very coldly, to 'phone for his solicitor at nine o'clock this morning, and then fell back, and was asleep again almost immediately. The solicitor came, and was with him for nearly an hour. He sent for one of his clerks, and they both went away at half-past ten. Uncle has been in a sort of dazed condition ever since; in fact he has only once aroused himself, to ask for Dr. Cairn. I had a telegram sent immediately."

"The governor will be here to-night," said Cairn confidently. "Tell me, the hands which you thought you saw: was there anything peculiar about them?"

"In the moonlight they seemed to be of a dull white colour. There was a ring on one finger—a green ring. Oh!" she shuddered. "I can see it now."

"You would know it again?"
"Anywhere!"
"Actually, there was no one in the room, of course?"
"No one. It was some awful illusion; but I can never forget it."

III. The Ring of Thoth

Half-Moon Street was very still; midnight had sounded nearly half-an-hour; but still Robert Cairn paced up and down his father's library. He was very pale, and many times he glanced at a book which lay open upon the table. Finally he paused before it and read once again certain passages.

"In the year 1571," it recorded, "the notorious Trois Echelles was executed in the Place de Grève. He confessed before the king, Charles IX… that he performed marvels… Admiral de Coligny, who also was present, recollected… the death of two gentlemen… He added that they were found black and swollen."

He turned over the page, with a hand none too steady.

"The famous Maréchal d'Ancre, Concini Concini," he read, "was killed by a pistol shot on the drawbridge of the Louvre by Vitry, Captain of the Bodyguard, on the 24th of April, 1617… It was proved that the Maréchal and his wife made use of wax images, which they kept in coffins…"

Cairn shut the book hastily and began to pace the room again.

"Oh, it is utterly, fantastically incredible!" he groaned. "Yet, with my own eyes I saw—"

He stepped to a bookshelf and began to look for a book which, so far as his slight knowledge of the subject bore him, would possibly throw light upon the darkness. But he failed to find it. Despite the heat of the weather, the library seemed to have grown chilly. He pressed the bell.

"Marston," he said to the man who presently came, "you must be very tired, but Dr. Cairn will be here within an hour. Tell him that I have gone to Sir Michael Ferrara's."

"But it's after twelve o'clock, sir!"

"I know it is; nevertheless I am going."

"Very good, sir. You will wait there for the Doctor?"

"Exactly, Marston. Good-night!"

"Good-night, sir."

Robert Cairn went out into Half-Moon Street. The night was perfect, and the cloudless sky lavishly gemmed with stars. He walked on heedlessly, scarce noting in which direction. An awful conviction was with him,

growing stronger each moment, that some mysterious menace, some danger unclassifiable, threatened Myra Duquesne. What did he suspect? He could give it no name. How should he act? He had no idea.

Sir Elwin Groves, whom he had seen that evening, had hinted broadly at mental trouble as the solution of Sir Michael Ferrara's peculiar symptoms. Although Sir Michael had had certain transactions with his solicitor during the early morning, he had apparently forgotten all about the matter, according to the celebrated physician.

"Between ourselves, Cairn," Sir Elwin had confided, "I believe he altered his will."

The inquiry of a taxi driver interrupted Cairn's meditations. He entered the vehicle, giving Sir Michael Ferrara's address.

His thoughts persistently turned to Myra Duquesne, who at that moment would be lying listening for the slightest sound from the sick-room; who would be fighting down fear, that she might do her duty to her guardian—fear of the waving phantom hands. The cab sped through the almost empty streets, and at last, rounding a corner, rolled up the tree-lined avenue, past three or four houses lighted only by the glitter of the moon, and came to a stop before that of Sir Michael Ferrara.

Lights shone from the many windows. The front door was open, and light streamed out into the porch.

"My God!" cried Cairn, leaping from the cab. "My God! what has happened?"

A thousand fears, a thousand reproaches, flooded his brain with frenzy. He went racing up to the steps and almost threw himself upon the man who stood half-dressed in the doorway.

"Felton, Felton!" he whispered hoarsely. "What has happened? Who—"

"Sir Michael, sir," answered the man. "I thought"—his voice broke—"you were the doctor, sir?"

"Miss Myra—"

"She fainted away, sir. Mrs. Hume is with her in the library, now."

Cairn thrust past the servant and ran into the library. The housekeeper and a trembling maid were bending over Myra Duquesne, who lay fully dressed, white and still, upon a Chesterfield. Cairn unceremoniously grasped her wrist, dropped upon his knees and placed his ear to the still breast.

"Thank God!" he said. "It is only a swoon. Look after her, Mrs. Hume."

The housekeeper, with set face, lowered her head, but did not trust herself to speak. Cairn went out into the hall and tapped Felton on the shoulder. The man turned with a great start.

"What happened?" he demanded. "Is Sir Michael—?"

Felton nodded.

"Five minutes before you came, sir." His voice was hoarse with emotion. "Miss Myra came out of her room. She thought someone called her. She rapped on Mrs. Hume's door, and Mrs. Hume, who was just retiring, opened it. She also thought she had heard someone calling Miss Myra out on the stairhead."

"Well?"

"There was no one there, sir. Everyone was in bed; I was just undressing, myself. But there was a sort of faint perfume—something like a church, only disgusting, sir—"

"How—disgusting! Did *you* smell it?"

"No, sir, never. Mrs. Hume and Miss Myra have noticed it in the house on other nights, and one of the maids, too. It was very strong, I'm told, last night. Well, sir, as they stood by the door they heard a horrid kind of choking scream. They both rushed to Sir Michael's room, and—"

"Yes, yes?"

"He was lying half out of bed, sir—"

"Dead?"

"Seemed like he'd been strangled, they told me, and—"

"Who is with him now?"

The man grew even paler.

"No one, Mr. Cairn, sir. Miss Myra screamed out that there were two hands just unfastening from his throat as she and Mrs. Hume got to the door, and there was no living soul in the room, sir. I might as well out with it! We're all afraid to go in!"

Cairn turned and ran up the stairs. The upper landing was in darkness and the door of the room which he knew to be Sir Michael's stood wide open. As he entered, a faint scent came to his nostrils. It brought him up short at the threshold, with a chill of supernatural dread.

The bed was placed between the windows, and one curtain had been pulled aside, admitting a flood, of moonlight. Cairn remembered that Myra

had mentioned this circumstance in connection with the disturbance of the previous night.

"Who, in God's name, opened that curtain!" he muttered.

Fully in the cold white light lay Sir Michael Ferrara, his silver hair gleaming and his strong, angular face upturned to the intruding rays. His glazed eyes were starting from their sockets; his face was nearly black; and his fingers were clutching the sheets in a death grip. Cairn had need of all his courage to touch him.

He was quite dead.

Someone was running up the stairs. Cairn turned, half dazed, anticipating the entrance of a local medical man. Into the room ran his father, switching on the light as he did so. A greyish tinge showed through his ruddy complexion. He scarcely noticed his son.

"Ferrara!" he cried, coming up to the bed. "Ferrara!"

He dropped on his knees beside the dead man.

"Ferrara, old fellow—"

His cry ended in something like a sob. Robert Cairn turned, choking, and went downstairs.

In the hall stood Felton and some other servants.

"Miss Duquesne?"

"She has recovered, sir. Mrs. Hume has taken her to another bedroom."

Cairn hesitated, then walked into the deserted library, where a light was burning. He began to pace up and down, clenching and unclenching his fists. Presently Felton knocked and entered. Clearly the man was glad of the chance to talk to someone.

"Mr. Antony has been 'phoned at Oxford, sir. I thought you might like to know. He is motoring down, sir, and will be here at four o'clock."

"Thank you," said Cairn shortly.

Ten minutes later his father joined him. He was a slim, well-preserved man, alert-eyed and active, yet he had aged five years in his son's eyes. His face was unusually pale, but he exhibited no other signs of emotion.

"Well, Rob," he said, tersely. "I can see you have something to tell me. I am listening."

Robert Cairn leant back against a bookshelf.

"I *have* something to tell you, sir, and something to ask you."

"Tell your story, first; then ask your question."

"My story begins in a Thames backwater—"

Dr. Cairn stared, squaring his jaw, but his son proceeded to relate, with some detail, the circumstances attendant upon the death of the king-swan. He went on to recount what took place in Antony Ferrara's rooms, and at the point where something had been taken from the table and thrown in the fire —

"Stop!" said Dr. Cairn. "What did he throw in the fire?"

The doctor's nostrils quivered, and his eyes were ablaze with some hardly repressed emotion.

"I cannot swear to it, sir—"

"Never mind. What do you *think* he threw in the fire?"

"A little image, of wax or something similar—an image of—a swan."

At that, despite his self-control, Dr. Cairn became so pale that his son leapt forward.

"All right, Rob," his father waved him away, and turning, walked slowly down the room.

"Go on," he said, rather huskily.

Robert Cairn continued his story up to the time that he visited the hospital where the dead girl lay.

"You can swear that she was the original of the photograph in Antony's rooms and the same who was waiting at the foot of the stair?"

"I can, sir."

"Go on."

Again the younger man resumed his story, relating what he had learnt from Myra Duquesne; what she had told him about the phantom hands; what Felton had told him about the strange perfume perceptible in the house.

"The ring," interrupted Dr. Cairn—"she would recognise it again?"

"She says so."

"Anything else?"

"Only that if some of your books are to be believed, sir, Trois Echelle, D'Ancre and others have gone to the stake for such things in a less enlightened age!"

"Less enlightened, boy!" Dr. Cairn turned his blazing eyes upon him. "*More* enlightened where the powers of hell were concerned!"

"Then you think—"

"*Think*! Have I spent half my life in such studies in vain? Did I labour with poor Michael Ferrara in Egypt and learn *nothing*? Just God! what an end to his labour! What a reward for mine!"

He buried his face in quivering hands.

"I cannot tell exactly what you mean by that, sir," said Robert Cairn; "but it brings me to my question."

Dr. Cairn did not speak, did not move.

"*Who is Antony Ferrara*?"

The doctor looked up at that; and it was a haggard face he raised from his hands.

"You have tried to ask me that before."

"I ask now, sir, with better prospect of receiving an answer."

"Yet I can give you none, Rob."

"Why, sir? Are you bound to secrecy?"

"In a degree, yes. But the real reason is this—I don't know."

"You don't know!"

"I have said so."

"Good God, sir, you amaze me! I have always felt certain that he was really no Ferrara, but an adopted son; yet it had never entered my mind that you were ignorant of his origin."

"You have not studied the subjects which I have studied; nor do I wish that you should; therefore it is impossible, at any rate now, to pursue that matter further. But I may perhaps supplement your researches into the history of Trois Echelles and Concini Concini. I believe you told me that you were looking in my library for some work which you failed to find?"

"I was looking for M. Chabas' translation of the *Papyrus Harris*."

"What do you know of it?"

"I once saw a copy in Antony Ferrara's rooms."

Dr. Cairn started slightly.

"Indeed. It happens that my copy is here; I lent it quite recently to—Sir Michael. It is probably somewhere on the shelves."

He turned on more lights and began to scan the rows of books. Presently —

"Here it is," he said, and took down and opened the book on the table. "This passage may interest you." He laid his finger upon it.

His son bent over the book and read the following:—

"Hai, the evil man, was a shepherd. He had said: 'O, that I might have a book of spells that would give me resistless power!' He obtained a book of the Formulas… By the divine powers of these he enchanted men. He obtained a deep vault furnished with implements. He made waxen images of men, and love-charms. And then he perpetrated all the horrors that his heart conceived."

"Flinders Petrie," said Dr. Cairn, "mentions the Book of Thoth as another magical work conferring similar powers."

"But surely, sir—after all, it's the twentieth century—this is mere superstition!"

"I thought so—*once*!" replied Dr. Cairn. "But I have lived to know that Egyptian magic was a real and a potent force. A great part of it was no more than a kind of hypnotism, but there were other branches. Our most learned modern works are as children's nursery rhymes beside such a writing as the Egyptian *Ritual of the Dead*! God forgive me! What have I done!"

"You cannot reproach yourself in any way, sir!"

"Can I not?" said Dr. Cairn hoarsely. "Ah, Rob, you don't know!"

There came a rap on the door, and a local practitioner entered.

"This is a singular case, Dr. Cairn," he began diffidently. "An autopsy—"

"Nonsense!" cried Dr. Cairn. "Sir Elwin Groves had foreseen it—so had I!"

"But there are distinct marks of pressure on either side of the windpipe —"

"Certainly. These marks are not uncommon in such cases. Sir Michael had resided in the East and had contracted a form of plague. Virtually he died from it. The thing is highly contagious, and it is almost impossible to rid the system of it. A girl died in one of the hospitals this week, having identical marks on the throat." He turned to his son. "You saw her, Rob?"

Robert Cairn nodded, and finally the local man withdrew, highly mystified, but unable to contradict so celebrated a physician as Dr. Bruce Cairn.

The latter seated himself in an armchair, and rested his chin in the palm of his left hand. Robert Cairn paced restlessly about the library. Both were waiting, expectantly. At half-past two Felton brought in a tray of refreshments, but neither of the men attempted to avail themselves of the hospitality.

"Miss Duquesne?" asked the younger.

"She has just gone to sleep, sir."

"Good," muttered Dr. Cairn. "Blessed is youth."

Silence fell again, upon the man's departure, to be broken but rarely, despite the tumultuous thoughts of those two minds, until, at about a quarter to three, the faint sound of a throbbing motor brought Dr. Cairn sharply to his feet. He looked towards the window. Dawn was breaking. The car came roaring along the avenue and stopped outside the house.

Dr. Cairn and his son glanced at one another. A brief tumult and hurried exchange of words sounded in the hall; footsteps were heard ascending the stairs, then came silence. The two stood side by side in front of the empty hearth, a haggard pair, fitly set in that desolate room, with the yellowing rays of the lamps shrinking before the first spears of dawn.

Then, without warning, the door opened slowly and deliberately, and Antony Ferrara came in.

His face was expressionless, ivory; his red lips were firm, and he drooped his head. But the long black eyes glinted and gleamed as if they reflected the glow from a furnace. He wore a motor coat lined with leopard skin and he was pulling off his heavy gloves.

"It is good of you to have waited, Doctor," he said in his huskily musical voice—"you too, Cairn."

He advanced a few steps into the room. Cairn was conscious of a kind of fear, but uppermost came a desire to pick up some heavy implement and crush this evilly effeminate thing with the serpent eyes. Then he found himself speaking; the words seemed to be forced from his throat.

"Antony Ferrara," he said, "have you read the *Harris Papyrus*?"

Ferrara dropped his glove, stooped and recovered it, and smiled faintly.

"No," he replied. "Have you?" His eyes were nearly closed, mere luminous slits. "But surely," he continued, "this is no time, Cairn, to discuss books? As my poor father's heir, and therefore your host, I beg of you to partake—"

A faint sound made him turn. Just within the door, where the light from the reddening library windows touched her as if with sanctity, stood Myra Duquesne, in her night robe, her hair unbound and her little bare feet gleaming whitely upon the red carpet. Her eyes were wide open, vacant of expression, but set upon Antony Ferrara's ungloved left hand.

Ferrara turned slowly to face her, until his back was towards the two men in the library. She began to speak, in a toneless, unemotional voice, raising her finger and pointing at a ring which Ferrara wore.

"I know you now," she said; "I know you, son of an evil woman, for you wear her ring, the sacred ring of Thoth. You have stained that ring with blood, as she stained it—with the blood of those who loved and trusted you. I could name you, but my lips are sealed—I could name you, brood of a witch, murderer, for I know you now."

Dispassionately, mechanically, she delivered her strange indictment. Over her shoulder appeared the anxious face of Mrs. Hume, finger to lip.

"My God!" muttered Cairn. "My God! What—"

"S—sh!" his father grasped his arm. "She is asleep!"

Myra Duquesne turned and quitted the room, Mrs. Hume hovering anxiously about her. Antony Ferrara faced around; his mouth was oddly twisted.

"She is troubled with strange dreams," he said, very huskily.

"Clairvoyant dreams!" Dr. Cairn addressed him for the first time. "Do not glare at me in that way, for it may be that *I* know you, too! Come, Rob."

"But Myra—"

Dr. Cairn laid his hand upon his son's shoulder, fixing his eyes upon him steadily.

"Nothing in this house can injure Myra," he replied quietly; "for Good is higher than Evil. For the present we can only go."

Antony Ferrara stood aside, as the two walked out of the library.

IV. At Ferrara's Chambers

Dr. Bruce Cairn swung around in his chair, lifting his heavy eyebrows interrogatively, as his son, Robert, entered the consulting-room. Half-Moon Street was bathed in almost tropical sunlight, but already the celebrated physician had sent those out from his house to whom the sky was overcast, whom the sun would gladden no more, and a group of anxious-eyed sufferers yet awaited his scrutiny in an adjoining room.

"Hullo, Rob! Do you wish to see me professionally?"

Robert Cairn seated himself upon a corner of the big table, shaking his head slowly.

"No, thanks sir; I'm fit enough; but I thought you might like to know about the will—"

"I do know. Since I was largely interested, Jermyn attended on my behalf; an urgent case detained me. He rang up earlier this morning."

"Oh, I see. Then perhaps I'm wasting your time; but it was a surprise—quite a pleasant one—to find that Sir Michael had provided for Myra—Miss Duquesne."

Dr. Cairn stared hard.

"What led you to suppose that he had *not* provided for his niece? She is an orphan, and he was her guardian."

"Of course, he should have done so; but I was not alone in my belief that during the—peculiar state of mind—which preceded his death, he had altered his will—"

"In favour of his adopted son, Antony?"

"Yes. I know *you* were afraid of it, sir! But as it turns out they inherit equal shares, and the house goes to Myra. Mr. Antony Ferrara"—he accentuated the name—"quite failed to conceal his chagrin."

"Indeed!"

"Rather. He was there in person, wearing one of his beastly fur coats—a fur coat, with the thermometer at Africa!—lined with civet-cat, of all abominations!"

Dr. Cairn turned to his table, tapping at the blotting-pad with the tube of a stethoscope.

"I regret your attitude towards young Ferrara, Rob."

His son started.

"Regret it! I don't understand. Why, you, yourself brought about an open rupture on the night of Sir Michael's death."

"Nevertheless, I am sorry. You know, since you were present, that Sir Michael has left his niece—to my care—"

"Thank God for that!"

"I am glad, too, although there are many difficulties. But, furthermore, he enjoined me to—"

"Keep an eye on Antony! Yes, yes—but, heavens! he didn't know him for what he is!"

Dr. Cairn turned to him again.

"He did not; by a divine mercy, he never knew—what we know. But"—his clear eyes were raised to his son's—"the charge is none the less sacred, boy!"

The younger man stared perplexedly.

"But he is nothing less than a ——"

His father's upraised hand checked the word on his tongue.

"*I* know what he is, Rob, even better than you do. But cannot you see how this ties my hands, seals my lips?"

Robert Cairn was silent, stupefied.

"Give me time to see my way clearly, Rob. At the moment I cannot reconcile my duty and my conscience; I confess it. But give me time. If only as a move—as a matter of policy—keep in touch with Ferrara. You loathe him, I know; but we *must* watch him! There are other interests—"

"Myra!" Robert Cairn flushed hotly. "Yes, I see. I understand. By heavens, it's a hard part to play, but—"

"Be advised by me, Rob. Meet stealth with stealth. My boy, we have seen strange ends come to those who stood in the path of someone. If you had studied the subjects that I have studied you would know that retribution, though slow, is inevitable. But be on your guard. I am taking precautions. We have an enemy; I do not pretend to deny it; and he fights with strange weapons. Perhaps I know something of those weapons, too, and I am adopting—certain measures. But one defence, and the one for you, is guile—stealth!"

Robert Cairn spoke abruptly.

"He is installed in palatial chambers in Piccadilly."

"Have you been there?"

"No."

"Call upon him. Take the first opportunity to do so. Had it not been for your knowledge of certain things which happened in a top set at Oxford we might be groping in the dark now! You never liked Antony Ferrara—no men do; but you used to call upon him in college. Continue to call upon him, in town."

Robert Cairn stood up, and lighted a cigarette.

"Right you are, sir!" he said. "I'm glad I'm not alone in this thing! By the way, about—?"

"Myra? For the present she remains at the house. There is Mrs. Hume, and all the old servants. We shall see what is to be done, later. You might run over and give her a look-up, though."

"I will, sir! Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Dr. Cairn, and pressed the bell which summoned Marston to usher out the caller, and usher in the next patient.

In Half-Moon Street, Robert Cairn stood irresolute; for he was one of those whose mental moods are physically reflected. He might call upon Myra Duquesne, in which event he would almost certainly be asked to stay to lunch; or he might call upon Antony Ferrara. He determined upon the latter, though less pleasant course.

Turning his steps in the direction of Piccadilly, he reflected that this grim and uncanny secret which he shared with his father was like to prove prejudicial to his success in journalism. It was eternally uprising, demoniac, between himself and his work. The feeling of fierce resentment towards Antony Ferrara which he cherished grew stronger at every step. *He* was the spider governing the web, the web that clammily touched Dr. Cairn, himself, Robert Cairn, and—Myra Duquesne. Others there had been who had felt its touch, who had been drawn to the heart of the unclean labyrinth—and devoured. In the mind of Cairn, the figure of Antony Ferrara assumed the shape of a monster, a ghoul, an elemental spirit of evil.

And now he was ascending the marble steps. Before the gates of the lift he stood and pressed the bell.

Ferrara's proved to be a first-floor suite, and the doors were opened by an Eastern servant dressed in white.

"His beastly theatrical affectation again!" muttered Cairn. "The man should have been a music-hall illusionist!"

The visitor was salaamed into a small reception room. Of this apartment the walls and ceiling were entirely covered by a fretwork in sandalwood, evidently Oriental in workmanship. In niches, or doorless cup-boards; stood curious-looking vases and pots. Heavy curtains of rich fabric draped the doors. The floor was of mosaic, and a small fountain played in the centre. A cushioned divan occupied one side of the place, from which natural light was entirely excluded and which was illuminated only by an ornate lantern swung from the ceiling. This lantern had panes of blue glass, producing a singular effect. A silver *mibkharah*, or incense-burner, stood near to one corner of the divan and emitted a subtle perfume. As the servant withdrew:

"Good heavens!" muttered Cairn, disgustedly; "poor Sir Michael's fortune won't last long at this rate!" He glanced at the smoking *mibkharah*. "Phew! effeminate beast! Ambergris!"

No more singular anomaly could well be pictured than that afforded by the lean, neatly-groomed Scotsman, with his fresh, clean-shaven face and typically British air, in this setting of Eastern voluptuousness.

The dusky servitor drew back a curtain and waved him to enter, bowing low as the visitor passed. Cairn found himself in Antony Ferrara's study. A huge fire was blazing in the grate, rendering the heat of the study almost insufferable.

It was, he perceived, an elaborated copy of Ferrara's room at Oxford; infinitely more spacious, of course, and by reason of the rugs, cushions and carpets with which its floor was strewn, suggestive of great opulence. But the littered table was there, with its nameless instruments and its extraordinary silver lamp; the mummies were there; the antique volumes, rolls of papyrus, preserved snakes and cats and ibises, statuettes of Isis, Osiris and other Nile deities were there; the many photographs of women, too (Cairn had dubbed it at Oxford "the zenana"); above all, there was Antony Ferrara.

He wore the silver-grey dressing-gown trimmed with white swansdown in which Cairn had seen him before. His statuesque ivory face was set in a smile, which yet was no smile of welcome; the over-red lips smiled alone; the long, glittering dark eyes were joyless; almost, beneath the straightly-

pencilled brows, sinister. Save for the short, lustreless hair it was the face of a handsome, evil woman.

"My dear Cairn—what a welcome interruption. How good of you!"

There was strange music in his husky tones. He spoke unemotionally, falsely, but Cairn could not deny the charm of that unique voice. It was possible to understand how women—some women—would be as clay in the hands of the man who had such a voice as that.

His visitor nodded shortly. Cairn was a poor actor; already his *rôle* was oppressing him. Whilst Ferrara was speaking one found a sort of fascination in listening, but when he was silent he repelled. Ferrara may have been conscious of this, for he spoke much, and well.

"You have made yourself jolly comfortable," said Cairn.

"Why not, my dear Cairn? Every man has within him something of the Sybarite. Why crush a propensity so delightful? The Spartan philosophy is palpably absurd; it is that of one who finds himself in a garden filled with roses and who holds his nostrils; who perceives there shady bowers, but chooses to burn in the sun; who, ignoring the choice fruits which tempt his hand and court his palate, stoops to pluck bitter herbs from the wayside!"

"I see!" snapped Cairn. "Aren't you thinking of doing any more work, then?"

"Work!" Antony Ferrara smiled and sank upon a heap of cushions. "Forgive me, Cairn, but I leave it, gladly and confidently, to more robust characters such as your own."

He proffered a silver box of cigarettes, but Cairn shook his head, balancing himself on a corner of the table.

"No; thanks. I have smoked too much already; my tongue is parched."

"My dear fellow!" Ferrara rose. "I have a wine which, I declare, you will never have tasted but which you will pronounce to be nectar. It is made in Cyprus—"

Cairn raised his hand in a way that might have reminded a nice observer of his father.

"Thank you, nevertheless. Some other time, Ferrara; I am no wine man."

"A whisky and soda, or a burly British B. and S., even a sporty 'Scotch and Polly'?"

There was a suggestion of laughter in the husky voice, now, of a sort of contemptuous banter. But Cairn stolidly shook his head and forced a smile.

"Many thanks; but it's too early."

He stood up and began to walk about the room, inspecting the numberless oddities which it contained. The photographs he examined with supercilious curiosity. Then, passing to a huge cabinet, he began to peer in at the rows of amulets, statuettes and other, unclassifiable, objects with which it was laden. Ferrara's voice came.

"That head of a priestess on the left, Cairn, is of great interest. The brain had not been removed, and quite a colony of Dermestes Beetles had propagated in the cavity. Those creatures never saw the light, Cairn. Yet I assure you that they had eyes. I have nearly forty of them in the small glass case on the table there. You might like to examine them."

Cairn shuddered, but felt impelled to turn and look at these gruesome relics. In a square, glass case he saw the creatures. They lay in rows on a bed of moss; one might almost have supposed that unclean life yet survived in the little black insects. They were an unfamiliar species to Cairn, being covered with unusually long, black hair, except upon the root of the wing-cases where they were of brilliant orange.

"The perfect pupæ of this insect are extremely rare," added Ferrara informatively.

"Indeed?" replied Cairn.

He found something physically revolting in that group of beetles whose history had begun and ended in the skull of a mummy.

"Filthy things!" he said. "Why do you keep them?"

Ferrara shrugged his shoulders.

"Who knows?" he answered enigmatically. "They might prove useful, some day."

A bell rang; and from Ferrara's attitude it occurred to Cairn that he was expecting a visitor.

"I must be off," he said accordingly.

And indeed he was conscious of a craving for the cool and comparatively clean air of Piccadilly. He knew something of the great evil which dwelt within this man whom he was compelled, by singular circumstances, to tolerate. But the duty began to irk.

"If you must," was the reply. "Of course, your press work no doubt is very exacting."

The note of badinage was discernible again, but Cairn passed out into the *mandarah* without replying, where the fountain plashed coolly and the silver *mibkharah* sent up its pencils of vapour. The outer door was opened by the Oriental servant, and Ferrara stood and bowed to his departing visitor. He did not proffer his hand.

"Until our next meeting. Cairn, *es-selâm aleykûm*!" (peace be with you) he murmured, "as the Moslems say. But indeed I shall be with you in spirit, dear Cairn."

There was something in the tone wherein he spoke those last words that brought Cairn up short. He turned, but the doors closed silently. A faint breath of ambergris was borne to his nostrils.

V. The Rustling Shadows

Cairn stepped out of the lift, crossed the hall, and was about to walk out on to Piccadilly, when he stopped, staring hard at a taxi-cab which had slowed down upon the opposite side whilst the driver awaited a suitable opportunity to pull across.

The occupant of the cab was invisible now, but a moment before Cairn had had a glimpse of her as she glanced out, apparently towards the very doorway in which he stood. Perhaps his imagination was playing him tricks. He stood and waited, until at last the cab drew up within a few yards of him.

Myra Duquesne got out.

Having paid the cabman, she crossed the pavement and entered the hall-way. Cairn stepped forward so that she almost ran into his arms.

"Mr. Cairn!" she cried. "Why! have you been to see Antony?"

"I have," he replied, and paused, at a loss for words.

It had suddenly occurred to him that Antony Ferrara and Myra Duquesne had known one another from childhood; that the girl probably regarded Ferrara in the light of a brother.

"There are so many things I want to talk to him about," she said. "He seems to know everything, and I am afraid I know very little."

Cairn noted with dismay the shadows under her eyes—the grey eyes that he would have wished to see ever full of light and laughter. She was pale, too, or seemed unusually so in her black dress; but the tragic death of her guardian, Sir Michael Ferrara, had been a dreadful blow to this convent-bred girl who had no other kin in the world. A longing swept into Cairn's heart and set it ablaze; a longing to take all her sorrows, all her cares, upon his own broad shoulders, to take her and hold her, shielded from whatever of trouble or menace the future might bring.

"Have you seen his rooms here?" he asked, trying to speak casually; but his soul was up in arms against the bare idea of this girl's entering that perfumed place where abominable and vile things were, and none of them so vile as the man she trusted, whom she counted a brother.

"Not yet," she answered, with a sort of childish glee momentarily lighting her eyes. "Are they *very* splendid?"

"Very," he answered her, grimly.

"Can't you come in with me for awhile? Only just a little while, then you can come home to lunch—you and Antony." Her eyes sparkled now. "Oh, do say yes!"

Knowing what he did know of the man upstairs, he longed to accompany her; yet, contradictorily, knowing what he did he could not face him again, could not submit himself to the test of being civil to Antony Ferrara in the presence of Myra Duquesne.

"Please don't tempt me," he begged, and forced a smile. "I shall find myself enrolled amongst the seekers of soup-tickets if I *completely* ignore the claims of my employer upon my time!"

"Oh, what a shame!" she cried.

Their eyes met, and something—something unspoken but cogent—passed between them; so that for the first time a pretty colour tinted the girl's cheeks. She suddenly grew embarrassed.

"Good-bye, then," she said, holding out her hand. "Will you lunch with us to-morrow?"

"Thanks awfully," replied Cairn. "Rather—if it's humanly possible. I'll ring you up."

He released her hand, and stood watching her as she entered the lift. When it ascended, he turned and went out to swell the human tide of Piccadilly. He wondered what his father would think of the girl's visiting Ferrara. Would he approve? Decidedly the situation was a delicate one; the wrong kind of interference—the tactless kind—might merely render it worse. It would be awfully difficult, if not impossible, to explain to Myra. If an open rupture were to be avoided (and he had profound faith in his father's acumen), then Myra must remain in ignorance. But was she to be allowed to continue these visits?

Should he have permitted her to enter Ferrara's rooms?

He reflected that he had no right to question her movements. But, at least, he might have accompanied her.

"Oh, heavens!" he muttered—"what a horrible tangle. It will drive me mad!"

There could be no peace for him until he knew her to be safely home again, and his work suffered accordingly; until, at about midday, he rang up Myra Duquesne, on the pretence of accepting her invitation to lunch on the morrow, and heard, with inexpressible relief, her voice replying to him.

In the afternoon he was suddenly called upon to do a big "royal" matinée, and this necessitated a run to his chambers in order to change from Harris tweed into vicuna and cashmere. The usual stream of lawyers' clerks and others poured under the archway leading to the court; but in the far corner shaded by the tall plane tree, where the ascending steps and worn iron railing, the small panes of glass in the solicitor's window on the ground floor and the general air of Dickens-like aloofness prevailed, one entered a sort of backwater. In the narrow hall-way, quiet reigned—a quiet profound as though motor 'buses were not.

Cairn ran up the stairs to the second landing, and began to fumble for his key. Although he knew it to be impossible, he was aware of a queer impression that someone was waiting for him, inside his chambers. The sufficiently palpable fact—that such a thing *was* impossible—did not really strike him until he had opened the door and entered. Up to that time, in a sort of subconscious way, he had anticipated finding a visitor there.

"What an ass I am!" he muttered; then, "Phew! there's a disgusting smell!"

He threw open all the windows, and entering his bedroom, also opening both the windows there. The current of air thus established began to disperse the odour—a fusty one as of something decaying—and by the time that he had changed, it was scarcely perceptible. He had little time to waste in speculation, but when, as he ran out to the door, glancing at his watch, the nauseous odour suddenly rose again to his nostrils, he stopped with his hand on the latch.

"What the deuce is it!" he said loudly.

Quite mechanically he turned and looked back. As one might have anticipated, there was nothing visible to account for the odour.

The emotion of fear is a strange and complex one. In this breath of decay rising to his nostril, Cairn found something fearsome. He opened the door, stepped out on to the landing, and closed the door behind him.

At an hour close upon midnight, Dr. Bruce Cairn, who was about to retire, received a wholly unexpected visit from his son. Robert Cairn

followed his father into the library and sat down in the big, red leathern easy-chair. The doctor tilted the lamp shade, directing the light upon Robert's face. It proved to be slightly pale, and in the clear eyes was an odd expression—almost a hunted look.

"What's the trouble, Rob? Have a whisky and soda."

Robert Cairn helped himself quietly.

"Now take a cigar and tell me what has frightened you."

"Frightened me!" He started, and paused in the act of reaching for a match. "Yes—you're right, sir. I *am* frightened!"

"Not at the moment. You have been."

"Right again." He lighted his cigar. "I want to begin by saying that—well, how can I put it? When I took up newspaper work, we thought it would be better if I lived in chambers—"

"Certainly."

"Well, at that time—" he examined the lighted end of his cigar—"there was no reason—why I should not live alone. But now—"

"Well?"

"Now I feel, sir, that I have need of more or less constant companionship. Especially I feel that it would be desirable to have a friend handy at—er—at night time!"

Dr. Cairn leant forward in his chair. His face was very stern.

"Hold out your fingers," he said, "extended; left hand."

His son obeyed, smiling slightly. The open hand showed in the lamplight steady as a carven hand.

"Nerves quite in order, sir."

Dr. Cairn inhaled a deep breath.

"Tell me," he said.

"It's a queer tale," his son began, "and if I told it to Craig Fenton, or Madderley round in Harley Street I know what they would say. But you will *understand*. It started this afternoon, when the sun was pouring in through the windows. I had to go to my chambers to change; and the rooms were filled with a most disgusting smell."

His father started.

"What kind of smell?" he asked. "Not—incense?"

"No," replied Robert, looking hard at him—"I thought you would ask that. It was a smell of something putrid—something rotten, rotten with the

rottenness of ages."

"Did you trace where it came from?"

"I opened all the windows, and that seemed to disperse it for a time. Then, just as I was going out, it returned; it seemed to envelop me like a filthy miasma. You know, sir, it's hard to explain just the way I felt about it—but it all amounts to this: I was glad to get outside!"

Dr. Cairn stood up and began to pace about the room, his hands locked behind him.

"To-night," he rapped suddenly, "what occurred to-night?"

"To-night," continued his son, "I got in at about half-past nine. I had had such a rush, in one way and another, that the incident had quite lost its hold on my imagination; I hadn't forgotten it, of course, but I was not thinking of it when I unlocked the door. In fact I didn't begin to think of it again until, in slippers and dressing-gown, I had settled down for a comfortable read. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, to influence my imagination—in that way. The book was an old favourite, Mark Twain's *Up the Mississippi*, and I sat in the armchair with a large bottle of lager beer at my elbow and my pipe going strong."

Becoming restless in turn, the speaker stood up and walking to the fireplace flicked off the long cone of grey ash from his cigar. He leant one elbow upon the mantel-piece, resuming his story:

"St. Paul's had just chimed the half-hour—half-past ten—when my pipe went out. Before I had time to re-light it, came the damnable smell again. At the moment nothing was farther from my mind, and I jumped up with an exclamation of disgust. It seemed to be growing stronger and stronger. I got my pipe alight quickly. Still I could smell it; the aroma of the tobacco did not lessen its beastly pungency in the smallest degree.

"I tilted the shade of my reading-lamp and looked all about. There was nothing unusual to be seen. Both windows were open and I went to one and thrust my head out, in order to learn if the odour came from outside. It did not. The air outside the window was fresh and clean. Then I remembered that when I had left my chambers in the afternoon, the smell had been stronger near the door than anywhere. I ran out to the door. In the passage I could smell nothing; but—"

He paused, glancing at his father.

"Before I had stood there thirty seconds it was rising all about me like the fumes from a crater. By God, sir! I realised then that it was something… following me!"

Dr. Cairn stood watching him, from the shadows beyond the big table, as he came forward and finished his whisky at a gulp.

"That seemed to work a change in me," he continued rapidly; "I recognised there was something behind this disgusting manifestation, something directing it; and I recognised, too, that the next move was up to me. I went back to my room. The odour was not so pronounced, but as I stood by the table, waiting, it increased, and increased, until it almost choked me. My nerves were playing tricks, but I kept a fast hold on myself. I set to work, very methodically, and fumigated the place. Within myself I knew that it could do no good, but I felt that I had to put up some kind of opposition. You understand, sir?"

"Quite," replied Dr. Cairn quietly. "It was an organised attempt to expel the invader, and though of itself it was useless, the mental attitude dictating it was good. Go on."

"The clocks had chimed eleven when I gave up, and I felt physically sick. The air by this time was poisonous, literally poisonous. I dropped into the easy-chair and began to wonder what the end of it would be. Then, in the shadowy parts of the room, outside the circle of light cast by the lamp, I detected—darker patches. For awhile I tried to believe that they were imaginary, but when I saw one move along the bookcase, glide down its side, and come across the carpet, towards me, I knew that they were not. Before heaven, sir"—his voice shook—"either I am mad, or to-night my room was filled with things that *crawled*! They were everywhere; on the floor, on the walls, even on the ceiling above me! Where the light was I couldn't detect them, but the shadows were alive, alive with things—the size of my two hands; and in the growing stillness—"

His voice had become husky. Dr. Cairn stood still, as a man of stone, watching him.

"In the stillness, very faintly, *they rustled*!"

Silence fell. A car passed outside in Half-Moon Street; its throb died away. A clock was chiming the half-hour after midnight. Dr. Cairn spoke:

"Anything else?"

"One other thing, sir. I was gripping the chair arms; I felt that I had to grip something to prevent myself from slipping into madness. My left hand —" he glanced at it with a sort of repugnance—"something hairy—and indescribably loathsome—touched it; just brushed against it. But it was too much. I'm ashamed to tell you, sir; I screamed, screamed like any hysterical girl, and for the second time, ran! I ran from my own rooms, grabbed a hat and coat; and left my dressing gown on the floor!"

He turned, leaning both elbows on the mantel-piece, and buried his face in his hands.

"Have another drink," said Dr. Cairn. "You called on Antony Ferrara to-day, didn't you? How did he receive you?"

"That brings me to something else I wanted to tell you," continued Robert, squirting soda-water into his glass. "Myra—goes there."

"Where—to his chambers?"

"Yes."

Dr. Cairn began to pace the room again.

"I am not surprised," he admitted; "she has always been taught to regard him in the light of a brother. But nevertheless we must put a stop to it. How did you learn this?"

Robert Cairn gave him an account of the morning's incidents, describing Ferrara's chambers with a minute exactness which revealed how deep, how indelible an impression their strangeness had made upon his mind.

"There is one thing," he concluded, "against which I am always coming up, I puzzled over it at Oxford, and others did, too; I came against it to-day. Who *is* Antony Ferrara? Where did Sir Michael find him? What kind of woman bore such a son?"

"Stop boy!" cried Dr. Cairn.

Robert started, looking at his father across the table.

"You are already in danger, Rob. I won't disguise that fact from you. Myra Duquesne is no relation of Ferrara's; therefore, since she inherits half of Sir Michael's fortune, a certain course must have suggested itself to Antony. You, patently, are an obstacle! That's bad enough, boy; let us deal with it before we look for further trouble."

"He took up a blackened briar from the table and began to load it.

"Regarding your next move," he continued slowly, "there can be no question. You must return to your chambers!"

"What!"

"There can be no question, Rob. A kind of attack has been made upon you which only *you* can repel. If you desert your chambers, it will be repeated here. At present it is evidently localised. There are laws governing these things; laws as immutable as any other laws in Nature. One of them is this: the powers of darkness (to employ a conventional and significant phrase) cannot triumph over the powers of Will. Below the Godhead, Will is the supreme force of the Universe. *Resist*! You *must* resist, or you are lost!"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I mean that destruction of mind, and of something more than mind, threatens you. If you retreat you are lost. Go back to your rooms. *Seek* your foe; strive to haul him into the light and crush him! The phenomena at your rooms belong to one of two varieties; at present it seems impossible to classify them more closely. Both are dangerous, though in different ways. I suspect, however, that a purely mental effort will be sufficient to disperse these nauseous shadow-things. Probably you will not be troubled again to-night, but whenever the phenomena return, take off your coat to them! You require no better companion than the one you had:—Mark Twain! Treat your visitors as one might imagine he would have treated them; as a very poor joke! But whenever it begins again, ring me up. Don't hesitate, whatever the hour. I shall be at the hospital all day, but from seven onward I shall be here and shall make a point of remaining. Give me a call when you return, now, and if there is no earlier occasion, another in the morning. Then rely upon my active co-operation throughout the following night."

"Active, sir?"

"I said active, Rob. The next repetition of these manifestations shall be the last. Good-night. Remember, you have only to lift the receiver to know that you are not alone in your fight."

Robert Cairn took a second cigar, lighted it, finished his whisky, and squared his shoulders.

"Good-night, sir," he said. "I shan't run away a third time!"

When the door had closed upon his exit, Dr. Cairn resumed his restless pacing up and down the library. He had given Roman counsel, for he had sent his son out to face, alone, a real and dreadful danger. Only thus could he hope to save him, but nevertheless it had been hard. The next fight would

be a fight to the finish, for Robert had said, "I shan't run away a third time;" and he was a man of his word.

As Dr. Cairn had declared, the manifestations belonged to one of two varieties. According to the most ancient science in the world, the science by which the Egyptians, and perhaps even earlier peoples, ordered their lives, we share this, our plane of existence, with certain other creatures, often called Elementals. Mercifully, these fearsome entities are invisible to our normal sight, just as the finer tones of music are inaudible to our normal powers of hearing.

Victims of delirium tremens, opium smokers, and other debauchees, artificially open that finer, latent power of vision; and the horrors which surround them are not imaginary but are Elementals attracted to the victim by his peculiar excesses.

The crawling things, then, which reeked abominably might be Elementals (so Dr. Cairn reasoned) superimposed upon Robert Cairn's consciousness by a directing, malignant intelligence. On the other hand they might be mere glamours—or thought-forms—thrust upon him by the same wizard mind; emanations from an evil, powerful will.

His reflections were interrupted by the ringing of the 'phone bell. He took up the receiver.

"Hullo!"

"That you, sir? All's clear here, now. I'm turning in."

"Right. Good-night, Rob. Ring me in the morning."

"Good-night, sir."

Dr. Cairn refilled his charred briar, and, taking from a drawer in the writing table a thick MS., sat down and began to study the closely-written pages. The paper was in the cramped handwriting of the late Sir Michael Ferrara, his travelling companion through many strange adventures; and the sun had been flooding the library with dimmed golden light for several hours, and a bustle below stairs acclaiming an awakened household, ere the doctor's studies were interrupted. Again, it was the 'phone bell. He rose, switched off the reading-lamp, and lifted the instrument.

"That you, Rob?"

"Yes, sir. All's well, thank God! Can I breakfast with you?"

"Certainly, my boy!" Dr. Cairn glanced at his watch. "Why, upon my soul it's seven o'clock!"

VI. The Beetles

Sixteen hours had elapsed and London's clocks were booming eleven that night, when the uncanny drama entered upon its final stage. Once more Dr. Cairn sat alone with Sir Michael's manuscript, but at frequent intervals his glance would stray to the telephone at his elbow. He had given orders to the effect that he was on no account to be disturbed and that his car should be ready at the door from ten o'clock onward.

As the sound of the final strokes was dying away the expected summons came. Dr. Cairn's jaw squared and his mouth was very grim, when he recognised his son's voice over the wires.

"Well, boy?"

"They're here, sir—now, while I'm speaking! I have been fighting—fighting hard—for half an hour. The place smells like a charnel-house and the—shapes are taking definite, horrible form! They have… *eyes*!" His voice sounded harsh. "Quite black the eyes are, and they shine like beads! It's gradually wearing me down, although I have myself in hand, so far. I mean I might crack up—at any moment. Bah!—"

His voice ceased.

"Hullo!" cried Dr. Cairn. "Hullo, Rob!"

"It's all right, sir," came, all but inaudibly. "The—things are all around the edge of the light patch; they make a sort of rustling noise. It is a tremendous, conscious *effort* to keep them at bay. While I was speaking, I somehow lost my grip of the situation. One—crawled… it fastened on my hand… a hairy, many-limbed horror… Oh, my God! another is touching…"

"Rob! Rob! Keep your nerve, boy! Do you hear?"

"Yes—yes—" faintly.

"*Pray*, my boy—pray for strength, and it will come to you! You *must* hold out for another ten minutes. Ten minutes—do you understand?"

"Yes! yes!—Merciful God!—if you can help me, do it, sir, or—"

"Hold out, boy! In *ten minutes* you'll have won."

Dr. Cairn hung up the receiver, raced from the library, and grabbing a cap from the rack in the hall, ran down the steps and bounded into the waiting car, shouting an address to the man.

Piccadilly was gay with supper-bound theatre crowds when he leapt out and ran into the hall-way which had been the scene of Robert's meeting with Myra Duquesne. Dr. Cairn ran past the lift doors and went up the stairs three steps at a time. He pressed his finger to the bell-push beside Antony Ferrara's door and held it there until the door opened and a dusky face appeared in the opening.

The visitor thrust his way in, past the white-clad man holding out his arms to detain him.

"Not at home, *effendim*—"

Dr. Cairn shot out a sinewy hand, grabbed the man—he was a tall *fellahîn*—by the shoulder, and sent him spinning across the mosaic floor of the *mandarah*. The air was heavy with the perfume of ambergris.

Wasting no word upon the reeling man, Dr. Cairn stepped to the doorway. He jerked the drapery aside and found himself in a dark corridor. From his son's description of the chambers he had no difficulty in recognising the door of the study.

He turned the handle—the door proved to be unlocked—and entered the darkened room.

In the grate a huge fire glowed redly; the temperature of the place was almost unbearable. On the table the light from the silver lamp shed a patch of radiance, but the rest of the study was veiled in shadow.

A black-robed figure was seated in a high-backed, carved chair; one corner of the cowl-like garment was thrown across the table. Half rising, the figure turned—and, an evil apparition in the glow from the fire, Antony Ferrara faced the intruder.

Dr. Cairn walked forward, until he stood over the other.

"Uncover what you have on the table," he said succinctly.

Ferrara's strange eyes were uplifted to the speaker's with an expression in their depths which, in the Middle Ages, alone would have sent a man to the stake.

"Dr. Cairn—"

The husky voice had lost something of its suavity.

"You heard my order!"

"Your *order*! Surely, doctor, since I am in my own—"

"Uncover what you have on the table. Or must I do so for you!"

Antony Ferrara placed his hand upon the end of the black robe which lay across the table.

"Be careful, Dr. Cairn," he said evenly. "You—are taking risks."

Dr. Cairn suddenly leapt, seized the shielding hand in a sure grip and twisted Ferrara's arm behind him. Then, with a second rapid movement, he snatched away the robe. A faint smell—a smell of corruption, of ancient rottenness—arose on the superheated air.

A square of faded linen lay on the table, figured with all but indecipherable Egyptian characters, and upon it, in rows which formed a definite geometrical design, were arranged a great number of little, black insects.

Dr. Cairn released the hand which he held, and Ferrara sat quite still, looking straight before him.

"*Dermestes beetles!* from the skull of a mummy! You filthy, obscene beast!"

Ferrara spoke, with a calm suddenly regained:

"Is there anything obscene in the study of beetles?"

"My son saw these things here yesterday; and last night, and again to-night, you cast magnified doubles—glamours—of the horrible creatures into his rooms! By means which you know of, but which *I* know of, too, you sought to bring your thought-things down to the material plane."

"Dr. Cairn, my respect for you is great; but I fear that much study has made you mad."

Ferrara reached out his hand towards an ebony box; he was smiling.

"Don't dare to touch that box!"

He paused, glancing up.

"More orders, doctor?"

"Exactly."

Dr. Cairn grabbed the faded linen, scooping up the beetles within it, and, striding across the room, threw the whole unsavoury bundle into the heart of the fire. A great flame leapt up; there came a series of squeaky explosions, so that, almost, one might have imagined those age-old insects to have had life. Then the doctor turned again.

Ferrara leapt to his feet with a cry that had in it something inhuman, and began rapidly to babble in a tongue that was not European. He was facing

Dr. Cairn, a tall, sinister figure, but one hand was groping behind him for the box.

"Stop that!" rapped the doctor imperatively—"and for the last time do not dare to touch that box!"

The flood of strange words was dammed. Ferrara stood quivering, but silent.

"The laws by which such as you were burnt—the *wise* laws of long ago—are no more," said Dr. Cairn. "English law cannot touch you, but God has provided for your kind!"

"Perhaps," whispered Ferrara, "you would like also to burn this box to which you object so strongly?"

"No power on earth would prevail upon me to touch it! But you—you *have* touched it—and you know the penalty! You raise forces of evil that have lain dormant for ages and dare to wield them. Beware! I know of some whom you have murdered; I cannot know how many you have sent to the madhouse. But I swear that in future your victims shall be few. There is a way to deal with you!"

He turned and walked to the door.

"Beware also, dear Dr. Cairn," came softly. "As you say, I raise forces of evil—"

Dr. Cairn spun about. In three strides he was standing over Antony Ferrara, fists clenched and his sinewy body tense in every fibre. His face was pale, as was apparent even in that vague light, and his eyes gleamed like steel.

"You raise other forces," he said—and his voice, though steady was very low; "evil forces, also."

Antony Ferrara, invoker of nameless horrors, shrank before him—before the primitive Celtic man whom unwittingly he had invoked. Dr. Cairn was spare and lean, but in perfect physical condition. Now he was strong, with the strength of a just cause. Moreover, he was dangerous, and Ferrara knew it well.

"I fear—" began the latter huskily.

"Dare to bandy words with me," said Dr. Cairn, with icy coolness, "answer me back but once again, and before God I'll strike you dead!"

Ferrara sat silent, clutching at the arms of his chair, and not daring to raise his eyes. For ten magnetic seconds they stayed so, then again Dr.

Cairn turned, and this time walked out.

The clocks had been chiming the quarter after eleven as he had entered Antony Ferrara's chambers, and some had not finished their chimes when his son, choking, calling wildly upon Heaven to aid him, had fallen in the midst of crowding, obscene things, and, in the instant of his fall, had found the room clear of the waving antennæ, the beady eyes, and the beetle shapes. The whole horrible phantasmagoria—together with the odour of ancient rottenness—faded like a fevered dream, at the moment that Dr. Cairn had burst in upon the creator of it.

Robert Cairn stood up, weakly, trembling; then dropped upon his knees and sobbed out prayers of thankfulness that came from his frightened soul.

VII. Sir Elwin Groves' Patient

When a substantial legacy is divided into two shares, one of which falls to a man, young, dissolute and clever, and the other to a girl, pretty and inexperienced, there is laughter in the hells. But, to the girl's legacy add another item—a strong, stern guardian, and the issue becomes one less easy to predict.

In the case at present under consideration, such an arrangement led Dr. Bruce Cairn to pack off Myra Duquesne to a grim Scottish manor in Inverness upon a visit of indefinite duration. It also led to heart burnings on the part of Robert Cairn, and to other things about to be noticed.

Antony Ferrara, the co-legatee, was not slow to recognise that a damaging stroke had been played, but he knew Dr. Cairn too well to put up any protest. In his capacity of fashionable physician, the doctor frequently met Ferrara in society, for a man at once rich, handsome, and bearing a fine name, is not socially ostracised on the mere suspicion that he is a dangerous blackguard. Thus Antony Ferrara was courted by the smartest women in town and tolerated by the men. Dr. Cairn would always acknowledge him, and then turn his back upon the dark-eyed, adopted son of his dearest friend.

There was that between the two of which the world knew nothing. Had the world known what Dr. Cairn knew respecting Antony Ferrara, then, despite his winning manner, his wealth and his station, every door in London, from those of Mayfair to that of the foulest den in Limehouse, would have been closed to him—closed, and barred with horror and loathing. A tremendous secret was locked up within the heart of Dr. Bruce Cairn.

Sometimes we seem to be granted a glimpse of the guiding Hand that steers men's destinies; then, as comprehension is about to dawn, we lose again our temporal lucidity of vision. The following incident illustrates this.

Sir Elwin Groves, of Harley Street, took Dr. Cairn aside at the club one evening.

"I am passing a patient on to you, Cairn," he said; "Lord Lashmore."

"Ah!" replied Cairn, thoughtfully. "I have never met him."

"He has only quite recently returned to England—you may have heard?—and brought a South American Lady Lashmore with him."

"I had heard that, yes."

"Lord Lashmore is close upon fifty-five, and his wife—a passionate Southern type—is probably less than twenty. They are an odd couple. The lady has been doing some extensive entertaining at the town house."

Groves stared hard at Dr. Cairn.

"Your young friend, Antony Ferrara, is a regular visitor."

"No doubt," said Cairn; "he goes everywhere. I don't know how long his funds will last."

"I have wondered, too. His chambers are like a scene from the 'Arabian Nights.'"

"How do you know?" inquired the other curiously. "Have you attended him?"

"Yes," was the reply. "His Eastern servant 'phoned for me one night last week; and I found Ferrara lying unconscious in a room like a pasha's harem. He looked simply ghastly, but the man would give me no account of what had caused the attack. It looked to me like sheer nervous exhaustion. He gave me quite an anxious five minutes. Incidentally, the room was blazing hot, with a fire roaring right up the chimney, and it smelt like a Hindu temple."

"Ah!" muttered Cairn, "between his mode of life and his peculiar studies he will probably crack up. He has a fragile constitution."

"Who the deuce is he, Cairn?" pursued Sir Elwin. "You must know all the circumstances of his adoption; you were with the late Sir Michael in Egypt at the time. The fellow is a mystery to me; he repels, in some way. I was glad to get away from his rooms."

"You were going to tell me something about Lord Lashmore's case, I think?" said Cairn.

Sir Elwin Groves screwed up his eyes and readjusted his pince-nez, for the deliberate way in which his companion had changed the conversation was unmistakable. However, Cairn's brusque manners were proverbial, and Sir Elwin accepted the lead.

"Yes, yes, I believe I was," he agreed, rather lamely. "Well, it's very singular. I was called there last Monday, at about two o'clock in the morning. I found the house upside-down, and Lady Lashmore, with a

dressing-gown thrown over her nightdress, engaged in bathing a bad wound in her husband's throat."

"What! Attempted suicide?"

"My first idea, naturally. But a glance at the wound set me wondering. It was bleeding profusely, and from its location I was afraid that it might have penetrated the internal jugular; but the external only was wounded. I arrested the flow of blood and made the patient comfortable. Lady Lashmore assisted me coolly and displayed some skill as a nurse. In fact she had applied a ligature before my arrival."

"Lord Lashmore remained conscious?"

"Quite. He was shaky, of course. I called again at nine o'clock that morning, and found him progressing favourably. When I had dressed the wounds—"

"Wounds?"

"There were two actually; I will tell you in a moment. I asked Lord Lashmore for an explanation. He had given out, for the benefit of the household, that, stumbling out of bed in the dark, he had tripped upon a rug, so that he fell forward almost into the fireplace. There is a rather ornate fender, with an elaborate copper scrollwork design, and his account was that he came down with all his weight upon this, in such a way that part of the copperwork pierced his throat. It was possible, just possible, Cairn; but it didn't satisfy me and I could see that it didn't satisfy Lady Lashmore. However, when we were alone, Lashmore told me the real facts."

"He had been concealing the truth?"

"Largely for his wife's sake, I fancy. He was anxious to spare her the alarm which, knowing the truth, she must have experienced. His story was this—related in confidence, but he wishes that you should know. He was awakened by a sudden, sharp pain in the throat; not very acute, but accompanied by a feeling of pressure. It was gone again, in a moment, and he was surprised to find blood upon his hands when he felt for the cause of the pain.

"He got out of bed and experienced a great dizziness. The hemorrhage was altogether more severe than he had supposed. Not wishing to arouse his wife, he did not enter his dressing-room, which is situated between his own room and Lady Lashmore's; he staggered as far as the bell-push, and then

collapsed. His man found him on the floor—sufficiently near to the fender to lend colour to the story of the accident."

Dr. Cairn coughed drily.

"Do you think it was attempted suicide after all, then?" he asked.

"No—I don't," replied Sir Elwin emphatically. "I think it was something altogether more difficult to explain."

"Not attempted murder?"

"Almost impossible. Excepting Chambers, Lord Lashmore's valet, no one could possibly have gained access to that suite of rooms. They number four. There is a small boudoir, out of which opens Lady Lashmore's bedroom; between this and Lord Lashmore's apartment is the dressing-room. Lord Lashmore's door was locked and so was that of the boudoir. These are the only two means of entrance."

"But you said that Chambers came in and found him."

"Chambers has a key of Lord Lashmore's door. That is why I said 'excepting Chambers.' But Chambers has been with his present master since Lashmore left Cambridge. It's out of the question."

"Windows?"

"First floor, no balcony, and overlook Hyde Park."

"Is there no clue to the mystery?"

"There are three!"

"What are they?"

"First: the nature of the wounds. Second: Lord Lashmore's idea that something was in the room at the moment of his awakening. Third: the fact that an identical attempt was made upon him last night!"

"Last night! Good God! With what result?"

"The former wounds, though deep, are very tiny, and had quite healed over. One of them partially reopened, but Lord Lashmore awoke altogether more readily and before any damage had been done. He says that some soft body rolled off the bed. He uttered a loud cry, leapt out and switched on the electric lights. At the same moment he heard a frightful scream from his wife's room. When I arrived—Lashmore himself summoned me on this occasion—I had a new patient."

"Lady Lashmore?"

"Exactly. She had fainted from fright, at hearing her husband's cry, I assume. There had been a slight hemorrhage from the throat, too."

"What! Tuberculous?"

"I fear so. Fright would not produce hemorrhage in the case of a healthy subject, would it?"

Dr. Cairn shook his head. He was obviously perplexed.

"And Lord Lashmore?" he asked.

"The marks were there again," replied Sir Elwin; "rather lower on the neck. But they were quite superficial. He had awakened in time and had struck out—hitting something."

"What?"

"Some living thing; apparently covered with long, silky hair. It escaped, however."

"And now," said Dr. Cairn—"these wounds; what are they like?"

"They are like the marks of fangs," replied Sir Elwin; "of two long, sharp fangs!"

VIII. The Secret of Dhoon

Lord Lashmore was a big, blonde man, fresh coloured, and having his nearly white hair worn close cut and his moustache trimmed in the neat military fashion. For a fair man, he had eyes of a singular colour. They were of so dark a shade of brown as to appear black: southern eyes; lending to his personality an oddness very striking.

When he was shown into Dr. Cairn's library, the doctor regarded him with that searching scrutiny peculiar to men of his profession, at the same time inviting the visitor to be seated.

Lashmore sat down in the red leathern armchair, resting his large hands upon his knees, with the fingers widely spread. He had a massive dignity, but was not entirely at his ease.

Dr. Cairn opened the conversation, in his direct fashion.

"You come to consult me, Lord Lashmore, in my capacity of occultist rather than in that of physician?"

"In both," replied Lord Lashmore; "distinctly, in both."

"Sir Elwin Groves is attending you for certain throat wounds—"

Lord Lashmore touched the high stock which he was wearing.

"The scars remain," he said. "Do you wish to see them?"

"I am afraid I must trouble you."

The stock was untied; and Dr. Cairn, through a powerful glass, examined the marks. One of them, the lower, was slightly inflamed.

Lord Lashmore retied his stock, standing before the small mirror set in the overmantel.

"You had an impression of some presence in the room at the time of the outrage?" pursued the doctor.

"Distinctly; on both occasions."

"Did you see anything?"

"The room was too dark."

"But you felt something?"

"Hair; my knuckles, as I struck out—I am speaking of the second outrage—encountered a thick mass of hair."

"The body of some animal?"

"Probably the head."

"But still you saw nothing?"

"I must confess that I had a vague idea of some shape flitting away across the room; a white shape—therefore probably a figment of my imagination."

"Your cry awakened Lady Lashmore?"

"Unfortunately, yes. Her nerves were badly shaken already, and this second shock proved too severe. Sir Elwin fears chest trouble. I am taking her abroad as soon as possible."

"She was found insensible. Where?"

"At the door of the dressing-room—the door communicating with her own room, not that communicating with mine. She had evidently started to come to my assistance when faintness overcame her."

"What is her own account?"

"That is her own account."

"Who discovered her?"

"I did."

Dr. Cairn was drumming his fingers on the table.

"You have a theory, Lord Lashmore," he said suddenly. "Let me hear it."

Lord Lashmore started, and glared across at the speaker with a sort of haughty surprise.

"*I* have a theory?"

"I think so. Am I wrong?"

Lashmore stood on the rug before the fireplace, with his hands locked behind him and his head lowered, looking out under his tufted eyebrows at Dr. Cairn. Thus seen, Lord Lashmore's strange eyes had a sinister appearance.

"If I had had a theory—" he began.

"You would have come to me to seek confirmation?" suggested Dr. Cairn.

"Ah! yes, you may be right. Sir Elwin Groves, to whom I hinted something, mentioned your name. I am not quite clear upon one point, Dr. Cairn. Did he send me to you because he thought—in a word, are you a mental specialist?"

"I am not. Sir Elwin has no doubts respecting your brain, Lord Lashmore. He has sent you here because I have made some study of what I may term psychical ailments. There is a chapter in your family history"—he fixed his

searching gaze upon the other's face—"which latterly has been occupying your mind?"

At that, Lashmore started in good earnest.

"To what do you refer?"

"Lord Lashmore, you have come to me for advice. A rare ailment—happily very rare in England—has assailed you. Circumstances have been in your favour thus far, but a recurrence is to be anticipated at any time. Be good enough to look upon me as a specialist, and give me all your confidence."

Lashmore cleared his throat.

"What do you wish to know, Dr. Cairn?" he asked, with a queer intermingling of respect and hauteur in his tones.

"I wish to know about Mirza, wife of the third Baron Lashmore."

Lord Lashmore took a stride forward. His large hands clenched, and his eyes were blazing.

"What do you know about her?"

Surprise was in his voice, and anger.

"I have seen her portrait in Dhoon Castle; you were not in residence at the time. Mirza, Lady Lashmore, was evidently a very beautiful woman. What was the date of the marriage?"

"1615."

"The third Baron brought her to England from?—"

"Poland."

"She was a Pole?"

"A Polish Jewess."

"There was no issue of the marriage, but the Baron outlived her and married again?"

Lord Lashmore shifted his feet nervously, and gnawed his finger-nails.

"There *was* issue of the marriage," he snapped. "She was—my ancestress."

"Ah!" Dr. Cairn's grey eyes lighted up momentarily. "We get to the facts! Why was this birth kept secret?"

"Dhoon Castle has kept many secrets!" It was a grim noble of the Middle Ages who was speaking. "For a Lashmore, there was no difficulty in suppressing the facts, arranging a hasty second marriage and representing

the boy as the child of the later union. Had the second marriage proved fruitful, this had been unnecessary; but an heir to Dhoon was—essential."

"I see. Had the second marriage proved fruitful, the child of Mirza would have been—what shall we say?—smothered?"

"Damn it! What do you mean?"

"He was the rightful heir."

"Dr. Cairn," said Lashmore slowly, "you are probing an open wound. The fourth Baron Lashmore represents what the world calls 'The Curse of the House of Dhoon.' At Dhoon Castle there is a secret chamber, which has engaged the pens of many so-called occultists, but which no man, save every heir, has entered for generations. It's very location is a secret. Measurements do not avail to find it. You would appear to know much of my family's black secret; perhaps you know where that room lies at Dhoon?"

"Certainly, I do," replied Dr. Cairn calmly; "it is under the moat, some thirty yards west of the former drawbridge."

Lord Lashmore changed colour. When he spoke again his voice had lost its *timbre*.

"Perhaps you know—what it contains."

"I do. It contains Paul, fourth Baron Lashmore, son of Mirza, the Polish Jewess!"

Lord Lashmore reseated himself in the big armchair, staring at the speaker, aghast.

"I thought no other in the world knew that!" he said, hollowly. "Your studies have been extensive indeed. For three years—three whole years from the night of my twenty-first birthday—the horror hung over me, Dr. Cairn. It ultimately brought my grandfather to the madhouse, but my father was of sterner stuff, and so, it seems, was I. After those three years of horror I threw off the memories of Paul Dhoon, the third baron—"

"It was on the night of your twenty-first birthday that you were admitted to the subterranean room?"

"You know so much, Dr. Cairn, that you may as well know all." Lashmore's face was twitching. "But you are about to hear what no man has ever heard from the lips of one of my family before."

He stood up again, restlessly.

"Nearly thirty-five years have elapsed," he resumed, "since that December night; but my very soul trembles now, when I recall it! There was a big house-party at Dhoon, but I had been prepared, for some weeks, by my father, for the ordeal that awaited me. Our family mystery is historical, and there were many fearful glances bestowed upon me, when, at midnight, my father took me aside from the company and led me to the old library. By God! Dr. Cairn—fearful as these reminiscences are, it is a relief to relate them—to *someone*!"

A sort of suppressed excitement was upon Lashmore, but his voice remained low and hollow.

"He asked me," he continued, "the traditional question: if I had prayed for strength. God knows I had! Then, his stern face very pale, he locked the library door, and from a closet concealed beside the ancient fireplace—a closet which, hitherto, I had not known to exist—he took out a bulky key of antique workmanship. Together we set to work to remove all the volumes from one of the bookshelves.

"Even when the shelves were empty, it called for our united efforts to move the heavy piece of furniture; but we accomplished the task ultimately, making visible a considerable expanse of panelling. Nearly forty years had elapsed since that case had been removed, and the carvings which it concealed were coated with all the dust which had accumulated there since the night of my father's coming of age.

"A device upon the top of the centre panel represented the arms of the family; the helm which formed part of the device projected like a knob. My father grasped it, turned it, and threw his weight against the seemingly solid wall. It yielded, swinging inward upon concealed hinges, and a damp, earthy smell came out into the library. Taking up a lamp, which he had in readiness, my father entered the cavity, beckoning me to follow.

"I found myself descending a flight of rough steps, and the roof above me was so low that I was compelled to stoop. A corner was come to, passed, and a further flight of steps appeared beneath. At that time the old moat was still flooded, and even had I not divined as much from the direction of the steps, I should have known, at this point, that we were beneath it. Between the stone blocks roofing us in oozed drops of moisture, and the air was at once damp and icily cold.

"A short passage, commencing at the foot of the steps, terminated before a massive, iron-studded door. My father placed the key in the lock, and holding the lamp above his head, turned and looked at me. He was deathly pale.

"'Summon all your fortitude,' he said.

"He strove to turn the key, but for a long time without success for the lock was rusty. Finally, however—he was a strong man—his efforts were successful. The door opened, and an indescribable smell came out into the passage. Never before had I met with anything like it; I have never met with it since."

Lord Lashmore wiped his brow with his handkerchief.

"The first thing," he resumed, "upon which the lamplight shone, was what appeared to be a blood-stain spreading almost entirely over one wall of the cell which I perceived before me. I have learnt since that this was a species of fungus, not altogether uncommon, but at the time, and in that situation, it shocked me inexpressibly.

"But let me hasten to that which we were come to see—let me finish my story as quickly as may be. My father halted at the entrance to this frightful cell; his hand, with which he held the lamp above his head, was not steady; and over his shoulder I looked into the place and saw… *him*.

"Dr. Cairn, for three years, night and day, that spectacle haunted me; for three years, night and day, I seemed to have before my eyes the dreadful face—the bearded, grinning face of Paul Dhoon. He lay there upon the floor of the dungeon, his fists clenched and his knees drawn up as if in agony. He had lain there for generations; yet, as God is my witness, there was flesh on his bones.

"Yellow and seared it was, and his joints protruded through it, but his features were yet recognisable—horribly, dreadfully, recognisable. His black hair was like a mane, long and matted, his eyebrows were incredibly heavy and his lashes overhung his cheekbones. The nails of his fingers… no! I will spare you! But his teeth, his ivory gleaming teeth—with the two wolf-fangs fully revealed by that death-grin!…

"An aspen stake was driven through his breast, pinning him to the earthern floor, and there he lay in the agonised attitude of one who had died by such awful means. Yet—that stake was not driven through his unhallowed body until a whole year after his death!

"How I regained the library I do not remember. I was unable to rejoin the guests, unable to face my fellow-men for days afterwards. Dr. Cairn, for three years I feared—feared the world—feared sleep—feared myself above all; for I knew that I had in my veins the blood of a *vampire*!"

IX. The Polish Jewess

There was a silence of some minutes' duration. Lord Lashmore sat staring straight before him, his fists clenched upon his knees. Then:

"It was after death that the third baron developed—certain qualities?" inquired Dr. Cairn.

"There were six cases of death in the district within twelve months," replied Lashmore. "The gruesome cry of 'vampire' ran through the community. The fourth baron—son of Paul Dhoon—turned a deaf ear to these reports, until the mother of a child—a child who had died—traced a man, or the semblance of a man, to the gate of the Dhoon family vault. By night, secretly, the son of Paul Dhoon visited the vault, and found…

"The body, which despite twelve months in the tomb, looked as it had looked in life, was carried to the dungeon—in the Middle Ages a torture-room; no cry uttered there can reach the outer world—and was submitted to the ancient process for slaying a vampire. From that hour no supernatural visitant has troubled the district; but—"

"But," said Dr. Cairn quietly, "the strain came from Mirza, the sorceress. What of her?"

Lord Lashmore's eyes shone feverishly.

"How do you know that she was a sorceress?" he asked, hoarsely. "These are family secrets."

"They will remain so," Dr. Cairn answered. "But my studies have gone far, and I know that Mirza, wife of the third Baron Lashmore, practised the Black Art in life, and became after death a ghoul. Her husband surprised her in certain detestable magical operations and struck her head off. He had suspected her for some considerable time, and had not only kept secret the birth of her son but had secluded the child from the mother. No heir resulting from his second marriage, however, the son of Mirza became Baron Lashmore, and after death became what his mother had been before him.

"Lord Lashmore, the curse of the house of Dhoon will prevail until the Polish Jewess who originated it has been treated as her son was treated!"

"Dr. Cairn, it is not known where her husband had her body concealed. He died without revealing the secret. Do you mean that the taint, the devil's taint, may recur—Oh, my God! do you want to drive me mad?"

"I do not mean that after so many generations which have been free from it, the vampirism will arise again in your blood; but I mean that the spirit, the unclean, awful spirit of that vampire woman, is still earth-bound. The son was freed, and with him went the hereditary taint, it seems; but the mother was *not* freed! Her body was decapitated, but her vampire soul cannot go upon its appointed course until the ancient ceremonial has been performed!"

Lord Lashmore passed his hand across his eyes.

"You daze me, Dr. Cairn. In brief, what do you mean?"

"I mean that the spirit of Mirza is to this day loose upon the world, and is forced, by a deathless, unnatural longing to seek incarnation in a human body. It is such awful pariahs as this, Lord Lashmore, that constitute the danger of so-called spiritualism. Given suitable conditions, such a spirit might gain control of a human being."

"Do you suggest that the spirit of the second lady—"

"It is distinctly possible that she haunts her descendants. I seem to remember a tradition of Dhoon Castle, to the effect that births and deaths are heralded by a woman's mocking laughter?"

"I, myself, heard it on the night—I became Lord Lashmore."

"That is the spirit who was known, in life, as Mirza, Lady Lashmore!"

"But—"

"It is possible to gain control of such a being."

"By what means?"

"By unhallowed means; yet there are those who do not hesitate to employ them. The danger of such an operation is, of course, enormous."

"I perceive, Dr. Cairn, that a theory, covering the facts of my recent experiences, is forming in your mind."

"That is so. In order that I may obtain corroborative evidence, I should like to call at your place this evening. Suppose I come ostensibly to see Lady Lashmore?"

Lord Lashmore was watching the speaker.

"There is someone in my household whose suspicions you do not wish to arouse?" he suggested.

"There is. Shall we make it nine o'clock?"

"Why not come to dinner?"

"Thanks all the same, but I think it would serve my purpose better if I came later."

Dr. Cairn and his son dined alone together in Half-Moon Street that night.

"I saw Antony Ferrara in Regent Street to-day," said. Robert Cairn. "I was glad to see him."

Dr. Cairn raised his heavy brows.

"Why?" he asked.

"Well, I was half afraid that he might have left London."

"Paid a visit to Myra Duquesne in Inverness?"

"It would not have surprised me."

"Nor would it have surprised me, Rob, but I think he is stalking other game at present."

Robert Cairn looked up quickly.

"Lady Lashmore," he began—

"Well?" prompted his father.

"One of the Paul Pry brigade who fatten on scandal sent a veiled paragraph in to us at *The Planet* yesterday, linking Ferrara's name with Lady Lashmores.' Of course we didn't use it; he had come to the wrong market; but—Ferrara was with Lady Lashmore when I met him to-day."

"What of that?"

"It is not necessarily significant, of course; Lord Lashmore in all probability will outlive Ferrara, who looked even more pallid than usual."

"You regard him as an utterly unscrupulous fortune-hunter?"

"Certainly."

"Did Lady Lashmore appear to be in good health?"

"Perfectly."

"Ah!"

A silence fell, of some considerable duration, then:

"Antony Ferrara is a menace to society," said Robert Cairn. "When I meet the reptilian glance of those black eyes of his and reflect upon what the man has attempted—what he has done—my blood boils. It is tragically funny to think that in our new wisdom we have abolished the only laws that

could have touched him! He could not have existed in Ancient Chaldea, and would probably have been burnt at the stake even under Charles II.; but in this wise twentieth century he dallies in Regent Street with a prominent society beauty and laughs in the face of a man whom he has attempted to destroy!"

"Be very wary," warned Dr. Cairn. "Remember that if you died mysteriously to-morrow, Ferrara would be legally immune. We must wait, and watch. Can you return here to-night, at about ten o'clock?"

"I think I can manage to do so—yes."

"I shall expect you. Have you brought up to date your record of those events which we know of, together with my notes and explanations?"

"Yes, sir, I spent last evening upon the notes."

"There may be something to add. This record, Rob, one day will be a weapon to destroy an unnatural enemy. I will sign two copies to-night and lodge one at my bank."

X. The Laughter

Lady Lashmore proved to be far more beautiful than Dr. Cairn had anticipated. She was a true brunette with a superb figure and eyes like the darkest passion flowers. Her creamy skin had a golden quality, as though it had absorbed within its velvet texture something of the sunshine of the South.

She greeted Dr. Cairn without cordiality.

"I am delighted to find you looking so well, Lady Lashmore," said the doctor. "Your appearance quite confirms my opinion."

"Your opinion of what, Dr. Cairn?"

"Of the nature of your recent seizure. Sir Elwin Groves invited my opinion and I gave it."

Lady Lashmore paled perceptibly.

"Lord Lashmore, I know," she said, "was greatly concerned, but indeed it was nothing serious—"

"I quite agree. It was due to nervous excitement."

Lady Lashmore held a fan before her face.

"There have been recent happenings," she said—"as no doubt you are aware—which must have shaken anyone's nerves. Of course, I am familiar with your reputation, Dr. Cairn, as a psychical specialist—?"

"Pardon me, but from whom have you learnt of it?"

"From Mr. Ferrara," she answered simply. "He has assured me that you are the greatest living authority upon such matters."

Dr. Cairn turned his head aside.

"Ah!" he said grimly.

"And I want to ask you a question," continued Lady Lashmore. "Have you any idea, any idea at all respecting the cause of the wounds upon my husband's throat? Do you think them due to—something supernatural?"

Her voice shook, and her slight foreign accent became more marked.

"Nothing is supernatural," replied Dr. Cairn; "but I think they are due to something supernormal. I would suggest that possibly you have suffered from evil dreams recently?"

Lady Lashmore started wildly, and her eyes opened with a sort of sudden horror.

"How can you know?" she whispered. "How can you know! Oh, Dr. Cairn!" She laid her hand upon his arm—"if you can prevent those dreams; if you can assure me that I shall never dream them again—!"

It was a plea and a confession. This was what had lain behind her coldness—this horror which she had not dared to confide in another.

"Tell me," he said gently. "You have dreamt these dreams twice?"

She nodded, wide-eyed with wonder for his knowledge.

"On the occasions of your husband's illnesses?"

"Yes, yes!"

"What did you dream?"

"Oh! can I, dare I tell you!—"

"You must."

There was pity in his voice.

"I dreamt that I lay in some very dark cavern. I could hear the sea booming, apparently over my head. But above all the noise a voice was audible, calling to me—not by name; I cannot explain in what way; but calling, calling imperatively. I seemed to be clothed but scantily, in some kind of ragged garments; and upon my knees I crawled toward the voice, through a place where there were other living things that crawled also—things with many legs and clammy bodies…"

She shuddered and choked down an hysterical sob that was half a laugh.

"My hair hung dishevelled about me and in some inexplicable way—oh! am I going mad!—my head seemed to be detached from my living body! I was filled with a kind of unholy anger which I cannot describe. Also, I was consumed with thirst, and this thirst…"

"I think I understand," said Dr. Cairn quietly. "What followed?"

"An interval—quite blank—after which I dreamt again. Dr. Cairn, I *cannot* tell you of the dreadful, the blasphemous and foul thoughts, that then possessed me! I found myself resisting—resisting—something, some power that was dragging me back to that foul cavern with my thirst unslaked! I was frenzied; I dare not name, I tremble to think, of the ideas which filled my mind. Then, again came a blank, and I awoke."

She sat trembling. Dr. Cairn noted that she avoided his gaze.

"You awoke," he said, "on the first occasion, to find that your husband had met with a strange and dangerous accident?"

"There was—something else."

Lady Lashmore's voice had become a tremulous whisper.

"Tell me; don't be afraid."

She looked up; her magnificent eyes were wild with horror.

"I believe you know!" she breathed. "Do you?"

Dr. Cairn nodded.

"And on the second occasion," he said, "you awoke earlier?"

Lady Lashmore slightly moved her head.

"The dream was identical?"

"Yes."

"Excepting these two occasions, you never dreamt it before?"

"I dreamt *part* of it on several other occasions; or only remembered part of it on waking."

"Which part?"

"The first; that awful cavern—"

"And now, Lady Lashmore—you have recently been present at a spiritualistic *séance*."

She was past wondering at his power of inductive reasoning, and merely nodded.

"I suggest—I do not know—that the *séance* was held under the auspices of Mr. Antony Ferrara, ostensibly for amusement."

Another affirmative nod answered him.

"You proved to be mediumistic?"

It was admitted.

"And now, Lady Lashmore"—Dr. Cairn's face was very stern—"I will trouble you no further."

He prepared to depart; when—

"Dr. Cairn!" whispered Lady Lashmore, tremulously, "some dreadful thing, something that I cannot comprehend but that I fear and loathe with all my soul, has come to me. Oh—for pity's sake, give me a word of hope! Save for you, I am alone with a horror I cannot name. Tell me—"

At the door, he turned.

"Be brave," he said—and went out.

Lady Lashmore sat still as one who had looked upon Gorgon, her beautiful eyes yet widely opened and her face pale as death; for he had not even told her to hope.

Robert Cairn was sitting smoking in the library, a bunch of notes before him, when Dr. Cairn returned to Half-Moon Street. His face, habitually fresh coloured, was so pale that his son leapt up in alarm. But Dr. Cairn waved him away with a characteristic gesture of the hand.

"Sit down, Rob," he said, quietly; "I shall be all right in a moment. But I have just left a woman—a young woman and a beautiful woman—whom a fiend of hell has condemned to that which my mind refuses to contemplate."

Robert Cairn sat down again, watching his father.

"Make out a report of the following facts," continued the latter, beginning to pace up and down the room.

He recounted all that he had learnt of the history of the house of Dhoon and all that he had learnt of recent happenings from Lord and Lady Lashmore. His son wrote rapidly.

"And now," said the doctor, "for our conclusions. Mirza, the Polish Jewess, who became Lady Lashmore in 1615, practised sorcery in life and became, after death, a ghoul—one who sustained an unholy existence by unholy means—a vampire."

"But, sir! Surely that is but a horrible superstition of the Middle Ages!"

"Rob, I could take you to a castle not ten miles from Cracow in Poland where there are—certain relics, which would for ever settle your doubts respecting the existence of vampires. Let us proceed. The son of Mirza, Paul Dhoon, inherited the dreadful proclivities of his mother, but his shadowy existence was cut short in the traditional, and effective, manner. Him we may neglect.

"It is Mirza, the sorceress, who must engage our attention. She was decapitated by her husband. This punishment prevented her, in the unhallowed life which, for such as she, begins after ordinary decease, from practising the horrible rites of a vampire. Her headless body could not serve her as a vehicle for nocturnal wanderings, but the evil spirit of the woman might hope to gain control of some body more suitable.

"Nurturing an implacable hatred against all of the house of Dhoon, that spirit, disembodied, would frequently be drawn to the neighbourhood of Mirza's descendants, both by hatred and by affinity. Two horrible desires of the Spirit Mirza would be gratified if a Dhoon could be made her victim—the desire for blood and the desire for vengeance! The fate of Lord Lashmore would be sealed if that spirit could secure incarnation!"

Dr. Cairn paused, glancing at his son, who was writing at furious speed. Then—

"A magician more mighty and more evil than Mirza ever was or could be," he continued, "a master of the Black Art, expelled a woman's spirit from its throne and temporarily installed in its place the blood-lustful spirit of Mirza!"

"My God, sir!" cried Robert Cairn, and threw down his pencil. "I begin to understand!"

"Lady Lashmore," said Dr. Cairn, "since she was weak enough to consent to be present at a certain *séance*, has, from time to time, been *possessed*; she has been possessed by the spirit of a vampire! Obedient to the nameless cravings of that control, she has sought out Lord Lashmore, the last of the House of Dhoon. The horrible attack made, a mighty will which, throughout her temporary incarnation, has held her like a hound in leash, has dragged her from her prey, has forced her to remove, from the garments clothing her borrowed body, all traces of the deed, and has cast her out again to the pit of abomination where her headless trunk was thrown by the third Baron Lashmore!

"Lady Lashmore's brain retains certain memories. They have been received at the moment when possession has taken place and at the moment when the control has been cast out again. They thus are memories of some secret cavern near Dhoon Castle, where that headless but deathless body lies, and memories of the poignant moment when the vampire has been dragged back, her 'thirst unslaked,' by the ruling Will."

"Merciful God!" muttered Robert Cairn, "Merciful God, can such things be!"

"They can be—they are! Two ways have occurred to me of dealing with the matter," continued Dr. Cairn quietly. "One is to find that cavern and to kill, in the occult sense, by means of a stake, the vampire who lies there; the other which, I confess, might only result in the permanent 'possession' of

Lady Lashmore—is to get at the power which controls this disembodied spirit—kill Antony Ferrara!"

Robert Cairn went to the sideboard, and poured out brandy with a shaking hand.

"What's his object?" he whispered.

Dr. Cairn shrugged his shoulders.

"Lady Lashmore would be the wealthiest widow in society," he replied.

"*He* will know now," continued the younger man unsteadily, "that you are up against him. Have you—"

"I have told Lord Lashmore to lock, at night, not only his outer door but also that of his dressing-room. For the rest—?" he dropped into an easy-chair,—"I cannot face the facts, I—"

The telephone bell rang.

Dr. Cairn came to his feet as though he had been electrified; and as he raised the receiver to his ear, his son knew, by the expression on his face, from where the message came and something of its purport.

"Come with me," was all that he said, when he had replaced the instrument on the table.

They went out together. It was already past midnight, but a cab was found at the corner of Half-Moon Street, and within the space of five minutes they were at Lord Lashmore's house.

Excepting Chambers, Lord Lashmore's valet, no servants were to be seen.

"They ran away, sir, out of the house," explained the man, huskily, "when it happened."

Dr. Cairn delayed for no further questions, but raced upstairs, his son close behind him. Together they burst into Lord Lashmore's bedroom. But just within the door they both stopped, aghast.

Sitting bolt upright in bed was Lord Lashmore, his face a dingy grey and his open eyes, though filming over, yet faintly alight with a stark horror… dead. An electric torch was still gripped in his left hand.

Bending over someone who lay upon the carpet near the bedside they perceived Sir Elwin Groves. He looked up. Some little of his usual self-possession had fled.

"Ah, Cairn!" he jerked. "We've both come too late."

The prostrate figure was that of Lady Lashmore, a loose kimono worn over her night-robe. She was white and still and the physician had been

engaged in bathing a huge bruise upon her temple.

"She'll be all right," said Sir Elwin; "she has sustained a tremendous blow, as you see. But Lord Lashmore—"

Dr. Cairn stepped closer to the dead man.

"Heart," he said. "He died of sheer horror."

He turned to Chambers, who stood in the open doorway behind him.

"The dressing-room door is open," he said. "I had advised Lord Lashmore to lock it."

"Yes, sir; his lordship meant to, sir. But we found that the lock had been broken. It was to have been replaced to-morrow."

Dr. Cairn turned to his son.

"You hear?" he said. "No doubt you have some idea respecting which of the visitors to this unhappy house took the trouble to break that lock? It was to have been replaced to-morrow; hence the tragedy of to-night." He addressed Chambers again. "Why did the servants leave the house to-night?"

The man was shaking pitifully.

"It was the laughter, sir! the laughter! I can never forget it! I was sleeping in an adjoining room and I had the key of his lordship's door in case of need. But when I heard his lordship cry out—quick and loud, sir—like a man that's been stabbed—I jumped up to come to him. Then, as I was turning the doorknob—of my room, sir—someone, something, began to *laugh*! It was in here; it was in here, gentlemen! It wasn't—her ladyship; it wasn't like *any* woman. I can't describe it; but it woke up every soul in the house."

"When you came in?"

"I daren't come in, sir! I ran downstairs and called up Sir Elwin Groves. Before he came, all the rest of the household huddled on their clothes and went away—"

"It was I who found him," interrupted Sir Elwin—"as you see him now; with Lady Lashmore where she lies. I have 'phoned for nurses."

"Ah!" said Dr. Cairn; "I shall come back, Groves, but I have a small matter to attend to."

He drew his son from the room. On the stair:

"You understand?" he asked. "The spirit of Mirza came to him again, clothed in his wife's body. Lord Lashmore felt the teeth at his throat, awoke

instantly and struck out. As he did so, he turned the torch upon her, and recognised—his wife! His heart completed the tragedy, and so—to the laughter of the sorceress—passed the last of the house of Dhoon."

The cab was waiting. Dr. Cairn gave an address in Piccadilly, and the two entered. As the cab moved off, the doctor took a revolver from his pocket, with some loose cartridges, charged the five chambers, and quietly replaced the weapon in his pocket again.

One of the big doors of the block of chambers was found to be ajar, and a porter proved to be yet in attendance.

"Mr. Ferrara?" began Dr. Cairn.

"You are five minutes too late, sir," said the man. "He left by motor at ten past twelve. He's gone abroad, sir."

XI. Cairo

The exact manner in which mental stress will effect a man's physical health is often difficult to predict. Robert Cairn was in the pink of condition at the time that he left Oxford to take up his London appointment; but the tremendous nervous strain wrought upon him by this series of events wholly outside the radius of normal things had broken him up physically, where it might have left unscathed a more highly strung, though less physically vigorous man.

Those who have passed through a nerve storm such as this which had laid him low will know that convalescence seems like a welcome awakening from a dreadful dream. It was indeed in a state between awaking and dreaming that Robert Cairn took counsel with his father—the latter more pale than was his wont and somewhat anxious-eyed—and determined upon an Egyptian rest-cure.

"I have made it all right at the office, Rob," said Dr. Cairn. "In three weeks or so you will receive instructions at Cairo to write up a series of local articles. Until then, my boy, complete rest and—don't worry; above all, don't worry. You and I have passed through a saturnalia of horror, and you, less inured to horrors than I, have gone down. I don't wonder."

"Where is Antony Ferrara?"

Dr. Cairn shook his head and his eyes gleamed with a sudden anger. "For God's sake don't mention his name!" he said. "That topic is taboo, Rob. I may tell you, however, that he has left England."

In this unreal frame of mind, then, and as one but partly belonging to the world of things actual, Cairn found himself an invalid, who but yesterday had been a hale man; found himself shipped for Port Said; found himself entrained for Cairo; and with an awakening to the realities of life, an emerging from an ill-dream to lively interest in the novelties of Egypt, found himself following the red-jerseyed Shepheard's porter along the corridor of the train and out on to the platform.

A short drive through those singular streets where East meets West and mingles, in the sudden, violet dusk of Lower Egypt, and he was amid the bustle of the popular hotel.

Sime was there, whom he had last seen at Oxford, Sime the phlegmatic. He apologised for not meeting the train, but explained that his duties had rendered it impossible. Sime was attached temporarily to an archæological expedition as medical man, and his athletic and somewhat bovine appearance contrasted oddly with the unhealthy gauntness of Cairn.

"I only got in from Wasta ten minutes ago, Cairn. You must come out to the camp when I return; the desert air will put you on your feet again in no time."

Sime was unemotional, but there was concern in his voice and in his glance, for the change in Cairn was very startling. Although he knew something, if but very little, of certain happenings in London—gruesome happenings centering around the man called Antony Ferrara—he avoided any reference to them at the moment.

Seated upon the terrace, Robert Cairn studied the busy life in the street below with all the interest of a new arrival in the Capital of the Near East. More than ever, now, his illness and the things which had led up to it seemed to belong to a remote dream existence. Through the railings at his feet a hawker was thrusting fly-whisks, and imploring him in complicated English to purchase one. Vendors of beads, of fictitious "antiques," of sweetmeats, of what-not; fortune-tellers—and all that chattering horde which some obscure process of gravitation seems to hurl against the terrace of Shepheard's, buzzed about him. Carriages and motor cars, camels and donkeys mingled, in the Shâria Kâmel Pasha. Voices American, voices Anglo-Saxon, guttural German tones, and softly murmured Arabic merged into one indescribable chord of sound; but to Robert Cairn it was all unspeakably restful. He was quite contented to sit there sipping his whisky and soda, and smoking his pipe. Sheer idleness was good for him and exactly what he wanted, and idling amid that unique throng is idleness *de luxe*.

Sime watched him covertly, and saw that his face had acquired lines—lines which told of the fires through which he had passed. Something, it was evident—something horrible—had seared his mind. Considering the many indications of tremendous nervous disaster in Cairn, Sime wondered how near his companion had come to insanity, and concluded that he had stood upon the frontiers of that grim land of phantoms, and had only been plucked back in the eleventh hour.

Cairn glanced around with a smile, from the group of hawkers who solicited his attention upon the pavement below.

"This is a delightful scene," he said. "I could sit here for hours; but considering that it's some time after sunset it remains unusually hot, doesn't it?"

"Rather!" replied Sime. "They are expecting *Khamsîn*—the hot wind, you know. I was up the river a week ago and we struck it badly in Assouan. It grew as black as night and one couldn't breathe for sand. It's probably working down to Cairo."

"From your description I am not anxious to make the acquaintance of *Khamsîn*!"

Sime shook his head, knocking out his pipe into the ash-tray.

"This is a funny country," he said reflectively. "The most weird ideas prevail here to this day—ideas which properly belong to the Middle Ages. For instance"—he began to recharge the hot bowl—"it is not really time for *Khamsîn*, consequently the natives feel called upon to hunt up some explanation of its unexpected appearance. Their ideas on the subject are interesting, if idiotic. One of our Arabs (we are excavating in the Fayûm, you know), solemnly assured me yesterday that the hot wind had been caused by an Efreet, a sort of Arabian Nights' demon, who has arrived in Egypt!"

He laughed gruffly, but Cairn was staring at him with a curious expression. Sime continued:

"When I got to Cairo this evening I found news of the Efreet had preceded me. Honestly, Cairn, it is all over the town—the native town, I mean. All the shopkeepers in the Mûski are talking about it. If a puff of *Khamsîn* should come, I believe they would permanently shut up shop and hide in their cellars—if they have any! I am rather hazy on modern Egyptian architecture."

Cairn nodded his head absently.

"You laugh," he said, "but the active force of a superstition—what we call a superstition—is sometimes a terrible thing."

Sime stared.

"Eh!" The medical man had suddenly come uppermost; he recollected that this class of discussion was probably taboo.

"You may doubt the existence of Efreets," continued Cairn, "but neither you nor I can doubt the creative power of thought. If a trained hypnotist, by sheer concentration, can persuade his subject that the latter sits upon the brink of a river fishing when actually he sits upon a platform in a lecture-room, what result should you expect from a concentration of thousands of native minds upon the idea that an Efreet is visiting Egypt?"

Sime stared in a dull way peculiar to him.

"Rather a poser," he said. "I have a glimmer of a notion what you mean."

"Don't you think—"

"If you mean don't I think the result would be the creation of an Efreet, no, I don't!"

"I hardly mean that, either," replied Cairn, "but this wave of superstition cannot be entirely unproductive; all that thought energy directed to one point—"

Sime stood up.

"We shall get out of our depth," he replied conclusively. He considered the ground of discussion an unhealthy one; this was the territory adjoining that of insanity.

A fortune-teller from India proffered his services incessantly.

"*Imshi*! *imshi*!" growled Sime.

"Hold on," said Cairn smiling; "this chap is not an Egyptian; let us ask him if he has heard the rumour respecting the Efreet!"

Sime reseated himself rather unwillingly. The fortune-teller spread his little carpet and knelt down in order to read the palm of his hypothetical client, but Cairn waved him aside.

"I don't want my fortune told!" he said; "but I will give you your fee,"—with a smile at Sime—"for a few minutes' conversation."

"Yes, sir, yes, sir!" The Indian was all attention.

"Why"—Cairn pointed forensically at the fortune-teller—"why is *Khamsîn* come so early this year?"

The Indian spread his hands, palms upward.

"How should I know?" he replied in his soft, melodious voice. "I am not of Egypt; I can only say what is told to me by the Egyptians."

"And what is told to you?"

Sime rested his hands upon his knees, bending forward curiously. He was palpably anxious that Cairn should have confirmation of the Efreet story

from the Indian.

"They tell me, sir,"—the man's voice sank musically low—"that a thing very evil"—he tapped a long brown finger upon his breast—"not as I am"—he tapped Sime upon the knee—"not as he, your friend"—he thrust the long finger at Cairn—"not as you, sir; not a man at all, though something like a man! not having any father and mother—"

"You mean," suggested Sime, "a spirit?"

The fortune-teller shook his head.

"They tell me, sir, not a spirit—a man, but not as other men; a very, very bad man; one that the great king, long, long ago, the king you call Wise ____"

"Solomon?" suggested Cairn.

"Yes, yes, Suleyman!—one that he, when he banish all the tribe of the demons from earth—one that he not found."

"One he overlooked?" jerked Sime.

"Yes, yes, overlook! A very evil man, my gentlemen. They tell me he has come to Egypt. He come not from the sea, but across the great desert—"

"The Libyan Desert?" suggested Sime.

The man shook, his head, seeking for words.

"The Arabian Desert?"

"No, no! Away beyond, far up in Africa"—he waved his long arms dramatically—"far, far up beyond the Sûdan."

"The Sahara Desert?" proposed Sime.

"Yes, yes! it is Sahara Desert!—come across the Sahara Desert, and is come to Khartûm."

"How did he get there?" asked Cairn.

The Indian shrugged his shoulders.

"I cannot say, but next he come to Wady Halfa, then he is in Assouan, and from Assouan he come down to Luxor! Yesterday an Egyptian friend told me *Khamsîn* is in the Fayûm. Therefore *he* is there—the man of evil—for he bring the hot wind with him."

The Indian was growing impressive, and two American tourists stopped to listen to his words.

"To-night—to-morrow,"—he spoke now almost in a whisper, glancing about him as if apprehensive of being overheard—"he may be here, in

Cairo, bringing with him the scorching breath of the desert—the scorpion wind!"

He stood up, casting off the mystery with which he had invested his story, and smiling insinuatingly. His work was done; his fee was due. Sime rewarded him with five piastres, and he departed, bowing.

"You know, Sime—" Cairn began to speak, staring absently the while after the fortune-teller, as he descended the carpeted steps and rejoined the throng on the sidewalk below—"you know, if a man—anyone, could take advantage of such a wave of thought as this which is now sweeping through Egypt—if he could cause it to concentrate upon him, as it were, don't you think that it would enable him to transcend the normal, to do phenomenal things?"

"By what process should you propose to make yourself such a focus?"

"I was speaking impersonally, Sime. It might be possible—"

"It might be possible to dress for dinner," snapped Sime, "if we shut up talking nonsense! There's a carnival here to-night; great fun. Suppose we concentrate our brain-waves on another Scotch and soda?"

XII. The Mask of Set

Above the palm trees swept the jewelled vault of Egypt's sky, and set amid the clustering leaves gleamed little red electric lamps; fairy lanterns outlined the winding paths and paper Japanese lamps hung dancing in long rows, whilst in the centre of the enchanted garden a fountain spurned diamond spray high in the air, to fall back coolly plashing into the marble home of the golden carp. The rustling of innumerable feet upon the sandy pathway and the ceaseless murmur of voices, with pealing laughter rising above all, could be heard amid the strains of the military band ensconced in a flower-covered arbour.

Into the brightly lighted places and back into the luminous shadows came and went fantastic forms. Sheikhs there were with flowing robes, dragomans who spoke no Arabic, Sultans and priests of Ancient Egypt, going arm-in-arm. Dancing girls of old Thebes, and harem ladies in silken trousers and high-heeled red shoes. Queens of Babylon and Cleopatras, many Geishas and desert Gypsies mingled, specks in a giant kaleidoscope. The thick carpet of confetti rustled to the tread; girls ran screaming before those who pursued them armed with handfuls of the tiny paper disks. Pipers of a Highland regiment marched piping through the throng, their Scottish kilts seeming wildly incongruous amid such a scene. Within the hotel, where the mosque lanterns glowed, one might catch a glimpse of the heads of dancers gliding shadowlike.

"A tremendous crowd," said Sime, "considering it is nearly the end of the season."

Three silken ladies wearing gauzy white *yashmaks* confronted Cairn and the speaker. A gleaming of jewelled fingers there was and Cairn found himself half-choked with confetti, which filled his eyes, his nose, his ears, and of which quite a liberal amount found access to his mouth. The three ladies of the *yashmak* ran screaming from their vengeance-seeking victims, Sime pursuing two, and Cairn hard upon the heels of the third. Amid this scene of riotous carnival all else was forgotten, and only the madness, the infectious madness of the night, claimed his mind. In and out of the

strangely attired groups darted his agile quarry, all but captured a score of times, but always eluding him.

Sime he had hopelessly lost, as around fountain and flower-bed, arbour and palm trunk he leapt in pursuit of the elusive *yashmak*.

Then, in a shadowed corner of the garden, he trapped her. Plunging his hand into the bag of confetti, which he carried, he leapt, exulting, to his revenge: when a sudden gust of wind passed sibilantly through the palm tops, and glancing upward, Cairn saw that the blue sky was overcast and the stars gleaming dimly, as through a veil. That moment of hesitancy proved fatal to his project, for with a little excited scream the girl dived under his outstretched arm and fled back towards the fountain. He turned to pursue again, when a second puff of wind, stronger than the first, set waving the palm fronds and showered dry leaves upon the confetti carpet of the garden. The band played loudly, the murmur of conversation rose to something like a roar, but above it whistled the increasing breeze, and there was a sort of grittiness in the air.

Then, proclaimed by a furious lashing of the fronds above, burst the wind in all its fury. It seemed to beat down into the garden in waves of heat. Huge leaves began to fall from the tree tops and the mast-like trunks bent before the fury from the desert. The atmosphere grew hazy with impalpable dust; and the stars were wholly obscured.

Commenced a stampede from the garden. Shrill with fear, rose a woman's scream from the heart of the throng:

"A scorpion! a scorpion!"

Panic threatened, but fortunately the doors were wide, so that, without disaster the whole fantastic company passed into the hotel; and even the military band retired.

Cairn perceived that he alone remained in the garden, and glancing along the path in the direction of the fountain, he saw a blotchy drab creature, fully four inches in length, running zigzag towards him. It was a huge scorpion; but, even as he leapt forward to crush it, it turned and crept in amid the tangle of flowers beside the path, where it was lost from view.

The scorching wind grew momentarily fiercer, and Cairn, entering behind a few straggling revellers, found something ominous and dreadful in its sudden fury. At the threshold, he turned and looked back upon the gaily lighted garden. The paper lamps were thrashing in the wind, many

extinguished; others were in flames; a number of electric globes fell from their fastenings amid the palm tops, and burst bomb-like upon the ground. The pleasure garden was now a battlefield, beset with dangers, and he fully appreciated the anxiety of the company to get within doors. Where chrysanthemum and *yashmak* turban and *tarboosh*, uraeus and Indian plume had mingled gaily, no soul remained; but yet—he was in error… someone did remain.

As if embodying the fear that in a few short minutes had emptied the garden, out beneath the waving lanterns, the flying *débris*, the whirling dust, pacing sombrely from shadow to light, and to shadow again, advancing towards the hotel steps, came the figure of one sandalled, and wearing the short white tunic of Ancient Egypt. His arms were bare, and he carried a long staff; but rising hideously upon his shoulders was a crocodile-mask, which seemed to grin—the mask of Set, Set the Destroyer, God of the underworld.

Cairn, alone of all the crowd, saw the strange figure, for the reason that Cairn alone faced towards the garden. The gruesome mask seemed to fascinate him; he could not take his gaze from that weird advancing god; he felt impelled hypnotically to stare at the gleaming eyes set in the saurian head. The mask was at the foot of the steps, and still Cairn stood rigid. When, as the sandalled foot was set upon the first step, a breeze, dust-laden, and hot as from a furnace door, blew fully into the hotel, blinding him. A chorus arose from the crowd at his back; and many voices cried out for doors to be shut. Someone tapped him on the shoulder, and spun him about.

"By God!"—it was Sime who now had him by the arm—"*Khamsîn* has come with a vengeance! They tell me that they have never had anything like it!"

The native servants were closing and fastening the doors. The night was now as black as Erebus, and the wind was howling about the building with the voices of a million lost souls. Cairn glanced back across his shoulder. Men were drawing heavy curtains across the doors and windows.

"They have shut him out, Sime!" he said.

Sime stared in his dull fashion.

"You surely saw him?" persisted Cairn irritably; "the man in the mask of Set—he was coming in just behind me."

Sime strode forward, pulled the curtains aside, and peered out into the deserted garden.

"Not a soul, old man," he declared. "You must have seen the Efreet!"

XIII. The Scorpion Wind

This sudden and appalling change of weather had sadly affected the mood of the gathering. That part of the carnival planned to take place in the garden was perforce abandoned, together with the firework display. A halfhearted attempt was made at dancing, but the howling of the wind, and the omnipresent dust, perpetually reminded the pleasure-seekers that *Khamsîn* raged without—raged with a violence unparalleled in the experience of the oldest residents. This was a full-fledged sand-storm, a terror of the Sahara descended upon Cairo.

But there were few departures, although many of the visitors who had long distances to go, especially those from Mena House, discussed the advisability of leaving before this unique storm should have grown even worse. The general tendency, though, was markedly gregarious; safety seemed to be with the crowd, amid the gaiety, where music and laughter were, rather than in the sand-swept streets.

"Guess we've outstayed our welcome!" confided an American lady to Sime. "Egypt wants to drive us all home now."

"Possibly," he replied with a smile. "The season has run very late, this year, and so this sort of thing is more or less to be expected."

The orchestra struck up a lively one-step, and a few of the more enthusiastic dancers accepted the invitation, but the bulk of the company thronged around the edge of the floor, acting as spectators.

Cairn and Sime wedged a way through the heterogeneous crowd to the American Bar.

"I prescribe a 'tango,'" said Sime.

"A 'tango' is—?"

"A 'tango,'" explained Sime, "is a new kind of cocktail sacred to this buffet. Try it. It will either kill you or cure you."

Cairn smiled rather wanly.

"I must confess that I need bucking up a bit," he said: "that confounded sand seems to have got me by the throat."

Sime briskly gave his orders to the bar attendant.

"You know," pursued Cairn, "I cannot get out of my head the idea that there was someone wearing a crocodile mask in the garden a while ago."

"Look here," growled Sime, studying the operations of the cocktail manufacturer, "suppose there were—what about it?"

"Well, it's odd that nobody else saw him."

"I suppose it hasn't occurred to you that the fellow might have removed his mask?"

Cairn shook his head slowly.

"I don't think so," he declared; "I haven't seen him anywhere in the hotel."

"Seen him?" Sime turned his dull gaze upon the speaker. "How should you know him?"

Cairn raised his hand to his forehead in an oddly helpless way.

"No, of course not—it's very extraordinary."

They took their seats at a small table, and in mutual silence loaded and lighted their pipes. Sime, in common with many young and enthusiastic medical men, had theories—theories of that revolutionary sort which only harsh experience can shatter. Secretly he was disposed to ascribe all the ills to which flesh is heir primarily to a disordered nervous system. It was evident that Cairn's mind persistently ran along a particular groove; something lay back of all this erratic talk; he had clearly invested the Mask of Set with a curious individuality.

"I gather that you had a stiff bout of it in London?" Sime said suddenly.

Cairn nodded.

"Beastly stiff. There is a lot of sound reason in your nervous theory, Sime. It was touch and go with me for days, I am told; yet, pathologically, I was a hale man. That would seem to show how nerves can kill. Just a series of shocks—horrors—one piled upon another, did as much for me as influenza, pneumonia, and two or three other ailments together could have done."

Sime shook his head wisely; this was in accordance with his ideas.

"You know Antony Ferrara?" continued Cairn. "Well, he has done this for me. His damnable practices are worse than any disease. Sime, the man is a pestilence! Although the law cannot touch him, although no jury can convict him—he is a murderer. He controls—forces—"

Sime was watching him intently.

"It will give you some idea, Sime, of the pitch to which things had come, when I tell you that my father drove to Ferrara's rooms one night, with a loaded revolver in his pocket—"

"For"—Sime hesitated—"for protection?"

"No." Cairn leant forward across the table—"to shoot him, Sime, shoot him on sight, as one shoots a mad dog!"

"Are you serious?"

"As God is my witness, if Antony Ferrara had been in his rooms that night, my father would have killed him!"

"It would have been a shocking scandal."

"It would have been a martyrdom. The man who removes Antony Ferrara from the earth will be doing mankind a service worthy of the highest reward. He is unfit to live. Sometimes I cannot believe that he does live; I expect to wake up and find that he was a figure of a particularly evil dream."

"This incident—the call at his rooms—occurred just before your illness?"

"The thing which he had attempted that night was the last straw, Sime; it broke me down. From the time that he left Oxford, Antony Ferrara has pursued a deliberate course of crime, of crime so cunning, so unusual, and based upon such amazing and unholy knowledge that no breath of suspicion has touched him. Sime, you remember a girl I told you about at Oxford one evening, a girl who came to visit him?"

Sime nodded slowly.

"Well—he killed her! Oh! there is no doubt about it; I saw her body in the hospital."

"*How* had he killed her, then?"

"How? Only he and the God who permits him to exist can answer that, Sime. He killed her without coming anywhere near her—and he killed his adoptive father, Sir Michael Ferrara, by the same unholy means!"

Sime watched him, but offered no comment.

"It was hushed up, of course; there is no existing law which could be used against him."

"*Existing* law?"

"They are ruled out, Sime, the laws that *could* have reached him; but he would have been burnt at the stake in the Middle Ages!"

"I see." Sime drummed his fingers upon the table. "You had those ideas about him at Oxford; and does Dr. Cairn seriously believe the same?"

"He does. So would you—you could not doubt it, Sime, not for a moment, if you had seen what we have seen!" His eyes blazed into a sudden fury, suggestive of his old, robust self. "He tried night after night, by means of the same accursed sorcery, which everyone thought buried in the ruins of Thebes, to kill *me*! He projected—things—"

"Suggested these—things, to your mind?"

"Something like that. I saw, or thought I saw, and smelt—pah!—I seem to smell them now!—beetles, mummy-beetles, you know, from the skull of a mummy! My rooms were thick with them. It brought me very near to Bedlam, Sime. Oh! it was not merely imaginary. My father and I caught him red-handed." He glanced across at the other. "You read of the death of Lord Lashmore? It was just after you came out."

"Yes—heart."

"It was his heart, yes—but Ferrara was responsible! That was the business which led my father to drive to Ferrara's rooms with a loaded revolver in his pocket."

The wind was shaking the windows, and whistling about the building with demoniacal fury as if seeking admission; the band played a popular waltz; and in and out of the open doors came and went groups representative of many ages and many nationalities.

"Ferrara," began Sime slowly, "was always a detestable man, with his sleek black hair, and ivory face. Those long eyes of his had an expression which always tempted me to hit him. Sir Michael, if what you say is true—and after all, Cairn, it only goes to show how little we know of the nervous system—literally took a viper to his bosom."

"He did. Antony Ferrara was his adopted son, of course; God knows to what evil brood he really belongs."

Both were silent for a while. Then:

"Gracious heavens!"

Cairn started to his feet so wildly as almost to upset the table.

"Look, Sime! look!" he cried.

Sime was not the only man in the bar to hear, and to heed his words. Sime, looking in the direction indicated by Cairn's extended finger, received a vague impression that a grotesque, long-headed figure had appeared

momentarily in the doorway opening upon the room where the dancers were; then it was gone again, if it had ever been there, and he was supporting Cairn, who swayed dizzily, and had become ghastly pale. Sime imagined that the heated air had grown suddenly even more heated. Curious eyes were turned upon, his companion, who now sank back into his chair, muttering:

"The Mask, the Mask!"

"I think I saw the chap who seems to worry you so much," said Sime soothingly. "Wait here; I will tell the waiter to bring you a dose of brandy; and whatever you do, don't get excited."

He made for the door, pausing and giving an order to a waiter on his way, and pushed into the crowd outside. It was long past midnight, and the gaiety, which had been resumed, seemed of a forced and feverish sort. Some of the visitors were leaving, and a breath of hot wind swept in from the open doors.

A pretty girl wearing a *yashmak*, who, with two similarly attired companions, was making her way to the entrance, attracted his attention; she seemed to be on the point of swooning. He recognised the trio for the same that had pelted Cairn and himself with confetti earlier in the evening.

"The sudden heat has affected your friend," he said, stepping up to them. "My name is Dr. Sime; may I offer you my assistance?"

The offer was accepted, and with the three he passed out on to the terrace, where the dust grated beneath the tread, and helped the fainting girl into an *arabîyeh*. The night was thunderously black, the heat almost insufferable, and the tall palms in front of the hotel bowed before the might of the scorching wind.

As the vehicle drove off, Sime stood for a moment looking after it. His face was very grave, for there was a look in the bright eyes of the girl in the *yashmak* which, professionally, he did not like. Turning up the steps, he learnt from the manager that several visitors had succumbed to the heat. There was something furtive in the manner of his informant's glance, and Sime looked at him significantly.

"*Khamsîn* brings clouds of septic dust with it," he said. "Let us hope that these attacks are due to nothing more than the unexpected rise in the temperature."

An air of uneasiness prevailed now throughout the hotel. The wind had considerably abated, and crowds were leaving, pouring from the steps into the deserted street, a dreamlike company.

Colonel Royland took Sime aside, as the latter was making his way back to the buffet. The Colonel, whose regiment was stationed at the Citadel, had known Sime almost from childhood.

"You know, my boy," he said, "I should never have allowed Eileen" (his daughter) "to remain in Cairo, if I had foreseen this change in the weather. This infernal wind, coming right through the native town, is loaded with infection."

"Has it affected her, then?" asked Sime anxiously.

"She nearly fainted in the ball-room," replied the Colonel. "Her mother took her home half an hour ago. I looked for you everywhere, but couldn't find you."

"Quite a number have succumbed," said Sime.

"Eileen seemed to be slightly hysterical," continued the Colonel. "She persisted that someone wearing a crocodile mask had been standing beside her at the moment that she was taken ill."

Sime started; perhaps Cairn's story was not a matter of imagination after all.

"There is someone here, dressed like that, I believe," he replied, with affected carelessness. "He seems to have frightened several people. Any idea who he is?"

"My dear chap!" cried the Colonel, "I have been searching the place for him! But I have never once set eyes upon him. I was about to ask if *you* knew anything about it!"

Sime returned to the table where Cairn was sitting. The latter seemed to have recovered somewhat; but he looked far from well. Sime stared at him critically.

"I should turn in," he said, "if I were you. *Khamsîn* is playing the deuce with people. I only hope it does not justify its name and blow for fifty days."

"Have you seen the man in the mask!" asked Cairn.

"No," replied Sime, "but he's here alright; others have seen him."

Cairn stood up rather unsteadily, and with Sime made his way through the moving crowd to the stairs. The band was still playing, but the cloud of

gloom which had settled upon the place, refused to be dissipated.

"Good-night, Cairn," said Sime, "see you in the morning."

Robert Cairn, with aching head and a growing sensation of nausea, paused on the landing, looking down into the court below. He could not disguise from himself that he felt ill, not nervously ill as in London, but physically sick. This superheated air was difficult to breathe; it seemed to rise in waves from below.

Then, from a weary glancing at the figures beneath him, his attitude changed to one of tense watching.

A man, wearing the crocodile mask of Set, stood by a huge urn containing a palm, looking up to the landing!

Cairn's weakness left him, and in its place came an indescribable anger, a longing to drive his fist into that grinning mask. He turned and ran lightly down the stairs, conscious of a sudden glow of energy. Reaching the floor, he saw the mask making across the hall, in the direction of the outer door. As rapidly as possible, for he could not run, without attracting undesirable attention, Cairn followed. The figure of Set passed out on to the terrace, but when Cairn in turn swung open the door, his quarry had vanished.

Then, in an *arabîyeh* just driving off, he detected the hideous mask. Hatless as he was, he ran down the steps and threw himself into another. The carriage-controller was in attendance, and Cairn rapidly told him to instruct the driver to follow the *arabîyeh* which had just left. The man lashed up his horses, turned the carriage, and went galloping on after the retreating figure. Past the Esbekîya Gardens they went, through several narrow streets, and on to the quarter of the Mûski. Time after time he thought he had lost the carriage ahead, but his own driver's knowledge of the tortuous streets enabled him always to overtake it again. They went rocking along lanes so narrow that with outstretched arms one could almost have touched the walls on either side; past empty shops and unlighted houses. Cairn had not the remotest idea of his whereabouts, save that he was evidently in the district of the bazaars. A right-angled corner was abruptly negotiated—and there, ahead of him, stood the pursued vehicle! The driver was turning his horses around, to return; his fare was disappearing from sight into the black shadows of a narrow alley on the left.

Cairn leaped from the *arabîyeh*, shouting to the man to wait, and went dashing down the sloping lane after the retreating figure. A sort of blind

fury possessed him, but he never paused to analyse it, never asked himself by what right he pursued this man, what wrong the latter had done him. His action was wholly unreasoning; he knew that he wished to overtake the wearer of the mask and to tear it from his head; upon that he acted!

He discovered that despite the tropical heat of the night, he was shuddering with cold, but he disregarded this circumstance, and ran on.

The pursued stopped before an iron-studded door, which was opened instantly; he entered as the runner came up with him. And, before the door could be reclosed, Cairn thrust his way in.

Blackness, utter blackness, was before him. The figure which he had pursued seemed to have been swallowed up. He stumbled on, gropingly, hands outstretched, then fell—fell, as he realised in the moment of falling, down a short flight of stone steps.

Still amid utter blackness, he got upon his feet, shaken but otherwise unhurt by his fall. He turned about, expecting to see some glimmer of light from the stairway, but the blackness was unbroken. Silence and gloom hemmed him in. He stood for a moment, listening intently.

A shaft of light pierced the darkness, as a shutter was thrown open. Through an iron-barred window the light shone; and with the light came a breath of stifling perfume. That perfume carried his imagination back instantly to a room at Oxford, and he advanced and looked through into the place beyond. He drew a swift breath, clutched the bars, and was silent—stricken speechless.

He looked into a large and lofty room, lighted by several hanging lamps. It had a carpeted divan at one end and was otherwise scantily furnished, in the Eastern manner. A silver incense-burner smoked upon a large praying-carpet, and by it stood the man in the crocodile mask. An Arab girl, fantastically attired, who had evidently just opened the shutters, was now helping him to remove the hideous head-dress.

She presently untied the last of the fastenings and lifted the thing from the man's shoulders, moving away with the gliding step of the Oriental, and leaving him standing there in his short white tunic, bare-legged and sandalled.

The smoke of the incense curled upward and played around the straight, slim figure, drew vaporous lines about the still, ivory face—the handsome, sinister face, sometimes partly veiling the long black eyes and sometimes

showing them in all their unnatural brightness. So the man stood, looking towards the barred window.

It was Antony Ferrara!

"Ah, dear Cairn—" the husky musical voice smote upon Cairn's ears as the most hated sound in nature—"you have followed me. Not content with driving me from London, you would also render Cairo—my dear Cairo—untenable for me."

Cairn clutched the bars but was silent.

"How wrong of you, Cairn!" the soft voice mocked. "This attention is so harmful—to you. Do you know, Cairn, the Sudanese formed the extraordinary opinion that I was an *efreet*, and this strange reputation has followed me right down the Nile. Your father, my dear friend, has studied these odd matters, and he would tell you that there is no power, in Nature, higher than the human will. Actually, Cairn, they have ascribed to me the direction of the *Khamsîn*, and so many worthy Egyptians have made up their minds that I travel with the storm—or that the storm follows me—that something of the kind has really come to pass! Or is it merely coincidence, Cairn? Who can say?"

Motionless, immobile, save for a slow smile, Antony Ferrara stood, and Cairn kept his eyes upon the evil face, and with trembling hands clutched the bars.

"It is certainly odd, is it not," resumed the taunting voice, "that *Khamsîn*, so violent, too, should thus descend upon the Cairene season? I only arrived from the Fayûm this evening, Cairn, and, do you know, they have the pestilence there! I trust the hot wind does not carry it to Cairo; there are so many distinguished European and American visitors here. It would be a thousand pities!"

Cairn released his grip of the bars, raised his clenched fists above his head, and in a voice and with a maniacal fury that were neither his own, cursed the man who stood there mocking him. Then he reeled, fell, and remembered no more.

"All right, old man—you'll do quite nicely now."

It was Sime speaking.

Cairn struggled upright… and found himself in bed! Sime was seated beside him.

"Don't talk!" said Sime, "you're in hospital! I'll do the talking; you listen. I saw you bolt out of Shepheard's last night—shut up! I followed, but lost you. We got up a search party, and with the aid of the man who had driven you, ran you to earth in a dirty alley behind the mosque of El-Azhar. Four kindly mendicants, who reside upon the steps of the establishment, had been awakened by your blundering in among them. They were holding you —yes, you were raving pretty badly. You are a lucky man, Cairn. You were inoculated before you left home?"

Cairn nodded weakly.

"Saved you. Be all right in a couple of days. That damned *Khamsîn* has brought a whiff of the plague from somewhere! Curiously enough, over fifty per cent. of the cases spotted so far are people who were at the carnival! Some of them, Cairn—but we won't discuss that now. I was afraid of it, last night. That's why I kept my eye on you. My boy, you were delirious when you bolted out of the hotel!"

"Was I?" said Cairn wearily, and lay back on the pillow. "Perhaps I was."

XIV. Dr. Cairn Arrives

Dr. Bruce Cairn stepped into the boat which was to take him ashore, and as it swung away from the side of the liner sought to divert his thoughts by a contemplation of the weird scene. Amid the smoky flare of many lights, amid rising clouds of dust, a line of laden toilers was crawling ant-like from the lighters into the bowels of the big ship; and a second line, unladen, was descending by another gangway. Above, the jewelled velvet of the sky swept in a glorious arc; beyond, the lights of Port Said broke through the black curtain of the night, and the moving ray from the lighthouse intermittently swept the harbour waters; whilst, amid the indescribable clamour, the grimily picturesque turmoil, so characteristic of the place, the liner took in coal for her run to Rangoon.

Dodging this way and that, rounding the sterns of big ships, and disputing the water-way with lesser craft, the boat made for shore.

The usual delay at the Custom House, the usual soothing of the excited officials in the usual way, and his *arabîyeh* was jolting Dr. Cairn through the noise and the smell of those rambling streets, a noise and a smell entirely peculiar to this clearing-house of the Near East.

He accepted the room which was offered to him at the hotel, without troubling to inspect it, and having left instructions that he was to be called in time for the early train to Cairo, he swallowed a whisky and soda at the buffet, and wearily ascended the stairs. There were tourists in the hotel, English and American, marked by a gaping wonderment, and loud with plans of sightseeing; but Port Said, nay all Egypt, had nothing of novelty to offer Dr. Cairn. He was there at great inconvenience; a practitioner of his repute may not easily arrange to quit London at a moment's notice. But the business upon which he was come was imperative. For him the charm of the place had not existence, but somewhere in Egypt his son stood in deadly peril, and Dr. Cairn counted the hours that yet divided them. His soul was up in arms against the man whose evil schemes had led to his presence in Port Said, at a time when many sufferers required his ministrations in Half-Moon Street. He was haunted by a phantom, a ghoul in human shape; Antony Ferrara, the adopted son of his dear friend, the adopted son, who

had murdered his adopter, who whilst guiltless in the eyes of the law, was blood-guilty in the eyes of God!

Dr. Cairn switched on the light and seated himself upon the side of the bed, knitting his brows and staring straight before him, with an expression in his clear grey eyes whose significance he would have denied hotly, had any man charged him with it. He was thinking of Antony Ferrara's record; the victims of this fiendish youth (for Antony Ferrara was barely of age) seemed to stand before him with hands stretched out appealingly.

"You alone," they seemed to cry, "know who and what he is! You alone know of our awful wrongs; you alone can avenge them!"

And yet he had hesitated! It had remained for his own flesh and blood to be threatened ere he had taken decisive action. The viper had lain within his reach, and he had neglected to set his heel upon it. Men and women had suffered and had died of its venom; and he had not crushed it. Then Robert, his son, had felt the poison fang, and Dr. Cairn, who had hesitated to act upon the behalf of all humanity, had leapt to arms. He charged himself with a parent's selfishness, and his conscience would hear no defence.

Dimly, the turmoil from the harbour reached him where he sat. He listened dully to the hooting of a syren—that of some vessel coming out of the canal.

His thoughts were evil company, and, with a deep sigh, he rose, crossed the room and threw open the double windows, giving access to the balcony.

Port Said, a panorama of twinkling lights, lay beneath him. The beam from the lighthouse swept the town searchingly like the eye of some pagan god lustful for sacrifice. He imagined that he could hear the shouting of the gangs coaling the liner in the harbour; but the night was full of the remote murmuring inseparable from that gateway of the East. The streets below, white under the moon, looked empty and deserted, and the hotel beneath him gave up no sound to tell of the many birds of passage who sheltered within it. A stunning sense of his loneliness came to him; his physical loneliness was symbolic of that which characterised his place in the world. He, alone, had the knowledge and the power to crush Antony Ferrara. He, alone, could rid the world of the unnatural menace embodied in the person bearing that name.

The town lay beneath his eyes, but now he saw nothing of it; before his mental vision loomed—exclusively—the figure of a slim and strangely

handsome young man, having jet black hair, lustreless, a face of uniform ivory hue, long dark eyes wherein lurked lambent fires, and a womanish grace expressed in his whole bearing and emphasised by his long white hands. Upon a finger of the left hand gleamed a strange green stone.

Antony Ferrara! In the eyes of this solitary traveller, who stood looking down upon Port Said, that figure filled the entire landscape of Egypt!

With a weary sigh, Dr. Cairn turned and began to undress. Leaving the windows open, he switched off the light and got into bed. He was very weary, with a weariness rather of the spirit than of the flesh, but it was of that sort which renders sleep all but impossible. Around and about one fixed point his thoughts circled; in vain he endeavoured to forget, for a while, Antony Ferrara and the things connected with him. Sleep was imperative, if he would be in fit condition to cope with the matters which demanded his attention in Cairo.

Yet sleep defied him. Every trifling sound from the harbour and the canal seemed to rise upon the still air to his room. Through a sort of mist created by the mosquito curtains, he could see the open windows, and look out upon the stars. He found himself studying the heavens with sleepless eyes, and idly working out the constellations visible. Then one very bright star attracted the whole of his attention, and, with the dogged persistency of insomnia, he sought to place it, but could not determine to which group it belonged.

So he lay with his eyes upon the stars until the other veiled lamps of heaven became invisible, and the patch of sky no more than a setting for that one white orb.

In this contemplation he grew restful; his thoughts ceased feverishly to race along that one hateful groove; the bright star seemed to soothe him. As a result of his fixed gazing, it now appeared to have increased in size. This was a common optical delusion, upon which he scarcely speculated at all. He recognised the welcome approach of sleep, and deliberately concentrated his mind upon the globe of light.

Yes, a globe of light indeed—for now it had assumed the dimensions of a lesser moon; and it seemed to rest in the space between the open windows. Then, he thought that it crept still nearer. The realities—the bed, the mosquito curtain, the room—were fading, and grateful slumber approached, and weighed upon his eyes in the form of that dazzling globe. The feeling

of contentment was the last impression which he had, ere, with the bright star seemingly suspended just beyond the netting, he slept.

XV. The Witch-Queen

A man mentally over-tired sleeps either dreamlessly, or dreams with a vividness greater than that characterising the dreams of normal slumber. Dr. Cairn dreamt a vivid dream.

He dreamt that he was awakened by the sound of a gentle rapping. Opening his eyes, he peered through the cloudy netting. He started up, and wrenched back the curtain. The rapping was repeated; and peering again across the room, he very distinctly perceived a figure upon the balcony by the open window. It was that of a woman who wore the black silk dress and the white *yashmak* of the Moslem, and who was bending forward looking into the room.

"Who is there?" he called. "What do you want?"

"*S—sh*!"

The woman raised her hand to her veiled lips, and looked right and left as if fearing to disturb the occupants of the adjacent rooms.

Dr. Cairn reached out for his dressing-gown which lay upon the chair beside the bed, threw it over his shoulders, and stepped out upon the floor. He stooped and put on his slippers, never taking his eyes from the figure at the window. The room was flooded with moonlight.

He began to walk towards the balcony, when the mysterious visitor spoke.

"You are Dr. Cairn?"

The words were spoken in the language of dreams; that is to say, that although he understood them perfectly, he knew that they had not been uttered in the English language, nor in any language known to him; yet, as is the way with one who dreams, he had understood.

"I am he," he said. "Who are you?"

"Make no noise, but follow me quickly. Someone is very ill."

There was sincerity in the appeal, spoken in the softest, most silvern tone which he had ever heard. He stood beside the veiled woman, and met the glance of her dark eyes with a consciousness of some magnetic force in the glance, which seemed to set his nerves quivering.

"Why do you come to the window? How do you know—"

The visitor raised her hand again to her lips. It was of a gleaming ivory colour, and the long tapered fingers were laden with singular jewellery—exquisite enamel work, which he knew to be Ancient Egyptian, but which did not seem out of place in this dream adventure.

"I was afraid to make any unnecessary disturbance," she replied. "Please do not delay, but come at once."

Dr. Cairn adjusted his dressing-gown, and followed the veiled messenger along the balcony. For a dream city, Port Said appeared remarkably substantial, as it spread out at his feet, its dingy buildings whitened by the moonlight. But his progress was dreamlike, for he seemed to glide past many windows, around the corner of the building, and, without having consciously exerted any physical effort, found his hands grasped by warm jewelled fingers, found himself guided into some darkened room, and then, possessed by that doubting which sometimes comes in dreams, found himself hesitating. The moonlight did not penetrate to the apartment in which he stood, and the darkness about him was impenetrable.

But the clinging fingers did not release their hold, and vaguely aware that he was acting in a manner which might readily be misconstrued, he nevertheless allowed his unseen guide to lead him forward.

Stairs were descended in phantom silence—many stairs. The coolness of the air suggested that they were outside the hotel. But the darkness remained complete. Along what seemed to be a stone-paved passage they advanced mysteriously, and by this time Dr. Cairn was wholly resigned to the strangeness of his dream.

Then, although the place lay in blackest shadow, he saw that they were in the open air, for the starry sky swept above them.

It was a narrow street—at points, the buildings almost met above—wherein, he now found himself. In reality, had he been in possession of his usual faculties, awake, he would have asked himself how this veiled woman had gained admittance to the hotel, and why she had secretly led him out from it. But the dreamer's mental lethargy possessed him, and, with the blind faith of a child, he followed on, until he now began vaguely to consider the personality of his guide.

She seemed to be of no more than average height, but she carried herself with unusual grace, and her progress was marked by a certain hauteur. At the point where a narrow lane crossed that which they were traversing the

veiled figure was silhouetted for a moment against the light of the moon, and through the gauze-like fabric, he perceived the outlines of a perfect shape. His vague wonderment, concerned itself now with the ivory, jewel-laden hands. His condition differed from the normal dream state, in that he was not entirely resigned to the anomalous.

Misty doubts were forming, when his dream guide paused before a heavy door of a typical native house which once had been of some consequence, and which faced the entrance to a mosque, indeed lay in the shadow of the minaret. It was opened from within, although she gave no perceptible signal, and its darkness, to Dr. Cairn's dulled perceptions, seemed to swallow them both up. He had an impression of a trap raised, of stone steps descended, of a new darkness almost palpable.

The gloom of the place effected him as a mental blank, and, when a bright light shone out, it seemed to mark the opening of a second dream phase. From where the light came, he knew not, cared not, but it illuminated a perfectly bare room, with a floor of native mud bricks, a plastered wall, and wood-beamed ceiling. A tall sarcophagus stood upright against the wall before him; its lid leant close beside it… and his black robed guide, her luminous eyes looking straightly over the yashmak, stood rigidly upright-within it!

She raised the jewelled hands, and with a swift movement discarded robe and *yashmak*, and stood before him, in the clinging draperies of an ancient queen, wearing the leopard skin and the *uraeus*, and carrying the flail of royal Egypt!

Her pale face formed a perfect oval; the long almond eyes had an evil beauty which seemed to chill; and the brilliantly red mouth was curved in a smile which must have made any man forget the evil in the eyes. But when we move in a dream world, our emotions become dreamlike too. She placed a sandalled foot upon the mud floor and stepped out of the sarcophagus, advancing towards Dr. Cairn, a vision of such sinful loveliness as he could never have conceived in his waking moments. In that strange dream language, in a tongue not of East nor West, she spoke; and her silvern voice had something of the tone of those Egyptian pipes whose dree fills the nights upon the Upper Nile—the seductive music of remote and splendid wickedness.

"You know me, *now*?" she whispered.

And in his dream she seemed to be a familiar figure, at once dreadful and worshipful.

A fitful light played through the darkness, and seemed to dance upon a curtain draped behind the sarcophagus, picking out diamond points. The dreamer groped in the mental chaos of his mind, and found a clue to the meaning of this. The diamond points were the eyes of thousands of tarantula spiders with which the curtain was broidered.

The sign of the spider! What did he know of it? Yes! of course; it was the secret mark of Egypt's witch-queen—of the beautiful woman whose name, after her mysterious death, had been erased from all her monuments. A sweet whisper stole to his ears:

"You will befriend him, befriend my son—for *my* sake."

And in his dream-state he found himself prepared to foreswear all that he held holy—for her sake. She grasped both his hands, and her burning eyes looked closely into his.

"Your reward shall be a great one," she whispered, even more softly.

Came a sudden blank, and Dr. Cairn found himself walking again through the narrow street, led by the veiled woman. His impressions were growing dim; and now she seemed less real than hitherto. The streets were phantom streets, built of shadow stuff, and the stairs which presently he found himself ascending, were unsubstantial, and he seemed rather to float upward; until, with the jewelled fingers held fast in his own, he stood in a darkened apartment, and saw before him an open window, knew that he was once more back in the hotel. A dim light dawned in the blackness of the room and the musical voice breathed in his ear:

"Your reward shall be easily earned. I did but test you. Strike—and strike truly!"

The whisper grew sibilant—serpentine. Dr. Cairn felt the hilt of a dagger thrust into his right hand, and in the dimly-mysterious light looked down at one who lay in a bed close beside him.

At sight of the face of the sleeper—the perfectly-chiselled face, with the long black lashes resting on the ivory cheeks—he forgot all else, forgot the place wherein he stood, forgot his beautiful guide, and only remembered that he held a dagger in his hand, and that Antony Ferrara lay there, sleeping!

"Strike!" came the whisper again.

Dr. Cairn felt a mad exultation boiling up within him. He raised his hand, glanced once more on the face of the sleeper, and nerved himself to plunge the dagger into the heart of this evil thing.

A second more, and the dagger would have been buried to the hilt in the sleeper's breast—when there ensued a deafening, an appalling explosion. A wild red light illuminated the room, the building seemed to rock. Close upon that frightful sound followed a cry so piercing that it seemed to ice the blood in Dr. Cairn's veins.

"Stop, sir, stop! My God! what are you doing!"

A swift blow struck the dagger from his hand and the figure on the bed sprang upright. Swaying dizzily, Dr. Cairn stood there in the darkness, and as the voice of awakened sleepers reached his ears from adjoining rooms, the electric light was switched on, and across the bed, the bed upon which he had thought Antony Ferrara lay, he saw his son, Robert Cairn!

No one else was in the room. But on the carpet at his feet lay an ancient dagger, the hilt covered with beautiful and intricate gold and enamel work.

Rigid with a mutual horror, these two so strangely met stood staring at one another across the room. Everyone in the hotel, it would appear, had been awakened by the explosion, which, as if by the intervention of God, had stayed the hand of Dr. Cairn—had spared him from a deed impossible to contemplate.

There were sounds of running footsteps everywhere; but the origin of the disturbance at that moment had no interest for these two. Robert was the first to break the silence.

"Merciful God, sir!" he whispered huskily, "how did you come to be here? What is the matter? Are you ill?"

Dr. Cairn extended his hands like one groping in darkness.

"Rob, give me a moment, to think, to collect myself. Why am I here? By all that is wonderful, why are *you* here?"

"I am here to meet you."

"To meet me! I had no idea that you were well enough for the journey, and if you came to meet me, why—"

"That's it, sir! Why did you send me that wireless?"

"I sent no wireless, boy!"

Robert Cairn, with a little colour returning to his pale cheeks, advanced and grasped his father's hand.

"But after I arrived here to meet the boat, sir I received a wireless from the P. and O. due in the morning, to say that you had changed your mind, and come *via* Brindisi."

Dr. Cairn glanced at the dagger upon the carpet, repressed a shudder, and replied in a voice which he struggled to make firm:

"*I* did not send that wireless!"

"Then you actually came by the boat which arrived last night?—and to think that I was asleep in the same hotel! What an amazing—"

"Amazing indeed, Rob, and the result of a cunning and well planned scheme." He raised his eyes, looking fixedly at his son. "You understand the scheme; the scheme that could only have germinated in one mind—a scheme to cause me, your father, to—"

His voice failed and again his glance sought the weapon which lay so close to his feet. Partly in order to hide his emotion, he stooped, picked up the dagger, and threw it on the bed.

"For God's sake, sir," groaned Robert, "what were you doing here in my room with—that!"

Dr. Cairn stood straightly upright and replied in an even voice:

"I was here to do murder!"

"*Murder*!"

"I was under a spell—no need to name its weaver; I thought that a poisonous thing at last lay at my mercy, and by cunning means the primitive evil within me was called up, and braving the laws of God and man, I was about to slay that thing. Thank God!—"

He dropped upon his knees, silently bowed his head for a moment, and then stood up, self-possessed again, as his son had always known him. It had been a strange and awful awakening for Robert Cairn—to find his room illuminated by a lurid light, and to find his own father standing over him with a knife! But what had moved him even more deeply than the fear of these things, had been the sight of the emotion which had shaken that stern and unemotional man. Now, as he gathered together his scattered wits, he began to perceive that a malignant hand was moving above them, that his father, and himself, were pawns, which had been moved mysteriously to a dreadful end.

A great disturbance had now arisen in the streets below, streams of people it seemed, were pouring towards the harbour; but Dr. Cairn pointed to an

armchair.

"Sit down, Rob," he said. "I will tell my story, and you shall tell yours. By comparing notes, we can arrive at some conclusion. Then we must act. This is a fight to a finish, and I begin to doubt if we are strong enough to win."

He took up the dagger and ran a critical glance over it, from the keen point to the enamelled hilt.

"This is unique," he muttered, whilst his son, spellbound, watched him; "the blade is as keen as if tempered but yesterday; yet it was made full five thousand years ago, as the workmanship of the hilt testifies. Rob, we deal with powers more than human! We have to cope with a force which might have awed the greatest Masters which the world has known. It would have called for all the knowledge, and all the power of Apollonius of Tyana to have dealt with—*him*!"

"Antony Ferrara!"

"Undoubtedly, Rob! it was by the agency of Antony Ferrara that the wireless message was sent to you from the P. and O. It was by the agency of Antony Ferrara that I dreamt a dream to-night. In fact it was no true dream; I was under the influence of—what shall I term it?—hypnotic suggestion. To what extent that malign will was responsible for you and I being placed in rooms communicating by means of a balcony, we probably shall never know; but if this proximity was merely accidental, the enemy did not fail to take advantage of the coincidence. I lay watching the stars before I slept, and one of them seemed to grow larger as I watched." He began to pace about the room in growing excitement. "Rob, I cannot doubt that a mirror, or a crystal, was actually suspended before my eyes by—someone, who had been watching for the opportunity. I yielded myself to the soothing influence, and thus deliberately—deliberately—placed myself in the power of—Antony Ferrara—"

"You think that he is here, in this hotel?"

"I cannot doubt that he is in the neighbourhood. The influence was too strong to have emanated from a mind at a great distance removed. I will tell you exactly what I dreamt."

He dropped into a cane armchair. Comparative quiet reigned again in the streets below, but a distant clamour told of some untoward happening at the harbour.

Dawn would break ere long, and there was a curious rawness in the atmosphere. Robert Cairn seated himself upon the side of the bed, and watched his father, whilst the latter related those happenings with which we are already acquainted.

"You think, sir," said Robert, at the conclusion of the strange story, "that no part of your experience was real?"

Dr. Cairn held up the antique dagger, glancing at the speaker significantly.

"On the contrary," he replied, "I *do* know that part of it was dreadfully real. My difficulty is to separate the real from the phantasmal."

Silence fell for a moment. Then:

"It is almost certain," said the younger man, frowning thoughtfully, "that you did not actually leave the hotel, but merely passed from your room to mine by way of the balcony."

Dr. Cairn stood up, walked to the open window, and looked out, then turned and faced his son again.

"I believe I can put that matter to the test," he declared. "In my dream, as I turned into the lane where the house was—the house of the mummy—there was a patch covered with deep mud, where at some time during the evening a quantity of water had been spilt. I stepped upon that patch, or dreamt that I did. We can settle the point."

He sat down on the bed beside his son, and, stooping, pulled off one of his slippers. The night had been full enough of dreadful surprises; but here was yet another, which came to them as Dr. Cairn, with the inverted slipper in his hand, sat looking into his son's eyes.

The sole of the slipper was caked with reddish brown mud.

XVI. Lair of the Spiders

"We must find that house, find the sarcophagus—for I no longer doubt that it exists—drag it out, and destroy it."

"Should you know it again, sir?"

"Beyond any possibility of doubt. It is the sarcophagus of a queen."

"What queen?"

"A queen whose tomb the late Sir Michael Ferrara and I sought for many months, but failed to find."

"Is this queen well known in Egyptian history?"

Dr. Cairn stared at him with an odd expression in his eyes.

"Some histories ignore her existence entirely," he said; and, with an evident desire to change the subject, added, "I shall return to my room to dress now. Do you dress also. We cannot afford to sleep whilst the situation of that house remains unknown to us."

Robert Cairn nodded, and his father stood up, and went out of the room.

Dawn saw the two of them peering from the balcony upon the streets of Port Said, already dotted with moving figures, for the Egyptian is an early riser.

"Have you any clue," asked the younger man, "to the direction in which this place lies?"

"Absolutely none, for the reason that I do not know where my dreaming left off, and reality commenced. Did someone really come to my window, and lead me out through another room, downstairs, and into the street, or did I wander out of my own accord and merely imagine the existence of the guide? In either event, I must have been guided in some way to a back entrance; for had I attempted to leave by the front door of the hotel in that trance-like condition, I should certainly have been detained by the *bowwab*. Suppose we commence, then, by inquiring if there is such another entrance?"

The hotel staff was already afoot, and their inquiries led to the discovery of an entrance communicating with the native servants' quarters. This could not be reached from the main hall, but there was a narrow staircase to the

left of the lift-shaft by which it might be gained. The two stood looking out across the stone-paved courtyard upon which the door opened.

"Beyond doubt," said Dr. Cairn, "I might have come down that staircase and out by this door without arousing a soul, either by passing through my own room, or through any other on that floor."

They crossed the yard, where members of the kitchen staff were busily polishing various cooking utensils, and opened the gate. Dr. Cairn turned to one of the men near by.

"Is this gate bolted at night?" he asked, in Arabic.

The man shook his head, and seemed to be much amused by the question, revealing his white teeth as he assured him that it was not.

A narrow lane ran along behind the hotel, communicating with a maze of streets almost exclusively peopled by natives.

"Rob," said Dr. Cairn slowly, "it begins to dawn upon me that this is the way I came."

He stood looking to right and left, and seemed to be undecided. Then:

"We will try right," he determined.

They set off along the narrow way. Once clear of the hotel wall, high buildings rose upon either side, so that at no time during the day could the sun have penetrated to the winding lane. Suddenly Robert Cairn stopped.

"Look!" he said, and pointed. "The mosque! You spoke of a mosque near to the house?"

Dr. Cairn nodded; his eyes were gleaming, now that he felt himself to be upon the track of this great evil which had shattered his peace.

They advanced until they stood before the door of the mosque—and there in the shadow of a low archway was just such an ancient, iron-studded door as Dr. Cairn remembered! Latticed windows overhung the street above, but no living creature was in sight.

He very gently pressed upon the door, but as he had anticipated it was fastened from within. In the vague light, his face seemed strangely haggard as he turned to his son, raising his eyebrows interrogatively.

"It is just possible that I may be mistaken," he said; "so that I scarcely know what to do."

He stood looking about him in some perplexity.

Adjoining the mosque, was a ruinous house, which clearly had had no occupants for many years. As Robert Cairn's gaze lighted upon its gaping

window-frames and doorless porch, he seized his father by the arm.

"We might hide up there," he suggested, "and watch for anyone entering or leaving the place opposite."

"I have little doubt that this was the scene of my experience," replied Dr. Cairn; "therefore I think we will adopt your plan. Perhaps there is some means of egress at the back. It will be useful if we have to remain on the watch for any considerable time."

They entered the ruined building and, by means of a rickety staircase, gained the floor above. It moved beneath them unsafely, but from the divan which occupied one end of the apartment an uninterrupted view of the door below was obtainable.

"Stay here," said Dr. Cairn, "and watch, whilst I reconnoitre."

He descended the stairs again, to return in a minute or so and announce that another street could be reached through the back of the house. There and then they settled the plan of campaign. One at a time they would go to the hotel for their meals, so that the door would never be unwatched throughout the day. Dr. Cairn determined to make no inquiries respecting the house, as this might put the enemy upon his guard.

"We are in his own country, Rob," he said. "Here, we can trust no one."

Thereupon they commenced their singular and self-imposed task. In turn they went back to the hotel for breakfast, and watched fruitlessly throughout the morning. They lunched in the same way, and throughout the great midday heat sat hidden in the ruined building, mounting guard over that iron-studded door. It was a dreary and monotonous day, long to be remembered by both of them, and when the hour of sunset drew nigh, and their vigil remained unrewarded, they began to doubt the wisdom of their tactics. The street was but little frequented; there was not the slightest chance of their presence being discovered.

It was very quiet, too, so that no one could have approached unheard. At the hotel they had learnt the cause of the explosion during the night; an accident in the engine-room of a tramp steamer, which had done considerable damage, but caused no bodily injury.

"We may hope to win yet," said Dr. Cairn, in speaking of the incident. "It was the hand of God."

Silence had prevailed between them for a long time, and he was about to propose that his son should go back to dinner, when the rare sound of a

footstep below checked the words upon his lips. Both craned their necks to obtain a view of the pedestrian.

An old man stooping beneath the burden of years and resting much of his weight upon a staff, came tottering into sight. The watchers crouched back, breathless with excitement, as the newcomer paused before the iron-studded door, and from beneath his cloak took out a big key.

Inserting it into the lock, he swung open the door; it creaked upon ancient hinges as it opened inward, revealing a glimpse of a stone floor. As the old man entered, Dr. Cairn grasped his son by the wrist.

"Down!" he whispered. "Now is our chance!"

They ran down the rickety stairs, crossed the narrow street, and Robert Cairn cautiously looked in around the door which had been left ajar.

Black against the dim light of another door at the further end of the large and barn-like apartment, showed the stooping figure. Tap, tap, tap! went the stick; and the old man had disappeared around a corner.

"Where can we hide?" whispered Dr. Cairn. "He is evidently making a tour of inspection."

The sound of footsteps mounting to the upper apartments came to their ears. They looked about them right and left, and presently the younger man detected a large wooden cupboard set in one wall. Opening it, he saw that it contained but one shelf only, near the top.

"When he returns," he said, "we can hide in here until he has gone out."

Dr. Cairn nodded; he was peering about the room intently.

"This is the place I came to, Rob!" he said softly; "but there was a stone stair leading down to some room underneath. We must find it."

The old man could be heard passing from room to room above; then his uneven footsteps sounded on the stair again, and glancing at one another the two stepped into the cupboard, and pulled the door gently inward. A few moments later, the old caretaker—since such appeared to be his office—passed out, slamming the door behind him. At that, they emerged from their hiding-place and began to examine the apartment carefully. It was growing very dark now; indeed with the door shut, it was difficult to detect the outlines of the room. Suddenly a loud cry broke the perfect stillness, seeming to come from somewhere above. Robert Cairn started violently, grasping his father's arm, but the older man smiled.

"You forget that there is a mosque almost opposite," he said. "That is the *mueddin*!"

His son laughed shortly.

"My nerves are not yet all that they might be," he explained, and bending low began to examine the pavement.

"There must be a trap-door in the floor?" he continued. "Don't you think so?"

His father nodded silently, and upon hands and knees also began to inspect the cracks and crannies between the various stones. In the right-hand corner furthest from the entrance, their quest was rewarded. A stone some three feet square moved slightly when pressure was applied to it, and gave up a sound of hollowness beneath the tread. Dust and litter covered the entire floor, but having cleared the top of this particular stone, a ring was discovered, lying flat in a circular groove cut to receive it. The blade of a penknife served to raise it from its resting place, and Dr. Cairn, standing astride across the trap, tugged at the ring, and, without great difficulty, raised the stone block from its place.

A square hole was revealed. There were irregular stone steps leading down into the blackness. A piece of candle, stuck in a crude wooden holder, lay upon the topmost. Dr. Cairn, taking a box of matches from his pocket, very quickly lighted the candle, and with it held in his left hand began to descend. His head was not yet below the level of the upper apartment when he paused.

"You have your revolver?" he said.

Robert nodded grimly, and took his revolver from his pocket.

A singular and most disagreeable smell was arising from the trap which they had opened; but ignoring this they descended, and presently stood side by side in a low cellar. Here the odour was almost insupportable; it had in it something menacing, something definitely repellent; and at the foot of the steps they stood hesitating.

Dr. Cairn slowly moved the candle, throwing the light along the floor, where it picked out strips of wood and broken cases, straw packing and kindred litter—until it impinged upon a brightly painted slab. Further, he moved it, and higher, and the end of a sarcophagus came into view. He drew a quick, hissing breath, and bending forward, directed the light into the

interior of the ancient coffin. Then, he had need of all his iron nerve to choke down the cry that rose to his lips.

"By God! *Look*!" whispered his son.

Swathed in white wrappings, Antony Ferrara lay motionless before them.

The seconds passed one by one, until a whole minute was told, and still the two remained inert and the cold light shone fully upon that ivory face.

"Is he dead?"

Robert Cairn spoke huskily, grasping his father's shoulder.

"I think not," was the equally hoarse reply. "He is in the state of trance mentioned in—certain ancient writings; he is absorbing evil force from the sarcophagus of the Witch-Queen…"[A]

There was a faint rustling sound in the cellar, which seemed to grow louder and more insistent, but Dr. Cairn, apparently, did not notice it, for he turned to his son, and albeit the latter could see him but vaguely, he knew that his face was grimly set.

"It seems like butchery," he said evenly, "but, in the interests of the world, we must not hesitate. A shot might attract attention. Give me your knife."

For a moment, the other scarcely comprehended the full purport of the words. Mechanically he took out his knife, and opened the big blade.

"Good heavens, sir," he gasped breathlessly, "it is *too* awful!"

"Awful I grant you," replied Dr. Cairn, "but a duty—a duty, boy, and one that we must not shirk. I, alone among living men, know whom, and *what*, lies there, and my conscience directs me in what I do. His end shall be that which he had planned for you. Give me the knife."

He took the knife from his son's hand. With the light directed upon the still, ivory face, he stepped towards the sarcophagus. As he did so, something dropped from the roof, narrowly missed falling upon his outstretched hand, and with a soft, dull thud dropped upon the mud brick floor. Impelled by some intuition, he suddenly directed the light to the roof above.

Then with a shrill cry which he was wholly unable to repress, Robert Cairn seized his father's arm and began to pull him back towards the stair.

"Quick, sir!" he screamed shrilly, almost hysterically. "My God! my God! *be quick*!"

The appearance of the roof above had puzzled him for an instant as the light touched it, then in the next had filled his very soul with loathing and horror. For directly above them was moving a black patch, a foot or so in extent… and it was composed of a dense moving mass of tarantula spiders! A line of the disgusting creatures was mounting the wall and crossing the ceiling, ever swelling the unclean group!

Dr. Cairn did not hesitate to leap for the stair, and as he did so the spiders began to drop. Indeed, they seemed to leap towards the intruders, until the floor all about them and the bottom steps of the stair presented a mass of black, moving insects.

A perfect panic fear seized upon them. At every step spiders *crunched* beneath their feet. They seem to come from nowhere, to be conjured up out of the darkness, until the whole cellar, the stairs, the very fetid air about them, became black and nauseous with spiders.

Half-way to the top Dr. Cairn turned, snatched out a revolver and began firing down into the cellar in the direction of the sarcophagus.

A hairy, clutching thing ran up his arm, and his son, uttering a groan of horror, struck at it and stained the tweed with its poisonous blood.

They staggered to the head of the steps, and there Dr. Cairn turned and hurled the candle at a monstrous spider that suddenly sprang into view. The candle, still attached to its wooden socket, went bounding down steps that now were literally carpeted with insects.

Tarantulas began to run out from the trap, as if pursuing the intruders, and a faint light showed from below. Then came a crackling sound, and a wisp of smoke floated up.

Dr. Cairn threw open the outer door, and the two panic-stricken men leapt out into the street and away from the spider army. White to the lips they stood leaning against the wall.

"Was it really—Ferrara?" whispered Robert.

"I hope so!" was the answer.

Dr. Cairn pointed to the closed door. A fan of smoke was creeping from beneath it.

The fire which ensued destroyed, not only the house in which it had broken out, but the two adjoining; and the neighbouring mosque was saved only with the utmost difficulty.

When, in the dawn of the new day, Dr. Cairn looked down into the smoking pit which once had been the home of the spiders, he shook his head and turned to his son.

"If our eyes did not deceive us, Rob," he said, "a just retribution at last has claimed him!"

Pressing a way through the surrounding crowd of natives, they returned to the hotel. The hall porter stopped them as they entered.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "but which is Mr. Robert Cairn?"

Robert Cairn stepped forward.

"A young gentleman left this for you, sir, half an hour ago," said the man —"a very pale gentleman, with black eyes. He said you'd dropped it."

Robert Cairn unwrapped the little parcel. It contained a penknife, the ivory handle charred as if it had been in a furnace. It was his own—which he had handed to his father in that awful cellar at the moment when the first spider had dropped; and a card was enclosed, bearing the pencilled words, "With Antony Ferrara's Compliments."

XVII. The Story of Ali Mohammed

Saluting each of the three in turn, the tall Egyptian passed from Dr. Cairn's room. Upon his exit followed a brief but electric silence. Dr. Cairn's face was very stern and Sime, with his hands locked behind him, stood staring out of the window into the palmy garden of the hotel. Robert Cairn looked from one to the other excitedly.

"What did he say, sir?" he cried, addressing his father. "It had something to do with—"

Dr. Cairn turned. Sime did not move.

"It had something to do with the matter which has brought me to Cairo," replied the former—"yes."

"You see," said Robert, "my knowledge of Arabic is *nil*—"

Sime turned in his heavy fashion, and directed a dull gaze upon the last speaker.

"Ali Mohammed," he explained slowly, "who has just left, had come down from the Fayûm to report a singular matter. He was unaware of its real importance, but it was sufficiently unusual to disturb him, and Ali Mohammed es-Suefi is not easily disturbed."

Dr. Cairn dropped into an armchair, nodding towards Sime.

"Tell him all that we have heard," he said. "We stand together in this affair."

"Well," continued Sime, in his deliberate fashion, "when we struck our camp beside the Pyramid of Méydûm, Ali Mohammed remained behind with a gang of workmen to finish off some comparatively unimportant work. He is an unemotional person. Fear is alien to his composition; it has no meaning for him. But last night something occurred at the camp—or what remained of the camp—which seems to have shaken even Ali Mohammed's iron nerve."

Robert Cairn nodded, watching the speaker intently.

"The entrance to the Méydûm Pyramid—," continued Sime.

"*One* of the entrances," interrupted Dr. Cairn, smiling slightly.

"There is only one entrance," said Sime dogmatically.

Dr. Cairn waved his hand.

"Go ahead," he said. "We can discuss these archæological details later."

Sime stared dully, but, without further comment, resumed:

"The camp was situated on the slope immediately below the only *known* entrance to the Méydûm Pyramid; one might say that it lay in the shadow of the building. There are tumuli in the neighbourhood—part of a prehistoric cemetery—and it was work in connection with this which had detained Ali Mohammed in that part of the Fayûm. Last night about ten o'clock he was awakened by an unusual sound, or series of sounds, he reports. He came out of the tent into the moonlight, and looked up at the pyramid. The entrance was a good way above his head, of course, and quite fifty or sixty yards from the point where he was standing, but the moonbeams bathed that side of the building in dazzling light so that he was enabled to see a perfect crowd of bats whirling out of the pyramid."

"Bats!" ejaculated Robert Cairn.

"Yes. There is a small colony of bats in this pyramid, of course; but the bat does not hunt in bands, and the sight of these bats flying out from the place was one which Ali Mohammed had never witnessed before. Their concerted squeaking was very clearly audible. He could not believe that it was this which had awakened him, and which had awakened the ten or twelve workmen who also slept in the camp, for these were now clustering around him, and all looking up at the side of the pyramid.

"Fayûm nights are strangely still. Except for the jackals and the village dogs, and some other sounds to which one grows accustomed, there is nothing—absolutely nothing—audible.

"In this stillness, then, the flapping of the bat regiment made quite a disturbance overhead. Some of the men were only half awake, but most, of them were badly frightened. And now they began to compare notes, with the result that they determined upon the exact nature of the sound which had aroused them. It seemed almost certain that this had been a dreadful scream—the scream of a woman in the last agony."

He paused, looking from Dr. Cairn to his son, with a singular expression upon his habitually immobile face.

"Go on," said Robert Cairn.

Slowly Sime resumed:

"The bats had begun to disperse in various directions, but the panic which had seized upon the camp does not seem to have dispersed so readily.

Ali Mohammed confesses that he himself felt almost afraid—a remarkable admission for a man of his class to make. Picture these fellows, then, standing looking at one another, and very frequently up at the opening in the side of the pyramid. Then the smell began to reach their nostrils—the smell which completed the panic, and which led to the abandonment of the camp—"

"The smell—what kind of smell?" jerked Robert Cairn.

Dr. Cairn turned himself in his chair, looking fully at his son.

"The smell of Hades, boy!" he said grimly, and turned away again.

"Naturally," continued Sime, "I can give you no particulars on the point, but it must have been something very fearful to have affected the Egyptian native! There was no breeze, but it swept down upon them, this poisonous smell, as though borne by a hot wind."

"Was it actually hot?"

"I cannot say. But Ali Mohammed is positive that it came from the opening in the pyramid. It was not apparently in disgust, but in sheer, stark horror, that the whole crowd of them turned tail and ran. They never stopped and never looked back until they came to Rekka on the railway."

A short silence followed. Then:

"That was last night?" questioned Cairn.

His father nodded.

"The man came in by the first train from Wasta," he said, "and we have not a moment to spare!"

Sime stared at him.

"I don't understand—"

"I have a mission," said Dr. Cairn quietly. "It is to run to earth, to stamp out, as I would stamp out a pestilence, a certain *thing*—I cannot call it a man—Antony Ferrara. I believe, Sime, that you are at one with me in this matter?"

Sime drummed his fingers upon the table, frowning thoughtfully, and looking from one to the other of his companions under his lowered brows.

"With my own eyes," he said, "I have seen something of this secret drama which has brought you, Dr. Cairn, to Egypt; and, up to a point, I agree with you regarding Antony Ferrara. You have lost all trace of him?"

"Since leaving Port Said," said Dr. Cairn, "I have seen and heard nothing of him; but Lady Lashmore, who was an intimate—and an innocent victim,

God help her—of Ferrara in London, after staying at the Semiramis in Cairo for one day, departed. Where did she go?"

"What has Lady Lashmore to do with the matter?" asked Sime.

"If what I fear be true—" replied Dr. Cairn. "But I anticipate. At the moment it is enough for me that, unless my information be at fault, Lady Lashmore yesterday left Cairo by the Luxor train at 8.30."

Robert Cairn looked in a puzzled way at his father.

"What do you suspect, sir?" he said.

"I suspect that she went no further than Wasta," replied Dr. Cairn.

"Still I do not understand," declared Sime.

"You may understand later," was the answer. "We must not waste a moment. You Egyptologists think that Egypt has little or nothing to teach you; the Pyramid of Méydûm lost interest directly you learnt that apparently it contained no treasure. How, little you know what it *really* contained, Sime! Mariette did not suspect; Sir Gaston Maspero does not suspect! The late Sir Michael Ferrara and I once camped by the Pyramid of Méydûm, as you have camped there, and we made a discovery—"

"Well?" said Sime, with growing interest.

"It is a point upon which my lips are sealed, but—do you believe in black magic?"

"I am not altogether sure that I do—"

"Very well; you are entitled to your opinion. But although you appear to be ignorant of the fact, the Pyramid of Méydûm was formerly one of the strong-holds—the second greatest in all the land of the Nile—of Ancient Egyptian sorcery! I pray heaven I may be wrong, but in the disappearance of Lady Lashmore, and in the story of Ali Mohammed, I see a dreadful possibility. Ring for a time-table. We have not a moment to waste!"

XVIII. The Bats

Rekka was a mile behind.

"It will take us fully an hour yet," said Dr. Cairn, "to reach the pyramid, although it appears so near."

Indeed, in the violet dusk, the great mastabah Pyramid of Méydûm seemed already to loom above them, although it was quite four miles away. The narrow path along which they trotted their donkeys ran through the fertile lowlands of the Fayûm. They had just passed a village, amid an angry chorus from the pariah dogs, and were now following the track along the top of the embankment. Where the green carpet merged ahead into the grey ocean of sand the desert began, and out in that desert, resembling some weird work of Nature rather than anything wrought by the hand of man, stood the gloomy and lonely building ascribed by the Egyptologists to the Pharaoh Sneferu.

Dr. Cairn and his son rode ahead, and Sime, with Ali Mohammed, brought up the rear of the little company.

"I am completely in the dark, sir," said Robert Cairn, "respecting the object of our present journey. What leads you to suppose that we shall find Antony Ferrara here?"

"I scarcely hope to *find* him here," was the enigmatical reply, "but I am almost certain that he *is* here. I might have expected it, and I blame myself for not having provided against—this."

"Against what?"

"It is impossible, Rob, for you to understand this matter. Indeed, if I were to publish what I know—not what I imagine, but what I know—about the Pyramid of Méydûm I should not only call down upon myself the ridicule of every Egyptologist in Europe; I should be accounted mad by the whole world."

His son was silent for a time; then:

"According to the guide books," he said, "it is merely an empty tomb."

"It is empty, certainly," replied Dr. Cairn grimly, "or that apartment known as the King's Chamber is now empty. But even the so-called King's

Chamber was not empty once; and there is another chamber in the pyramid which is not empty *now*!"

"If you know of the existence of such a chamber, sir, why have you kept it secret?"

"Because I cannot *prove* its existence. I do not know how to enter it, but I know it is there; I know what it was formerly used for, and I suspect that last night it was used for that same unholy purpose again—after a lapse of perhaps four thousand years! Even you would doubt me, I believe, if I were to tell you what I know, if I were to hint at what I suspect. But no doubt in your reading you have met with Julian the Apostate?"

"Certainly, I have read of him. He is said to have practised necromancy."

"When he was at Carra in Mesopotamia, he retired to the Temple of the Moon, with a certain sorcerer and some others, and, his nocturnal operations concluded, he left the temple locked, the door sealed, and placed a guard over the gate. He was killed in the war, and never returned to Carra, but when, in the reign of Jovian, the seal was broken and the temple opened, a body was found hanging by its hair—I will spare you the particulars; it was a case of that most awful form of sorcery—*anthropomancy*!"

An expression of horror had crept over Robert Cairn's face.

"Do you mean, sir, that this pyramid was used for similar purposes?"

"In the past it has been used for many purposes," was the quiet reply. "The exodus of the bats points to the fact that it was again used for one of those purposes last night; the exodus of the bats—and something else."

Sime, who had been listening to this strange conversation, cried out from the rear:

"We cannot reach it before sunset!"

"No," replied Dr. Cairn, turning in his saddle, "but that does not matter. Inside the pyramid, day and night make no difference."

Having crossed a narrow wooden bridge, they turned now fully in the direction of the great ruin, pursuing a path along the opposite bank of the cutting. They rode in silence for some time, Robert Cairn deep in thought.

"I suppose that Antony Ferrara actually visited this place last night," he said suddenly, "although I cannot follow your reasoning. But what leads you to suppose that he is there now?"

"This," answered his father slowly. "The purpose for which I believe him to have come here would detain him at least two days and two nights. I shall say no more about it, because if I am wrong, or if for any reason I am unable to establish my suspicions as facts, you would certainly regard me as a madman if I had confided those suspicions to you."

Mounted upon donkeys, the journey from Rekka to the Pyramid of Méydûm occupies fully an hour and a half, and the glories of the sunset had merged into the violet dusk of Egypt before the party passed the outskirts of the cultivated land and came upon the desert sands. The mountainous pile of granite, its peculiar orange hue a ghastly yellow in the moonlight, now assumed truly monstrous proportions, seeming like a great square tower rising in three stages from its mound of sand to some three hundred and fifty feet above the level of the desert.

There is nothing more awesome in the world than to find one's self at night, far from all fellow-men, in the shadow of one of those edifices raised by unknown hands, by unknown means, to an unknown end; for, despite all the wisdom of our modern inquirers, these stupendous relics remain unsolved riddles set to posterity by a mysterious people.

Neither Sime nor Ali Mohammed were of highly strung temperament, neither subject to those subtle impressions which more delicate organisations receive, as the nostrils receive an exhalation, from such a place as this. But Dr. Cairn and his son, though each in a different way, came now within the *aura* of this temple of the dead ages.

The great silence of the desert—a silence like no other in the world; the loneliness, which must be experienced to be appreciated, of that dry and tideless ocean; the traditions which had grown up like fungi about this venerable building; lastly, the knowledge that it was associated in some way with the sorcery, the unholy activity, of Antony Ferrara, combined to chill them with a supernatural dread which called for all their courage to combat.

"What now?" said Sime, descending from his mount.

"We must lead the donkeys up the slope," replied Dr. Cairn, "where those blocks of granite are, and tether them there."

In silence, then, the party commenced the tedious ascent of the mound by the narrow path to the top, until at some hundred and twenty feet above the surrounding plain they found themselves actually under the wall of the mighty building. The donkeys were made fast.

"Sime and I," said Dr. Cairn quietly, "will enter the pyramid."

"But—" interrupted his son.

"Apart from the fatigue of the operation," continued the doctor, "the temperature in the lower part of the pyramid is so tremendous, and the air so bad, that in your present state of health it would be absurd for you to attempt it. Apart from which there is a possibly more important task to be undertaken here, outside."

He turned his eyes upon Sime, who was listening intently, then continued:

"Whilst we are penetrating to the interior by means of the sloping passage on the north side, Ali Mohammed and yourself must mount guard on the south side."

"What for?" said Sime rapidly.

"For the reason," replied Dr. Cairn, "that there is an entrance on to the first stage—"

"But the first stage is nearly seventy feet above us. Even assuming that there were an entrance there—which I doubt—escape by that means would be impossible. No one could climb down the face of the pyramid from above; no one has ever succeeded in climbing up. For the purpose of surveying the pyramid a scaffold had to be erected. Its sides are quite unscaleable."

"That may be," agreed Dr. Cairn; "but, nevertheless, I have my reasons for placing a guard over the south side. If anything appears upon the stage above, Rob—*anything*—shoot, and shoot straight!"

He repeated the same instructions to Ali Mohammed, to the evident surprise of the latter.

"I don't understand at all," muttered Sime, "but as I presume you have a good reason for what you do, let it be as you propose. Can you give me any idea respecting what we may hope to find inside this place? I only entered once, and I am not anxious to repeat the experiment. The air is unbreathable, the descent to the level passage below is stiff work, and, apart from the inconvenience of navigating the latter passage, which as you probably know is only sixteen inches high, the climb up the vertical shaft into the tomb is not a particularly safe one. I exclude the possibility of snakes," he added ironically.

"You have also omitted the possibility of Antony Ferrara," said Dr. Cairn.

"Pardon my scepticism, doctor, but I cannot imagine any man voluntarily remaining in that awful place."

"Yet I am greatly mistaken if he is not there!"

"Then he is trapped!" said Sime grimly, examining a Browning pistol which he carried. "Unless—"

He stopped, and an expression, almost of fear, crept over his stoical features.

"That sixteen-inch passage," he muttered—"with Antony Ferrara at the further end!"

"Exactly!" said Dr. Cairn. "But I consider it my duty to the world to proceed. I warn you that you are about to face the greatest peril, probably, which you will ever be called upon to encounter. I do not ask you to do this. I am quite prepared to go alone."

"That remark was wholly unnecessary, doctor," said Sime rather truculently. "Suppose the other two proceed to their post."

"But, sir—" began Robert Cairn.

"You know the way," said the doctor, with an air of finality. "There is not a moment to waste, and although I fear that we are too late, it is just possible we may be in time to prevent a dreadful crime."

The tall Egyptian and Robert Cairn went stumbling off amongst the heaps of rubbish and broken masonry, until an angle of the great wall concealed them from view. Then the two who remained continued the climb yet higher, following the narrow, zigzag path leading up to the entrance of the descending passage. Immediately under the square black hole they stood and glanced at one another.

"We may as well leave our outer garments here," said Sime. "I note that you wear rubber-soled shoes, but I shall remove my boots, as otherwise I should be unable to obtain any foothold."

Dr. Cairn nodded, and without more ado proceeded to strip off his coat, an example which was followed by Sime. It was as he stooped and placed his hat upon the little bundle of clothes at his feet that Dr. Cairn detected something which caused him to stoop yet lower and to peer at that dark object on the ground with a strange intentness.

"What is it?" jerked Sime, glancing back at him.

Dr. Cairn, from a hip pocket, took out an electric lamp, and directed the white ray upon something lying on the splintered fragments of granite.

It was a bat, a fairly large one, and a clot of blood marked the place where its head had been. For the bat was decapitated!

As though anticipating what he should find there, Dr. Cairn flashed the ray of the lamp all about the ground in the vicinity of the entrance to the pyramid. Scores of dead bats, headless, lay there.

"For God's sake, what does this mean?" whispered Sime, glancing apprehensively into the black entrance beside him.

"It means," answered Cairn, in a low voice, "that my suspicion, almost incredible though it seems, was well founded. Steel yourself against the task that is before you, Sime; we stand upon the borderland of strange horrors."

Sime hesitated to touch any of the dead bats, surveying them with an ill-concealed repugnance.

"What kind of creature," he whispered, "has done this?"

"One of a kind that the world has not known for many ages! The most evil kind of creature conceivable—a man-devil!"

"But what does he want with bats' heads?"

"The Cynonycteris, or pyramid bat, has a leaf-like appendage beside the nose. A gland in this secretes a rare oil. This oil is one of the ingredients of the incense which is never named in the magical writings."

Sime shuddered.

"Here!" said Dr. Cairn, proffering a flask. "This is only the overture! No nerves."

The other nodded shortly, and poured out a peg of brandy.

"Now," said Dr. Cairn, "shall I go ahead?"

"As you like," replied Sime quietly, and again quite master of himself. "Look out for snakes. I will carry the light and you can keep yours handy in case you may need it."

Dr. Cairn drew himself up into the entrance. The passage was less than four feet high, and generations of sand-storms had polished its sloping granite floor so as to render it impossible to descend except by resting one's hands on the roof above and lowering one's self foot by foot.

A passage of this description, descending at a sharp angle for over two hundred feet, is not particularly easy to negotiate, and progress was slow. Dr. Cairn at every five yards or so would stop, and, with the pocket-lamp which he carried, would examine the sandy floor and the crevices between the huge blocks composing the passage, in quest of those faint tracks which

warn the traveller that a serpent has recently passed that way. Then, replacing his lamp, he would proceed. Sime followed in like manner, employing only one hand to support himself, and, with the other, constantly directing the ray of his pocket torch past his companion, and down into the blackness beneath.

Out in the desert the atmosphere had been sufficiently hot, but now with every step it grew hotter and hotter. That indescribable smell, as of a decay begun in remote ages, that rises with the impalpable dust in these mysterious labyrinths of Ancient Egypt which never know the light of day, rose stiflingly; until, at some forty or fifty feet below the level of the sand outside, respiration became difficult, and the two paused, bathed in perspiration and gasping for air.

"Another thirty or forty feet," panted Sime, "and we shall be in the level passage. There is a sort of low, artificial cavern there, you may remember, where, although we cannot stand upright, we can sit and rest for a few moments."

Speech was exhausting, and no further words were exchanged until the bottom of the slope was reached, and the combined lights of the two pocket-lamps showed them that they had reached a tiny chamber irregularly hewn in the living rock. This also was less than four feet high, but its jagged floor being level, they were enabled to pause here for a while.

"Do you notice something unfamiliar in the smell of the place?"

Dr. Cairn was the speaker. Sime nodded, wiping the perspiration from his face the while.

"It was bad enough when I came here before," he said hoarsely. "It is terrible work for a heavy man. But to-night it seems to be reeking. I have smelt nothing like it in my life."

"Correct," replied Dr. Cairn grimly. "I trust that, once clear of this place, you will never smell it again."

"What is it?"

"It is the *incense*," was the reply. "Come! The worst of our task is before us yet."

The continuation of the passage now showed as an opening no more than fifteen to seventeen inches high. It was necessary, therefore, to lie prone upon the rubbish of the floor, and to proceed serpent fashion; one could not even employ one's knees, so low was the roof, but was compelled to

progress by clutching at the irregularities in the wall, and by digging the elbows into the splintered stones one crawled upon!

For three yards or so they proceeded thus. Then Dr. Cairn lay suddenly still.

"What is it?" whispered Sime.

A threat of panic was in his voice. He dared not conjecture what would happen if either should be overcome in that evil-smelling burrow, deep in the bowels of the ancient building. At that moment it seemed to him, absurdly enough, that the weight of the giant pile rested upon his back, was crushing him, pressing the life out from his body as he lay there prone, with his eyes fixed upon the rubber soles of Dr. Cairn's shoes, directly in front of him.

But softly came a reply:

"Do not speak again! Proceed as quietly as possible, and pray heaven we are not expected!"

Sime understood. With a malignant enemy before them, this hole in the rock through which they crawled was a certain death-trap. He thought of the headless bats and of how he, in crawling out into the shaft ahead, must lay himself open to a similar fate!

Dr. Cairn moved slowly onward. Despite their anxiety to avoid noise, neither he nor his companion could control their heavy breathing. Both were panting for air. The temperature was now deathly. A candle would scarcely have burnt in the vitiated air; and above that odour of ancient rottenness which all explorers of the monuments of Egypt know, rose that other indescribable odour which seemed to stifle one's very soul.

Dr. Cairn stopped again.

Sime knew, having performed this journey before, that his companion must have reached the end of the passage, that he must be lying peering out into the shaft, for which they were making. He extinguished his lamp.

Again Dr. Cairn moved forward. Stretching out his hand, Sime found only emptiness. He wriggled forward, in turn, rapidly, all the time groping with his fingers. Then:

"Take my hand," came a whisper. "Another two feet, and you can stand upright."

He proceeded, grasped the hand which was extended to him in the impenetrable darkness, and panting, temporarily exhausted, rose upright

beside Dr. Cairn, and stretched his cramped limbs.

Side by side they stood, mantled about in such a darkness as cannot be described; in such a silence as dwellers in the busy world cannot conceive; in such an atmosphere of horror that only a man morally and physically brave could have retained his composure.

Dr. Cairn bent to Sime's ear.

"We *must* have the light for the ascent," he whispered. "Have your pistol ready; I am about to press the button of the lamp."

A shaft of white light shone suddenly up the rocky sides of the pit in which they stood, and lost itself in the gloom of the chamber above.

"On to my shoulders," jerked Sime. "You are lighter than I. Then, as soon as you can reach, place your lamp on the floor above and mount up beside it. I will follow."

Dr. Cairn, taking advantage of the rugged walls, and of the blocks of stone amid which they stood, mounted upon Sime's shoulders.

"Could you carry your revolver in your teeth?" asked the latter. "I think you might hold it by the trigger-guard."

"I proposed to do so," replied Dr. Cairn grimly. "Stand fast!"

Gradually he rose upright upon the other's shoulders; then, placing his foot in a cranny of the rock, and with his left hand grasping a protruding fragment above, he mounted yet higher, all the time holding the lighted lamp in his right hand. Upward he extended his arms, and upward, until he could place the lamp upon the ledge above his head, where its white beam shone across the top of the shaft.

"Mind it does not fall!" panted Sime, craning his head upward to watch these operations.

Dr. Cairn, whose strength and agility were wonderful, twisted around sideways, and succeeded in placing his foot on a ledge of stone on the opposite side of the shaft. Resting his weight upon this, he extended his hand to the lip of the opening, and drew himself up to the top, where he crouched fully in the light of the lamp. Then, wedging his foot into a crevice a little below him, he reached out his hand to Sime. The latter, following much the same course as his companion, seized the extended hand, and soon found himself beside Dr. Cairn.

Impetuously he snatched out his own lamp and shone its beams about the weird apartment in which they found themselves—the so-called King's

Chamber of the pyramid. Right and left leapt the searching rays, touching the ends of the wooden beams, which, practically fossilised by long contact with the rock, still survive in that sepulchral place. Above and below and all around he directed the light—upon the litter covering the rock floor, upon the blocks of the higher walls, upon the frowning roof.

They were alone in the King's Chamber!

XIX. Anthropomancy

"There is no one here!"

Sime looked about the place excitedly.

"Fortunately for us!" answered Dr. Cairn.

He breathed rather heavily yet with his exertions, and, moreover, the air of the chamber was disgusting. But otherwise he was perfectly calm, although his face was pale and bathed in perspiration.

"Make as little noise as possible."

Sime, who, now that the place proved to be empty, began to cast off that dread which had possessed him in the passage-way, found something ominous in the words.

Dr. Cairn, stepping carefully over the rubbish of the floor, advanced to the east corner of the chamber, waving his companion to follow. Side by side they stood there.

"Do you notice that the abominable smell of the incense is more overpowering here than anywhere?"

Sime nodded.

"You are right. What does that mean?"

Dr. Cairn directed the ray of light down behind a little mound of rubbish into a corner of the wall.

"It means," he said, with a subdued expression of excitement, "that we have got to crawl in *there*!"

Sime stifled an exclamation.

One of the blocks of the bottom tier was missing, a fact which he had not detected before by reason of the presence of the mound of rubbish before the opening.

"Silence again!" whispered Dr. Cairn.

He lay down flat, and, without hesitation, crept into the gap. As his feet disappeared, Sime followed. Here it was possible to crawl upon hands and knees. The passage was formed of square stone blocks. It was but three yards or so in length; then it suddenly turned upward at a tremendous angle of about one in four. Square foot-holds were cut in the lower face. The smell of incense was almost unbearable.

Dr. Cairn bent to Sime's ear.

"Not a word, now," he said. "No light—pistol ready!"

He began to mount. Sime, following, counted the steps. When they had mounted sixty he knew that they must have come close to the top of the original *mastabah*, and close to the first stage of the pyramid. Despite the shaft beneath, there was little danger of falling, for one could lean back against the wall while seeking for the foothold above.

Dr. Cairn mounted very slowly, fearful of striking his head upon some obstacle. Then on the seventieth step, he found that he could thrust his foot forward and that no obstruction met his knee. They had reached a horizontal passage.

Very softly he whispered back to Sime:

"Take my hand. I have reached the top."

They entered the passage. The heavy, sickly sweet odour almost overpowered them, but, grimly set upon their purpose, they, after one moment of hesitancy, crept on.

A fitful light rose and fell ahead of them. It gleamed upon the polished walls of the corridor in which they now found themselves—that inexplicable light burning in a place which had known no light since the dim ages of the early Pharaohs!

The events of that incredible night had afforded no such emotion as this. This was the crowning wonder, and, in its dreadful mystery, the crowning terror of Méydûm.

When first that lambent light played upon the walls of the passage both stopped, stricken motionless with fear and amazement. Sime, who would have been prepared to swear that the Méydûm Pyramid contained no apartment other than the King's Chamber, now was past mere wonder, past conjecture. But he could still fear. Dr. Cairn, although he had anticipated this, temporarily also fell a victim to the supernatural character of the phenomenon.

They advanced.

They looked into a square chamber of about the same size as the King's Chamber. In fact, although they did not realise it until later, this second apartment, no doubt was situated directly above the first.

The only light was that of a fire burning in a tripod, and by means of this illumination, which rose and fell in a strange manner, it was possible to

perceive the details of the place. But, indeed, at the moment they were not concerned with these; they had eyes only for the black-robed figure beside the tripod.

It was that of a man, who stood with his back towards them, and he chanted monotonously in a tongue unfamiliar to Sime. At certain points in his chant he would raise his arms in such a way that, clad in the black robe, he assumed the appearance of a gigantic bat. Each time that he acted thus the fire in the tripod, as if fanned into new life, would leap up, casting a hellish glare about the place. Then, as the chanter dropped his arms again, the flame would drop also.

A cloud of reddish vapour floated low in the apartment. There were a number of curiously-shaped vessels upon the floor, and against the farther wall, only rendered visible when the flames leapt high, was some motionless white object, apparently hung from the roof.

Dr. Cairn drew a hissing breath and grasped Sime's wrist.

"We are too late!" he said strangely.

He spoke at a moment when his companion, peering through the ruddy gloom of the place, had been endeavouring more clearly to perceive that ominous shape which hung, horrible, in the shadow. He spoke, too, at a moment when the man in the black robe, raised his arms—when, as if obedient to his will, the flames leapt up fitfully.

Although Sime could not be sure of what he saw, the recollection came to him of words recently spoken by Dr. Cairn. He remembered the story of Julian the Apostate, Julian the Emperor—the Necromancer. He remembered what had been found in the Temple of the Moon after Julian's death. He remembered that Lady Lashmore—

And thereupon he experienced such a nausea that but for the fact that Dr. Cairn gripped him he must have fallen.

Tutored in a materialistic school, he could not even now admit that such monstrous things could be. With a necromantic operation taking place before his eyes; with the unholy perfume of the secret incense all but suffocating him; with the dreadful Oracle dully gleaming in the shadows of that temple of evil—his reason would not accept the evidences. Any man of the ancient world—of the middle ages—would have known that he looked upon a professed wizard, upon a magician, who, according to one of the

most ancient formulæ known to mankind, was seeking to question the dead respecting the living.

But how many modern men are there capable of realising such a circumstance? How many who would accept the statement that such operations are still performed, not only in the East, but in Europe? How many who, witnessing this mass of Satan, would accept it for verity, would not deny the evidence of their very senses?

He could not believe such an orgie of wickedness possible. A Pagan emperor might have been capable of these things, but to-day—wondrous is our faith in the virtue of "to-day!"

"Am I mad?" he whispered hoarsely, "or—"

A thinly-veiled shape seemed to float out from that still form in the shadows; it assumed definite outlines; it became a woman, beautiful with a beauty that could only be described as awful.

She wore upon her brow the *uraeus* of Ancient Egyptian royalty; her sole garment was a robe of finest gauze. Like a cloud, like a vision, she floated into the light cast by the tripod.

A voice—a voice which seemed to come from a vast distance, from somewhere outside the mighty granite walls of that unholy place—spoke. The language was unknown to Sime, but the fierce hand-grip upon his wrist grew fiercer. That dead tongue, that language unspoken since the dawn of Christianity, was known to the man who had been the companion of Sir Michael Ferrara.

In upon Sime swept a swift conviction—that one could not witness such a scene as this and live and move again amongst one's fellow-men! In a sort of frenzy, then, he wrenched himself free from the detaining hand, and launched a retort of modern science against the challenge of ancient sorcery.

Raising his Browning pistol, he fired—shot after shot—at that bat-like shape which stood between himself and the tripod!

A thousand frightful echoes filled the chamber with a demon mockery, boomed along those subterranean passages beneath, and bore the conflict of sound into the hidden places of the pyramid which had known not sound for untold generations.

"My God—!"

Vaguely he became aware that Dr. Cairn was seeking to drag him away. Through a cloud of smoke he saw the black-robed figure turn; dream

fashion, he saw the pallid, glistening face of Antony Ferrara; the long, evil eyes, alight like the eyes of a serpent, were fixed upon him. He seemed to stand amid a chaos, in a mad world beyond the borders of reason, beyond the dominions of God. But to his stupefied mind one astounding fact found access.

He had fired at least seven shots at the black-robed figure, and it was not humanly possible that all could have gone wide of their mark.

Yet Antony Ferrara lived!

Utter darkness blotted out the evil vision. Then there was a white light ahead; and feeling that he was struggling for sanity, Sime managed to realise that Dr. Cairn, retreating along the passage, was crying to him, in a voice rising almost to a shriek, to run—run for his life—for his salvation!

"*You should not have fired*!" he seemed to hear.

Unconscious of any contact with the stones—although afterwards he found his knees and shins to be bleeding—he was scrambling down that long, sloping shaft.

He had a vague impression that Dr. Cairn, descending beneath him, sometimes grasped his ankles and placed his feet into the footholes. A continuous roaring sound filled his ears, as if a great ocean were casting its storm waves against the structure around him. The place seemed to rock.

"Down flat!"

Some sense of reality was returning to him. Now he perceived that Dr. Cairn was urging him to crawl back along the short passage by which they had entered from the King's Chamber.

Heedless of hurt, he threw himself down and pressed on.

A blank, like the sleep of exhaustion which follows delirium, came. Then Sime found himself standing in the King's Chamber, Dr. Cairn, who held an electric lamp in his hand, beside him, and half supporting him.

The realities suddenly reasserting themselves,

"I have dropped my pistol!" muttered Sime.

He threw off the supporting arm, and turned to that corner behind the heap of *débris* where was the opening through which they had entered the Satanic temple.

No opening was visible!

"He has closed it!" cried Dr. Cairn. "There are six stone doors between here and the place above! If he had succeeded in shutting *one* of them

before we—?"

"My God!" whispered Sime. "Let us get out! I am nearly at the end of my tether!"

Fear lends wings, and it was with something like the lightness of a bird that Sime descended the shaft. At the bottom—

"On to my shoulders!" he cried, looking up.

Dr. Cairn lowered himself to the foot of the shaft. "You go first," he said.

He was gasping, as if nearly suffocated, but retained a wonderful self-control. Once over into the Borderland, and bravery assumes a new guise; the courage which can face physical danger undaunted, melts in the fires of the unknown.

Sime, his breath whistling sibilantly between his clenched teeth, hauled himself through the low passage, with incredible speed. The two worked their way arduously, up the long slope. They saw the blue sky above them…

"Something like a huge bat," said Robert Cairn, "crawled out upon the first stage. We both fired—"

Dr. Cairn raised his hand. He lay exhausted at the foot of the mound.

"He had lighted the incense," he replied, "and was reciting the secret ritual. I cannot explain. But your shots were wasted. We came too late—"

"Lady Lashmore—"

"Until the Pyramid of Méydûm is pulled down, stone by stone, the world will never know her fate! Sime and I have looked in at the gate of hell! Only the hand of God plucked us back! Look!"

He pointed to Sime. He lay, pallid, with closed eyes—and his hair was abundantly streaked with white!

XX. The Incense

To Robert Cairn it seemed that the boat-train would never reach Charing Cross. His restlessness was appalling. He perpetually glanced from his father, with whom he shared the compartment, to the flying landscape with its vistas of hop-poles; and Dr. Cairn, although he exhibited less anxiety, was, nevertheless, strung to highest tension.

That dash from Cairo homeward had been something of a fevered dream to both men. To learn, whilst one is searching for a malign and implacable enemy in Egypt, that that enemy, having secretly returned to London, is weaving his evil spells around "some we loved, the loveliest and the best," is to know the meaning of ordeal.

In pursuit of Antony Ferrara—the incarnation of an awful evil—Dr. Cairn had deserted his practice, had left England for Egypt. Now he was hurrying back again; for whilst he had sought in strange and dark places of that land of mystery for Antony Ferrara, the latter had been darkly active in London!

Again and again Robert Cairn read the letter which, surely as a royal command, had recalled them. It was from Myra Duquesne. One line in it had fallen upon them like a bomb, had altered all their plans, had shattered the one fragment of peace remaining to them.

In the eyes of Robert Cairn, the whole universe centred around Myra Duquesne; she was the one being in the world of whom he could not bear to think in conjunction with Antony Ferrara. Now he knew that Antony Ferrara was beside her, was, doubtless at this very moment, directing those Black Arts of which he was master, to the destruction of her mind and body —perhaps of her very soul.

Again he drew the worn envelope from his pocket and read that ominous sentence, which, when his eyes had first fallen upon it, had blotted out the sunlight of Egypt.

"…. And you will be surprised to hear that Antony is back in London… and is a frequent visitor here. It is quite like old times…"

Raising his haggard eyes, Robert Cairn saw that his father was watching him.

"Keep calm, my boy," urged the doctor; "it can profit us nothing, it can profit Myra nothing, for you to shatter your nerves at a time when real trials are before you. You are inviting another breakdown. Oh! I know it is hard; but for everybody's sake try to keep yourself in hand."

"I am trying, sir," replied Robert hollowly.

Dr. Cairn nodded, drumming his fingers upon his knee.

"We must be diplomatic," he continued. "That James Saunderson proposed to return to London, I had no idea. I thought that Myra would be far outside the Black maelström in Scotland. Had I suspected that Saunderson would come to London, I should have made other arrangements."

"Of course, sir, I know that. But even so we could never have foreseen this."

Dr. Cairn shook his head.

"To think that whilst we have been scouring Egypt from Port Said to Assouan—*he* has been laughing at us in London!" he said. "Directly after the affair at Méydûm he must have left the country—how, Heaven only knows. That letter is three weeks old, now?"

Robert Cairn nodded. "What may have happened since—what may have happened!"

"You take too gloomy a view. James Saunderson is a Roman guardian. Even Antony Ferrara could make little headway there."

"But Myra says that—Ferrara is—a frequent visitor."

"And Saunderson," replied Dr. Cairn with a grim smile, "is a Scotchman! Rely upon his diplomacy, Rob. Myra will be safe enough."

"God grant that she is!"

At that, silence fell between them, until punctually to time, the train slowed into Charing Cross. Inspired by a common anxiety, Dr. Cairn and his son were first among the passengers to pass the barrier. The car was waiting for them; and within five minutes of the arrival of the train they were whirling through London's traffic to the house of James Saunderson.

It lay in that quaint backwater, remote from motor-bus high-ways—Dulwich Common, and was a rambling red-tiled building which at some time had been a farmhouse. As the big car pulled up at the gate, Saunderson, a large-boned Scotchman, tawny-eyed, and with his grey hair worn long and untidily, came out to meet them. Myra Duquesne stood

beside him. A quick blush coloured her face momentarily; then left it pale again.

Indeed, her pallor was alarming. As Robert Cairn, leaping from the car, seized both her hands and looked into her eyes, it seemed to him that the girl had almost an ethereal appearance. Something clutched at his heart, iced his blood; for Myra Duquesne seemed a creature scarcely belonging to the world of humanity—seemed already half a spirit. The light in her sweet eyes was good to see; but her fragility, and a certain transparency of complexion, horrified him.

Yet, he knew that he must hide these fears from her; and turning to Mr. Saunderson, he shook him warmly by the hand, and the party of four passed by the low porch into the house.

In the hall-way Miss Saunderson, a typical Scottish housekeeper, stood beaming welcome; but in the very instant of greeting her, Robert Cairn stopped suddenly as if transfixed.

Dr. Cairn also pulled up just within the door, his nostrils quivering and his clear grey eyes turning right and left—searching the shadows.

Miss Saunderson detected this sudden restraint.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked anxiously.

Myra, standing beside Mr. Saunderson, began to look frightened. But Dr. Cairn, shaking off the incubus which had descended upon him, forced a laugh, and clapping his hand upon Robert's shoulder cried:

"Wake up, my boy! I know it is good to be back in England again, but keep your day-dreaming for after lunch!"

Robert Cairn forced a ghostly smile in return, and the odd incident promised soon to be forgotten.

"How good of you," said Myra as the party entered the dining-room, "to come right from the station to see us. And you must be expected in Half-Moon Street, Dr. Cairn?"

"Of course we came to see *you* first," replied Robert Cairn significantly.

Myra lowered her face and pursued that subject no further.

No mention was made of Antony Ferrara, and neither Dr. Cairn nor his son cared to broach the subject. The lunch passed off, then, without any reference to the very matter which had brought them there that day.

It was not until nearly an hour later that Dr. Cairn and his son found themselves alone for a moment. Then, with a furtive glance about him, the

doctor spoke of that which had occupied his mind, to the exclusion of all else, since first they had entered the house of James Saunderson.

"You noticed it, Rob?" he whispered.

"My God! it nearly choked me!"

Dr. Cairn nodded grimly.

"It is all over the house," he continued, "in every room that I have entered. They are used to it, and evidently do not notice it, but coming in from the clean air, it is—"

"Abominable, unclean—unholy!"

"We know it," continued Dr. Cairn softly—"that smell of unholiness; we have good reason to know it. It heralded the death of Sir Michael Ferrara. It heralded the death of—another."

"With a just God in heaven, can such things be?"

"It is the secret incense of Ancient Egypt," whispered Dr. Cairn, glancing towards the open door; "it is the odour of that Black Magic which, by all natural law, should be buried and lost for ever in the tombs of the ancient wizards. Only two living men within my knowledge know the use and the hidden meaning of that perfume; only one living man has ever dared to make it—to use it…"

"Antony Ferrara—"

"We knew he was here, boy; now we know that he is using his powers here. Something tells me that we come to the end of the fight. May victory be with the just."

XXI. The Magician

Half-Moon Street was bathed in tropical sunlight. Dr. Cairn, with his hands behind him, stood looking out of the window. He turned to his son, who leant against a corner of the bookcase in the shadows of the big room.

"Hot enough for Egypt, Rob," he said.

Robert Cairn nodded.

"Antony Ferrara," he replied, "seemingly travels his own atmosphere with him. I first became acquainted with his hellish activities during a phenomenal thunderstorm. In Egypt his movements apparently corresponded with those of the *Khamsîn*. Now,"—he waved his hand vaguely towards the window—"this is Egypt in London."

"Egypt is in London, indeed," muttered Dr. Cairn. "Jermyn has decided that our fears are well-founded."

"You mean, sir, that the will—?"

"Antony Ferrara would have an almost unassailable case in the event of—of Myra—"

"You mean that her share of the legacy would fall to that fiend, if she—"

"If she died? Exactly."

Robert Cairn began to stride up and down the room, clenching and unclenching his fists. He was a shadow of his former self, but now his cheeks were flushed and his eyes feverishly bright.

"Before Heaven!" he cried suddenly, "the situation is becoming unbearable. A thing more deadly than the Plague is abroad here in London. Apart from the personal aspect of the matter—of which I dare not think!—what do we know of Ferrara's activities? His record is damnable. To our certain knowledge his victims are many. If the murder of his adoptive father, Sir Michael, was actually the first of his crimes, we know of three other poor souls who beyond any shadow of doubt were launched into eternity by the Black Arts of this ghastly villain—"

"We do, Rob," replied Dr. Cairn sternly.

"He has made attempts upon you; he has made attempts upon me. We owe our survival"—he pointed to a row of books upon a corner shelf—"to the knowledge which you have accumulated in half a life-time of research.

In the face of science, in the face of modern scepticism, in the face of our belief in a benign God, this creature, Antony Ferrara, has proved himself conclusively to be—"

"He is what the benighted ancients called a magician," interrupted Dr. Cairn quietly. "He is what was known in the Middle Ages as a wizard. What that means, exactly, few modern thinkers know; but I know, and one day others will know. Meanwhile his shadow lies upon a certain house."

Robert Cairn shook his clenched fists in the air. In some men the gesture had seemed melodramatic; in him it was the expression of a soul's agony.

"But, sir!" he cried—"are we to wait, inert, helpless? Whatever he is, he has a human body and there are bullets, there are knives, there are a hundred drugs in the British Pharmacopia!"

"Quite so," answered Dr. Cairn, watching his son closely, and, by his own collected manner, endeavouring to check the other's growing excitement. "I am prepared at any personal risk to crush Antony Ferrara as I would crush a scorpion; but where is he?"

Robert Cairn groaned, dropping into the big red-leathern armchair, and burying his face in his hands.

"Our position is maddening," continued the elder man. "We know that Antony Ferrara visits Mr. Saunderson's house; we know that he is laughing at our vain attempts to trap him. Crowning comedy of all, Saunderson does not know the truth; he is not the type of man who could ever understand; in fact we dare not tell him—and we dare not tell Myra. The result is that those whom we would protect, unwittingly are working against us, and against themselves."

"That perfume!" burst out Robert Cairn; "that hell's incense which loads the atmosphere of Saunderson's house! To think that we know what it means—that we know what it means!"

"Perhaps *I* know even better than you do, Rob. The occult uses of perfume are not understood nowadays; but you, from experience, know that certain perfumes have occult uses. At the Pyramid of Méydûm in Egypt, Antony Ferrara dared—and the just God did not strike him dead—to make a certain incense. It was often made in the remote past, and a portion of it, probably in a jar hermetically sealed, had come into his possession. I once detected its dreadful odour in his rooms in London. Had you asked me prior to that occasion if any of the hellish stuff had survived to the present day, I

should most emphatically have said *no*; I should have been wrong. Ferrara had some. He used it all—and went to the Méydûm pyramid to renew his stock."

Robert Cairn was listening intently.

"All this brings me back to a point which I have touched upon before, sir," he said: "To my certain knowledge, the late Sir Michael and yourself have delved into the black mysteries of Egypt more deeply than any men of the present century. Yet Antony Ferrara, little more than a boy, has mastered secrets which you, after years of research, have failed to grasp. What does this mean, sir?"

Dr. Cairn, again locking his hands behind him, stared out of the window.

"He is not an ordinary mortal," continued his son. "He is supernormal—and supernaturally wicked. You have admitted—indeed it was evident—that he is merely the adopted son of the late Sir Michael. Now that we have entered upon the final struggle—for I feel that this is so—I will ask you again: *Who is Antony Ferrara*?"

Dr. Cairn spun around upon the speaker; his grey eyes were very bright.

"There is one little obstacle," he answered, "which has deterred me from telling you what you have asked so often. Although—and you have had dreadful opportunities to peer behind the veil—you will find it hard to believe, I hope very shortly to be able to answer that question, and to tell you who Antony Ferrara really is."

Robert Cairn beat his fist upon the arm of the chair.

"I sometimes wonder," he said, "that either of us has remained sane. Oh! what does it mean? What can we do? What can we do?"

"We must watch, Rob. To enlist the services of Saunderson, would be almost impossible; he lives in his orchid houses; they are his world. In matters of ordinary life I can trust him above most men, but in this—"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Could we suggest to him a reason—any reason but the real one—why he should refuse to receive Ferrara?"

"It might destroy our last chance."

"But sir," cried Robert wildly, "it amounts to this: we are using Myra as a lure!"

"In order to save her, Rob—simply in order to save her," retorted Dr. Cairn sternly.

"How ill she looks," groaned the other; "how pale and worn. There are great shadows under her eyes—oh! I cannot bear to think about her!"

"When was *he* last there?"

"Apparently some ten days ago. You may depend upon him to be aware of our return! He will not come there again, sir. But there are other ways in which he might reach her—does he not command a whole shadow army! And Mr. Saunderson is entirely unsuspicious—and Myra thinks of the fiend as a brother! Yet—she has never once spoken of him. I wonder…"

Dr. Cairn sat deep in reflection. Suddenly he took out his watch.

"Go around now," he said—"you will be in time for lunch—and remain there until I come. From to-day onward, although actually your health does not permit of the strain, we must watch, watch night and day."

XXII. Myra

Myra Duquesne came under an arch of roses to the wooden seat where Robert Cairn awaited her. In her plain white linen frock, with the sun in her hair and her eyes looking unnaturally large, owing to the pallor of her beautiful face, she seemed to the man who rose to greet her an ethereal creature, but lightly linked to the flesh and blood world.

An impulse, which had possessed him often enough before, but which hitherto he had suppressed, suddenly possessed him anew, set his heart beating, and filled his veins with fire. As a soft blush spread over the girl's pale cheeks, and, with a sort of timidity, she held out her hand, he leapt to his feet, threw his arms around her, and kissed her; kissed her eyes, her hair, her lips!

There was a moment of frightened hesitancy… and then she had resigned herself to this sort of savage tenderness which was better in its very brutality than any caress she had ever known, which thrilled her with a glorious joy such as, she realised now, she had dreamt of and lacked, and wanted; which was a harbourage to which she came, blushing, confused—but glad, conquered, and happy in the thrall of that exquisite slavery.

"Myra," he whispered, "Myra! have I frightened you? Will you forgive me?—"

She nodded her head quickly and nestled upon his shoulder.

"I could wait no longer," he murmured in her ear. "Words seemed unnecessary; I just wanted you; you are everything in the world; and,"—he concluded simply—"I took you."

She whispered his name, very softly. What a serenity there is in such a moment, what a glow of secure happiness, of immunity from the pains and sorrows of the world!

Robert Cairn, his arms about this girl, who, from his early boyhood, had been his ideal of womanhood, of love, and of all that love meant, forgot those things which had shaken his life and brought him to the threshold of death, forgot those evidences of illness which marred the once glorious beauty of the girl, forgot the black menace of the future, forgot the wizard

enemy whose hand was stretched over that house and that garden—and was merely happy.

But this paroxysm of gladness—which Eliphas Lévi, last of the Adepts, has so marvellously analysed in one of his works—is of short duration, as are all joys. It is needless to recount, here, the broken sentences (punctuated with those first kisses which sweeten the memory of old age) that now passed for conversation, and which lovers have believed to be conversation since the world began. As dusk creeps over a glorious landscape, so the shadow of Antony Ferrara crept over the happiness of these two.

Gradually that shadow fell between them and the sun; the grim thing which loomed big in the lives of them both, refused any longer to be ignored. Robert Cairn, his arm about the girl's waist, broached the hated subject.

"When did you last see—Ferrara?"

Myra looked up suddenly.

"Over a week—nearly a fortnight, ago—"

"Ah!"

Cairn noted that the girl spoke of Ferrara with an odd sort of restraint for which he was at a loss to account. Myra had always regarded her guardian's adopted son in the light of a brother; therefore her present attitude was all the more singular.

"You did not expect him to return to England so soon?" he asked.

"I had no idea that he was in England," said Myra, "until he walked in here one day. I was glad to see him—then."

"And should you not be glad to see him now?" inquired Cairn eagerly.

Myra, her head lowered, deliberately pressed out a crease in her white skirt.

"One day, last week," she replied slowly, "he—came here, and—acted strangely—"

"In what way?" jerked Cairn.

"He pointed out to me that actually we—he and I—were in no way related."

"Well?"

"You know how I have always liked Antony? I have always thought of him as my brother."

Again she hesitated, and a troubled expression crept over her pale face. Cairn raised his arm and clasped it about her shoulders.

"Tell me all about it," he whispered reassuringly.

"Well," continued Myra in evident confusion, "his behaviour became—embarrassing; and suddenly—he asked me if I could ever love him, not as a brother, but—"

"I understand!" said Cairn grimly. "And you replied?"

"For some time I could not reply at all: I was so surprised, and so—horrified. I cannot explain how I felt about it, but it seemed horrible—it seemed horrible!—"

"But of course, you told him?"

"I told him that I could never be fond of him in any different way—that I could never *think* of it. And although I endeavoured to avoid hurting his feelings, he—took it very badly. He said, in such a queer, choking voice, that he was going away—"

"Away!—from England?"

"Yes; and—he made a strange request."

"What was it?"

"In the circumstances—you see—I felt sorry for him—I did not like to refuse him; it was only a trifling thing. He asked for a lock of my hair!"

"A lock of your hair! And you—"

"I told you that I did not like to refuse—and I let him snip off a tiny piece, with a pair of pocket scissors which he had. Are you angry?"

"Of course not! You—were almost brought up together. You—?"

"Then—" she paused—"he seemed to change. Suddenly, I found myself afraid—dreadfully afraid—"

"Of Ferrara?"

"Not of Antony, exactly. But what is the good of my trying to explain! A most awful dread seized me. His face was no longer the face that I have always known; something—"

Her voice trembled, and she seemed disposed to leave the sentence unfinished; then:

"Something evil—sinister, had come into it."

"And since then," said Cairn, "you have not seen him?"

"He has not been here since then—no."

Cairn, his hands resting upon the girl's shoulders, leant back in the seat, and looked into her troubled eyes with a kind of sad scrutiny.

"You have not been fretting about him?"

Myra shook her head.

"Yet you look as though something were troubling you. This house"—he indicated the low-lying garden with a certain irritation—"is not healthily situated. This place lies in a valley; look at the rank grass—and there are mosquitoes everywhere. You do not look well, Myra."

The girl smiled—a little wistful smile.

"But I was so tired of Scotland," she said. "You do not know how I looked forward to London again. I must admit, though, that I was in better health there; I was quite ashamed of my dairy-maid appearance."

"You have nothing to amuse you here," said Cairn tenderly; "no company, for Mr. Saunderson only lives for his orchids."

"They are very fascinating," said Myra dreamily, "I, too, have felt their glamour. I am the only member of the household whom he allows amongst his orchids—"

"Perhaps you spend too much time there," interrupted Cairn; "that superheated, artificial atmosphere—"

Myra shook her head playfully, patting his arm.

"There is nothing in the world the matter with me," she said, almost in her old bright manner—"now that you are back—"

"I do not approve of orchids," jerked Cairn doggedly. "They are parodies of what a flower should be. Place an Odontoglossum beside a rose, and what a distorted unholy thing it looks!"

"Unholy?" laughed Myra.

"Unholy,—yes!—they are products of feverish swamps and deathly jungles. I hate orchids. The atmosphere of an orchid-house cannot possibly be clean and healthy. One might as well spend one's time in a bacteriological laboratory!"

Myra shook her head with affected seriousness.

"You must not let Mr. Saunderson hear you," she said. "His orchids are his children. Their very mystery enthrals him—and really it is most fascinating. To look at one of those shapeless bulbs, and to speculate upon what kind of bloom it will produce, is almost as thrilling as reading a

sensational novel! He has one growing now—it will bloom some time this week—about which he is frantically excited."

"Where did he get it?" asked Cairn without interest.

"He bought it from a man who had almost certainly stolen it! There were six bulbs in the parcel; only two have lived and one of these is much more advanced than the other; it is *so* high—"

She held out her hand, indicating a height of some three feet from the ground.

"It has not flowered yet?"

"No. But the buds—huge, smooth, egg-shaped things—seem on the point of bursting at any moment. We call it the 'Mystery,' and it is my special care. Mr. Saunderson has shown me how to attend to its simple needs, and if it proves to be a new species—which is almost certain—he is going to exhibit it, and name it after me! Shall you be proud of having an orchid named after—"

"After my wife?" Cairn concluded, seizing her hands. "I could never be more proud of you than I am already…"

XXIII. The Face In the Orchid-House

Dr. Cairn walked to the window, with its old-fashioned leaded panes. A lamp stood by the bedside, and he had tilted the shade so that it shone upon the pale face of the patient—Myra Duquesne.

Two days had wrought a dreadful change in her. She lay with closed eyes, and sunken face upon which ominous shadows played. Her respiration was imperceptible. The reputation of Dr. Bruce Cairn was a well deserved one, but this case puzzled him. He knew that Myra Duquesne was dying before his eyes; he could still see the agonised face of his son, Robert, who at that moment was waiting, filled with intolerable suspense, downstairs in Mr. Saunderson's study; but, withal, he was helpless. He looked out from the rose-entwined casement across the shrubbery, to where the moonlight glittered among the trees.

Those were the orchid-houses; and with his back to the bed, Dr. Cairn stood for long, thoughtfully watching the distant gleams of reflected light. Craig Fenton and Sir Elwin Groves, with whom he had been consulting, were but just gone. The nature of Myra Duquesne's illness had utterly puzzled them, and they had left, mystified.

Downstairs, Robert Cairn was pacing the study, wondering if his reason would survive this final blow which threatened. He knew, and his father knew, that a sinister something underlay this strange illness—an illness which had commenced on the day that Antony Ferrara had last visited the house.

The evening was insufferably hot; not a breeze stirred in the leaves; and despite open windows, the air of the room was heavy and lifeless. A faint perfume, having a sort of sweetness, but which yet was unutterably revolting, made itself perceptible to the nostrils. Apparently it had pervaded the house by slow degrees. The occupants were so used to it that they did not notice it at all.

Dr. Cairn had busied himself that evening in the sick-room, burning some pungent preparation, to the amazement of the nurse and of the consultants. Now the biting fumes of his pastilles had all been wafted out of the window and the faint sweet smell was as noticeable as ever.

Not a sound broke the silence of the house; and when the nurse quietly opened the door and entered, Dr. Cairn was still standing staring thoughtfully out of the window in the direction of the orchid-houses. He turned, and walking back to the bedside, bent over the patient.

Her face was like a white mask; she was quite unconscious; and so far as he could see showed no change either for better or worse. But her pulse was slightly more feeble and the doctor suppressed a groan of despair; for this mysterious progressive weakness could only have one end. All his experience told him that unless something could be done—and every expedient thus far attempted had proved futile—Myra Duquesne would die about dawn.

He turned on his heel, and strode from the room, whispering a few words of instruction to the nurse. Descending the stairs, he passed the closed study door, not daring to think of his son who waited within, and entered the dining-room. A single lamp burnt there, and the gaunt figure of Mr. Saunderson was outlined dimly where he sat in the window seat. Crombie, the gardener, stood by the table.

"Now, Crombie," said Dr. Cairn, quietly, closing the door behind him, "what is this story about the orchid-houses, and why did you not mention it before?"

The man stared persistently into the shadows of the room, avoiding Dr. Cairn's glance.

"Since he has had the courage to own up," interrupted Mr. Saunderson, "I have overlooked the matter: but he was afraid to speak before, because he had no business to be in the orchid-houses." His voice grew suddenly fierce —"He knows it well enough!"

"I know, sir, that you don't want me to interfere with the orchids," replied the man, "but I only ventured in because I thought I saw a light moving there—"

"Rubbish!" snapped Mr. Saunderson.

"Pardon me, Saunderson," said Dr. Cairn, "but a matter of more importance than the welfare of all the orchids in the world is under consideration now."

Saunderson coughed dryly.

"You are right, Cairn," he said. "I shouldn't have lost my temper for such a trifle, at a time like this. Tell your own tale, Crombie; I won't interrupt."

"It was last night then," continued the man. "I was standing at the door of my cottage smoking a pipe before turning in, when I saw a faint light moving over by the orchid-houses—"

"Reflection of the moon," muttered Saunderson. "I am sorry. Go on, Crombie!"

"I knew that some of the orchids were very valuable, and I thought there would not be time to call you; also I did not want to worry you, knowing you had worry enough already. So I knocked out my pipe and put it in my pocket, and went through the shrubbery. I saw the light again—it seemed to be moving from the first house into the second. I couldn't see what it was."

"Was it like a candle, or a pocket-lamp?" jerked Dr. Cairn.

"Nothing like that, sir; a softer light, more like a glow-worm; but much brighter. I went around and tried the door, and it was locked. Then I remembered the door at the other end, and I cut round by the path between the houses and the wall, so that I had no chance to see the light again, until I got to the other door. I found this unlocked. There was a close kind of smell in there, sir, and the air was very hot—"

"Naturally, it was hot," interrupted Saunderson.

"I mean much hotter than it should have been. It was like an oven, and the smell was stifling—"

"What smell?" asked Dr. Cairn. "Can you describe it?"

"Excuse me, sir, but I seem to notice it here in this room to-night, and I think I noticed it about the place before—never so strong as in the orchid-houses."

"Go on!" said Dr. Cairn.

"I went through the first house, and saw nothing. The shadow of the wall prevented the moonlight from shining in there. But just as I was about to enter the middle house, I thought I saw—a face."

"What do you mean you *thought* you saw?" snapped Mr. Saunderson.

"I mean, sir, that it was so horrible and so strange that I could not believe it was real—which is one of the reasons why I did not speak before. It reminded me of the face of a gentleman I have seen here—Mr. Ferrara—"

Dr. Cairn stifled an exclamation.

"But in other ways it was quite unlike the gentleman. In some ways it was more like the face of a woman—a very bad woman. It had a sort of

bluish light on it, but where it could have come from, I don't know. It seemed to be smiling, and two bright eyes looked straight out at me."

Crombie stopped, raising his hand to his head confusedly.

"I could see nothing but just this face—low down as if the person it belonged to was crouching on the floor; and there was a tall plant of some kind just beside it—"

"Well," said Dr. Cairn, "go on! What did you do?"

"I turned to run!" confessed the man. "If you had seen that horrible face, you would understand how frightened I was. Then when I got to the door, I looked back."

"I hope you had closed the door behind you," snapped Saunderson.

"Never mind that, never mind that!" interrupted Dr. Cairn.

"I had closed the door behind me—yes, sir—but just as I was going to open it again, I took a quick glance back, and the face had gone! I came out, and I was walking over the lawn, wondering whether I should tell you, when it occurred to me that I hadn't noticed whether the key had been left in or not."

"Did you go back to see?" asked Dr. Cairn.

"I didn't want to," admitted Crombie, "but I did—and—"

"Well?"

"The door was locked, sir!"

"So you concluded that your imagination had been playing you tricks," said Saunderson grimly. "In my opinion you were right."

Dr. Cairn dropped into an armchair.

"All right, Crombie; that will do."

Crombie, with a mumbled "Good-night, gentlemen," turned and left the room.

"Why are you worrying about this matter," inquired Saunderson, when the door had closed, "at a time like the present?"

"Never mind," replied Dr. Cairn wearily. "I must return to Half-Moon Street, now, but I shall be back within an hour."

With no other word to Saunderson, he stood up and walked out to the hall. He rapped at the study door, and it was instantly opened by Robert Cairn. No spoken word was necessary; the burning question could be read in his too-bright eyes. Dr. Cairn laid his hand upon his son's shoulder.

"I won't excite false hopes, Rob," he said huskily. "I am going back to the house, and I want you to come with me."

Robert Cairn turned his head aside, groaning aloud, but his father grasped him by the arm, and together they left that house of shadows, entered the car which waited at the gate, and without exchanging a word *en route*, came to Half-Moon Street.

XXIV. Flowering of the Lotus

Dr. Cairn led the way into the library, switching on the reading-lamp upon the large table. His son stood just within the doorway, his arms folded and his chin upon his breast.

The doctor sat down at the table, watching the other.

Suddenly Robert spoke:

"Is it possible, sir, is it possible—" his voice was barely audible—"that her illness can in any way be due to the orchids?"

Dr. Cairn frowned thoughtfully.

"What do you mean, exactly?" he asked.

"Orchids are mysterious things. They come from places where there are strange and dreadful diseases. Is it not possible that they may convey—"

"Some sort of contagion?" concluded Dr. Cairn. "It is a point that I have seen raised, certainly. But nothing of the sort has ever been established. I have heard something, to-night, though, which—"

"What have you heard, sir?" asked his son eagerly, stepping forward to the table.

"Never mind at the moment, Rob; let me think."

He rested his elbow upon the table, and his chin in his hand. His professional instincts had told him that unless something could be done—something which the highest medical skill in London had thus far been unable to devise—Myra Duquesne had but four hours to live. Somewhere in his mind a memory lurked, evasive, taunting him. This wild suggestion of his son's, that the girl's illness might be due in some way to her contact with the orchids, was in part responsible for this confused memory, but it seemed to be associated, too, with the story of Crombie the gardener—and with Antony Ferrara. He felt that somewhere in the darkness surrounding him there was a speck of light, if he could but turn in the right direction to see it. So, whilst Robert Cairn walked restlessly about the big room, the doctor sat with his chin resting in the palm of his hand, seeking to concentrate his mind upon that vague memory, which defied him, whilst the hand of the library clock crept from twelve towards one; whilst he knew

that the faint life in Myra Duquesne was slowly ebbing away in response to some mysterious condition, utterly outside his experience.

Distant clocks chimed *One*! Three hours only!

Robert Cairn began to beat his fist into the palm of his left hand convulsively. Yet his father did not stir, but sat there, a black-shadowed wrinkle between his brows…

"By God!"

The doctor sprang to his feet, and with feverish haste began to fumble amongst a bunch of keys.

"What is it, sir! What is it?"

The doctor unlocked the drawer of the big table, and drew out a thick manuscript written in small and exquisitely neat characters. He placed it under the lamp, and rapidly began to turn the pages.

"It is hope, Rob!" he said with quiet self-possession.

Robert Cairn came round the table, and leant over his father's shoulder.

"Sir Michael Ferrara's writing!"

"His unpublished book, Rob. We were to have completed it, together, but death claimed him, and in view of the contents, I—perhaps superstitiously—decided to suppress it… Ah!"

He placed the point of his finger upon a carefully drawn sketch, designed to illustrate the text. It was evidently a careful copy from the Ancient Egyptian. It represented a row of priestesses, each having her hair plaited in a thick queue, standing before a priest armed with a pair of scissors. In the centre of the drawing was an altar, upon which stood vases of flowers; and upon the right ranked a row of mummies, corresponding in number with the priestesses upon the left.

"By God!" repeated Dr. Cairn, "we were both wrong, we were both wrong!"

"What do you mean, sir? for Heaven's sake, what do you mean?"

"This drawing," replied Dr. Cairn, "was copied from the wall of a certain tomb—now reclosed. Since we knew that the tomb was that of one of the greatest wizards who ever lived in Egypt, we knew also that the inscription had some magical significance. We knew that the flowers represented here, were a species of the extinct sacred Lotus. All our researches did not avail us to discover for what purpose or by what means these flowers were cultivated. Nor could we determine the meaning of the cutting off,"—he ran

his fingers over the sketch—"of the priestesses' hair by the high priest of the goddess—"

"What goddess, sir?"

"A goddess, Rob, of which Egyptology knows nothing!—a mystical religion the existence of which has been vaguely suspected by a living French *savant*… but this is no time—"

Dr. Cairn closed the manuscript, replaced it and relocked the drawer. He glanced at the clock.

"A quarter past one," he said. "Come, Rob!"

Without hesitation, his son followed him from the house. The car was waiting, and shortly they were speeding through the deserted streets, back to the house where death in a strange guise was beckoning to Myra Duquesne. As the car started—

"Do you know," asked Dr. Cairn, "if Saunderson has bought any orchids —*quite* recently, I mean?"

"Yes," replied his son dully; "he bought a small parcel only a fortnight ago."

"A fortnight!" cried Dr. Cairn excitedly—"you are sure of that? You mean that the purchase was made since Ferrara—"

"Ceased to visit the house? Yes. Why!—it must have been the very day after!"

Dr. Cairn clearly was labouring under tremendous excitement.

"Where did he buy these orchids?" he asked, evenly.

"From someone who came to the house—someone he had never dealt with before."

The doctor, his hands resting upon his knees, was rapidly drumming with his fingers.

"And—did he cultivate them?"

"Two only proved successful. One is on the point of blooming—if it is not blooming already. He calls it the 'Mystery.'"

At that, the doctor's excitement overcame him. Suddenly leaning out of the window, he shouted to the chauffeur:

"Quicker! Quicker! Never mind risks. Keep on top speed!"

"What is it, sir?" cried his son. "Heavens! what is it?"

"Did you say that it might have bloomed, Rob?"

"Myra"—Robert Cairn swallowed noisily—"told me three days ago that it was expected to bloom before the end of the week."

"What is it like?"

"A thing four feet high, with huge egg-shaped buds."

"Merciful God grant that we are in time," whispered Dr. Cairn. "I could believe once more in the justice of Heaven, if the great knowledge of Sir Michael Ferrara should prove to be the weapon to destroy the fiend whom we raised!—he and I—may we be forgiven!'"

Robert Cairn's excitement was dreadful.

"Can you tell me nothing?" he cried. "What do you hope? What do you fear?"

"Don't ask me, Rob," replied his father; "you will know within five minutes."

The car indeed was leaping along the dark suburban roads at a speed little below that of an express train. Corners the chauffeur negotiated in racing fashion, so that at times two wheels thrashed the empty air; and once or twice the big car swung round as upon a pivot only to recover again in response to the skilled tactics of the driver.

They roared down the sloping narrow lane to the gate of Mr. Saunderson's house with a noise like the coming of a great storm, and were nearly hurled from their seats when the brakes were applied, and the car brought to a standstill.

Dr. Cairn leapt out, pushed open the gate and ran up to the house, his son closely following. There was a light in the hall and Miss Saunderson who had expected them, and had heard their stormy approach, already held the door open. In the hall—

"Wait here one moment," said Dr. Cairn.

Ignoring Saunderson, who had come out from the library, he ran upstairs. A minute later, his face very pale, he came running down again.

"She is worse?" began Saunderson, "but—"

"Give me the key of the orchid-house!" said Dr. Cairn tersely.

"Orchid-house!—"

"Don't hesitate. Don't waste a second. Give me the key."

Saunderson's expression showed that he thought Dr. Cairn to be mad, but nevertheless he plunged his hand into his pocket and pulled out a key-ring. Dr. Cairn snatched it in a flash.

"Which key?" he snapped.

"The Chubb, but—"

"Follow me, Rob!"

Down the hall he raced, his son beside him, and Mr. Saunderson following more slowly. Out into the garden he went and over the lawn towards the shrubbery.

The orchid-houses lay in dense shadow; but the doctor almost threw himself against the door.

"Strike a match!" he panted. Then—"Never mind—I have it!"

The door flew open with a bang. A sickly perfume swept out to them.

"Matches! matches, Rob! this way!"

They went stumbling in. Robert Cairn took out a box of matches—and struck one. His father was further along, in the centre building.

"Your knife, boy—quick! *quick*!"

As the dim light crept along the aisle between the orchids, Robert Cairn saw his father's horror-stricken face… and saw a vivid green plant growing in a sort of tub, before which the doctor stood. Four huge, smooth, egg-shaped buds grew upon the leafless stems; two of them were on the point of opening, and one already showed a delicious, rosy flush about its apex.

Dr. Cairn grasped the knife which Robert tremblingly offered him. The match went out. There was a sound of hacking, a soft *swishing*, and a dull thud upon the tiled floor.

As another match fluttered into brief life, the mysterious orchid, severed just above the soil, fell from the tub. Dr. Cairn stamped the swelling buds under his feet. A profusion of colourless sap was pouring out upon the floor.

Above the intoxicating odour of the place, a smell like that of blood made itself perceptible.

The second match went out.

"Another—"

Dr. Cairn's voice rose barely above a whisper. With fingers quivering, Robert Cairn managed to light a third match. His father, from a second tub, tore out a smaller plant and ground its soft tentacles beneath his feet. The place smelt like an operating theatre. The doctor swayed dizzily as the third match became extinguished, clutching at his son for support.

"Her life was in it, boy!" he whispered. "She would have died in the hour that it bloomed! The priestesses—were consecrated to this… Let me get

into the air—"

Mr. Saunderson, silent with amazement, met them.

"Don't speak," said Dr. Cairn to him. "Look at the dead stems of your 'Mystery.' You will find a thread of bright hair in the heart of each!…"

Dr. Cairn opened the door of the sick-room and beckoned to his son, who, haggard, trembling, waited upon the landing.

"Come in, boy," he said softly—"and thank God!"

Robert Cairn, on tiptoe, entered. Myra Duquesne, pathetically pale but with that dreadful, ominous shadow gone from her face, turned her wistful eyes towards the door; and their wistfulness became gladness.

"Rob!" she sighed—and stretched out her arms.

XXV. Cairn Meets Ferrara

Not the least of the trials which Robert Cairn experienced during the time that he and his father were warring with their supernaturally equipped opponent was that of preserving silence upon this matter which loomed so large in his mind, and which already had changed the course of his life.

Sometimes he met men who knew Ferrara, but who knew him only as a man about town of somewhat evil reputation. Yet even to these he dared not confide what he knew of the true Ferrara; undoubtedly they would have deemed him mad had he spoken of the knowledge and of the deeds of this uncanny, this fiendish being. How would they have listened to him had he sought to tell them of the den of spiders in Port Said; of the bats of Méydûm; of the secret incense and of how it was made; of the numberless murders and atrocities, wrought by means not human, which stood to the account of this adopted son of the late Sir Michael Ferrara?

So, excepting his father, he had no confidant; for above all it was necessary to keep the truth from Myra Duquesne—from Myra around whom his world circled, but who yet thought of the dreadful being who wielded the sorcery of forgotten ages, as a brother. Whilst Myra lay ill—not yet recovered from the ghastly attack made upon her life by the man whom she trusted—whilst, having plentiful evidence of his presence in London, Dr. Cairn and himself vainly sought for Antony Ferrara; whilst any night might bring some unholy visitant to his rooms, obedient to the will of this modern wizard; whilst these fears, anxieties, doubts, and surmises danced, impish, through his brain, it was all but impossible to pursue with success, his vocation of journalism. Yet for many reasons it was necessary that he should do so, and so he was employed upon a series of articles which were the outcome of his recent visit to Egypt—his editor having given him that work as being less exacting than that which properly falls to the lot of the Fleet Street copy-hunter.

He left his rooms about three o'clock in the afternoon, in order to seek, in the British Museum library, a reference which he lacked. The day was an exceedingly warm one, and he derived some little satisfaction from the fact that, at his present work, he was not called upon to endue the armour of

respectability. Pipe in mouth, he made his way across the Strand towards Bloomsbury.

As he walked up the steps, crossed the hall-way, and passed in beneath the dome of the reading-room, he wondered if, amid those mountains of erudition surrounding him, there was any wisdom so strange, and so awful, as that of Antony Ferrara.

He soon found the information for which he was looking, and having copied it into his notebook, he left the reading-room. Then, as he was recrossing the hall near the foot of the principal staircase, he paused. He found himself possessed by a sudden desire to visit the Egyptian Rooms, upstairs. He had several times inspected the exhibits in those apartments, but never since his return from the land to whose ancient civilisation they bore witness.

Cairn was not pressed for time in these days, therefore he turned and passed slowly up the stairs.

There were but few visitors to the grove of mummies that afternoon. When he entered the first room he found a small group of tourists passing idly from case to case; but on entering the second, he saw that he had the apartment to himself. He remembered that his father had mentioned on one occasion that there was a ring in this room which had belonged to the Witch-Queen. Robert Cairn wondered in which of the cases it was exhibited, and by what means he should be enabled to recognise it.

Bending over a case containing scarabs and other amulets, many set in rings, he began to read the inscriptions upon the little tickets placed beneath some of them; but none answered to the description, neither the ticketed nor the unticketed. A second case he examined with like results. But on passing to a third, in an angle near the door, his gaze immediately lighted upon a gold ring set with a strange green stone, engraved in a peculiar way. It bore no ticket, yet as Robert Cairn eagerly bent over it, he knew, beyond the possibility of doubt, that this was the ring of the Witch-Queen.

Where had he seen it, or its duplicate?

With his eyes fixed upon the gleaming stone, he sought to remember. That he had seen this ring before, or one exactly like it, he knew, but strangely enough he was unable to determine where and upon what occasion. So, his hands resting upon the case, he leant, peering down at the singular gem. And as he stood thus, frowning in the effort of recollection, a

dull white hand, having long tapered fingers, glided across the glass until it rested directly beneath his eyes. Upon one of the slim fingers was an exact replica of the ring in the case!

Robert Cairn leapt back with a stifled exclamation.

Antony Ferrara stood before him!

"The Museum ring is a copy, dear Cairn," came the huskily musical, hateful voice; "the one upon my finger is the real one."

Cairn realised in his own person, the literal meaning of the overworked phrase, "frozen with amazement." Before him stood the most dangerous man in Europe; a man who had done murder and worse; a man only in name, a demon in nature. His long black eyes half-closed, his perfectly chiselled ivory face expressionless, and his blood-red lips parted in a mirthless smile, Antony Ferrara watched Cairn—Cairn whom he had sought to murder by means of hellish art.

Despite the heat of the day, he wore a heavy overcoat, lined with white fox fur. In his right hand—for his left still rested upon the case—he held a soft hat. With an easy nonchalance, he stood regarding the man who had sworn to kill him, and the latter made no move, uttered no word. Stark amazement held him inert.

"I knew that you were in the Museum, Cairn," Ferrara continued, still having his basilisk eyes fixed upon the other from beneath the drooping lids, "and I called to you to join me here."

Still Cairn did not move, did not speak.

"You have acted very harshly towards me in the past, dear Cairn; but because my philosophy consists in an admirable blending of that practised in Sybaris with that advocated by the excellent Zeno; because whilst I am prepared to make my home in a Diogenes' tub, I, nevertheless, can enjoy the fragrance of a rose, the flavour of a peach—"

The husky voice seemed to be hypnotising Cairn; it was a siren's voice, thralling him.

"Because," continued Ferrara evenly, "in common with all humanity I am compound of man and woman, I can resent the enmity which drives me from shore to shore, but being myself a connoisseur of the red lips and laughing eyes of maidenhood—I am thinking, more particularly of Myra—I can forgive you, dear Cairn—"

Then Cairn recovered himself.

"You white-faced cur!" he snarled through clenched teeth; his knuckles whitened as he stepped around the case. "You dare to stand there mocking me—"

Ferrara again placed the case between himself and his enemy.

"Pause, my dear Cairn," he said, without emotion. "What would you do? Be discreet, dear Cairn; reflect that I have only to call an attendant in order to have you pitched ignominiously into the street."

"Before God! I will throttle the life from you!" said Cairn, in a voice savagely hoarse.

He sprang again towards Ferrara. Again the latter dodged around the case with an agility which defied the heavier man.

"Your temperament is so painfully Celtic, Cairn," he protested mockingly. "I perceive quite clearly that you will not discuss this matter judicially. Must I then call for the attendant?"

Cairn clenched his fists convulsively. Through all the tumult of his rage, the fact had penetrated—that he was helpless. He could not attack Ferrara in that place; he could not detain him against his will. For Ferrara had only to claim official protection to bring about the complete discomfiture of his assailant. Across the case containing the duplicate ring, he glared at this incarnate fiend, whom the law, which he had secretly outraged, now served to protect. Ferrara spoke again in his huskily musical voice.

"I regret that you will not be reasonable, Cairn. There is so much that I should like to say to you; there are so many things of interest which I could tell you. Do you know in some respects I am peculiarly gifted, Cairn? At times I can recollect, quite distinctly, particulars of former incarnations. Do you see that priestess lying there, just through the doorway? I can quite distinctly remember having met her when she was a girl; she was beautiful, Cairn. And I can even recall how, one night beside the Nile—but I see that you are growing impatient! If you will not avail yourself of this opportunity, I must bid you good-day—"

He turned and walked towards the door. Cairn leapt after him; but Ferrara, suddenly beginning to run, reached the end of the Egyptian Room and darted out on to the landing, before his pursuer had time to realise what he was about.

At the moment that Ferrara turned the corner ahead of him, Cairn saw something drop. Coming to the end of the room, he stooped and picked up

this object, which was a plaited silk cord about three feet in length. He did not pause to examine it more closely, but thrust it into his pocket and raced down the steps after the retreating figure of Ferrara. At the foot, a constable held out his arm, detaining him. Cairn stopped in surprise.

"I must ask you for your name and address," said the constable, gruffly.

"For Heaven's sake! what for?"

"A gentleman has complained—"

"My good man!" exclaimed Cairn, and proffered his card—"it is—it is a practical joke on his part. I know him well—"

The constable looked at the card and from the card, suspiciously, back to Cairn. Apparently the appearance of the latter reassured him—or he may have formed a better opinion of Cairn, from the fact that half-a-crown had quickly changed hands.

"All right, sir," he said, "it is no affair of mine; he did not charge you with anything—he only asked me to prevent you from following him."

"Quite so," snapped Cairn irritably, and dashed off along the gallery in the hope of overtaking Ferrara.

But, as he had feared, Ferrara had made good use of his ruse to escape. He was nowhere to be seen; and Cairn was left to wonder with what object he had risked the encounter in the Egyptian Room—for that it had been deliberate, and not accidental, he quite clearly perceived.

He walked down the steps of the Museum, deep in reflection. The thought that he and his father for months had been seeking the fiend Ferrara, that they were sworn to kill him as they would kill a mad dog; and that he, Robert Cairn, had stood face to face with Ferrara, had spoken with him; and had let him go free, unscathed, was maddening. Yet, in the circumstances, how could he have acted otherwise?

With no recollection of having traversed the intervening streets, he found himself walking under the archway leading to the court in which his chambers were situated; in the far corner, shadowed by the tall plane tree, where the worn iron railings of the steps and the small panes of glass in the solicitor's window on the ground floor called up memories of Charles Dickens, he paused, filled with a sort of wonderment. It seemed strange to him that such an air of peace could prevail, anywhere, whilst Antony Ferrara lived and remained at large.

He ran up the stairs to the second landing, opened the door, and entered his chambers. He was oppressed to-day with a memory, the memory of certain gruesome happenings whereof these rooms had been the scene. Knowing the powers of Antony Ferrara he often doubted the wisdom of living there alone, but he was persuaded that to allow these fears to make headway, would be to yield a point to the enemy. Yet there were nights when he found himself sleepless, listening for sounds which had seemed to arouse him; imagining sinister whispers in his room—and imagining that he could detect the dreadful odour of the secret incense.

Seating himself by the open window, he took out from his pocket the silken cord which Ferrara had dropped in the Museum, and examined it curiously. His examination of the thing did not serve to enlighten him respecting its character. It was merely a piece of silken cord, very closely and curiously plaited. He threw it down on the table, determined to show it to Dr. Cairn at the earliest opportunity. He was conscious of a sort of repugnance; and prompted by this, he carefully washed his hands as though the cord had been some unclean thing. Then, he sat down to work, only to realise immediately, that work was impossible until he had confided in somebody his encounter with Ferrara.

Lifting the telephone receiver, he called up Dr. Cairn, but his father was not at home.

He replaced the receiver, and sat staring vaguely at his open notebook.

XXVI. The Ivory Hand

For close upon an hour Robert Cairn sat at his writing-table, endeavouring to puzzle out a solution to the mystery of Ferrara's motive. His reflections served only to confuse his mind.

A tangible clue lay upon the table before him—the silken cord. But it was a clue of such a nature that, whatever deductions an expert detective might have based upon it, Robert Cairn could base none. Dusk was not far off, and he knew that his nerves were not what they had been before those events which had led to his Egyptian journey. He was back in his own chamber—scene of one gruesome outrage in Ferrara's unholy campaign; for darkness is the ally of crime, and it had always been in the darkness that Ferrara's activities had most fearfully manifested themselves.

What was that?

Cairn ran to the window, and, leaning out, looked down into the court below. He could have sworn that a voice—a voice possessing a strange music, a husky music, wholly hateful—had called him by name. But at the moment the court was deserted, for it was already past the hour at which members of the legal fraternity desert their business premises to hasten homewards. Shadows were creeping under the quaint old archways; shadows were draping the ancient walls. And there was something in the aspect of the place which reminded him of a quadrangle at Oxford, across which, upon a certain fateful evening, he and another had watched the red light rising and falling in Antony Ferrara's rooms.

Clearly his imagination was playing him tricks; and against this he knew full well that he must guard himself. The light in his rooms was growing dim, but instinctively his gaze sought out and found the mysterious silken cord amid the litter on the table. He contemplated the telephone, but since he had left a message for his father, he knew that the latter would ring him up directly he returned.

Work, he thought, should be the likeliest antidote to the poisonous thoughts which oppressed his mind, and again he seated himself at the table and opened his notes before him. The silken rope lay close to his left hand, but he did not touch it. He was about to switch on the reading lamp, for it

was now too dark to write, when his mind wandered off along another channel of reflection. He found himself picturing Myra as she had looked the last time that he had seen her.

She was seated in Mr. Saunderson's garden, still pale from her dreadful illness, but beautiful—more beautiful in the eyes of Robert Cairn than any other woman in the world. The breeze was blowing her rebellious curls across her eyes—eyes bright with a happiness which he loved to see.

Her cheeks were paler than they were wont to be, and the sweet lips had lost something of their firmness. She wore a short cloak, and a wide-brimmed hat, unfashionable, but becoming. No one but Myra could successfully have worn that hat, he thought.

Wrapt in such lover-like memories, he forgot that he had sat down to write—forgot that he held a pen in his hand—and that this same hand had been outstretched to ignite the lamp.

When he ultimately awoke again to the hard facts of his lonely environment, he also awoke to a singular circumstance; he made the acquaintance of a strange phenomenon.

He had been writing unconsciously!

And this was what he had written:

"Robert Cairn—renounce your pursuit of me, and renounce Myra; or to-night—" The sentence was unfinished.

Momentarily, he stared at the words, endeavouring to persuade himself that he had written them consciously, in idle mood. But some voice within gave him the lie; so that with a suppressed groan he muttered aloud:

"It has begun!"

Almost as he spoke there came a sound, from the passage outside, that led him to slide his hand across the table—and to seize his revolver.

The visible presence of the little weapon reassured him; and, as a further sedative, he resorted to tobacco, filled and lighted his pipe, and leant back in the chair, blowing smoke rings towards the closed door.

He listened intently—and heard the sound again.

It was a soft *hiss*!

And now, he thought he could detect another noise—as of some creature dragging its body along the floor.

"A lizard!" he thought; and a memory of the basilisk eyes of Antony Ferrara came to him.

Both the sounds seemed to come slowly nearer and nearer—the dragging thing being evidently responsible for the hissing; until Cairn decided that the creature must be immediately outside the door.

Revolver in hand, he leapt across the room, and threw the door open.

The red carpet, to right and left, was innocent of reptiles!

Perhaps the creaking of the revolving chair, as he had prepared to quit it, had frightened the thing. With the idea before him, he systematically searched all the rooms into which it might have gone.

His search was unavailing; the mysterious reptile was not to be found.

Returning again to the study he seated himself behind the table, facing the door—which he left ajar.

Ten minutes passed in silence—only broken by the dim murmur of the distant traffic.

He had almost persuaded himself that his imagination—quickened by the atmosphere of mystery and horror wherein he had recently moved—was responsible for the hiss, when a new sound came to confute his reasoning.

The people occupying the chambers below were moving about so that their footsteps were faintly audible; but, above these dim footsteps, a rustling—vague, indefinite, demonstrated itself. As in the case of the hiss, it proceeded from the passage.

A light burnt inside the outer door, and this, as Cairn knew, must cast a shadow before any thing—or person—approaching the room.

Sssf! ssf!—came, like the rustle of light draperies.

The nervous suspense was almost unbearable. He waited.

What was creeping, slowly, cautiously, towards the open door?

Cairn toyed with the trigger of his revolver.

"The arts of the West shall try conclusions with those of the East," he said.

A shadow!…

Inch upon inch it grew—creeping across the door, until it covered all the threshold visible.

Someone was about to appear.

He raised the revolver.

The shadow moved along.

Cairn saw the tail of it creep past the door, until no shadow was there!

The shadow had come—and gone… but there was *no substance*!

"I am going mad!"

The words forced themselves to his lips. He rested his chin upon his hands and clenched his teeth grimly. Did the horrors of insanity stare him in the face!

From that recent illness in London—when his nervous system had collapsed, utterly—despite his stay in Egypt he had never fully recovered. "A month will see you fit again," his father had said; but?—perhaps he had been wrong—perchance the affection had been deeper than he had suspected; and now this endless carnival of supernatural happenings had strained the weakened cells, so that he was become as a man in a delirium!

Where did reality end and phantasy begin? Was it all merely subjective?

He had read of such aberrations.

And now he sat wondering if he were the victim of a like affliction—and while he wondered he stared at the rope of silk. That was real.

Logic came to his rescue. If he had seen and heard strange things, so, too, had Sime in Egypt—so had his father, both in Egypt and in London! Inexplicable things were happening around him; and all could not be mad!

"I'm getting morbid again," he told himself; "the tricks of our damnable Ferrara are getting on my nerves. Just what he desires and intends!"

This latter reflection spurred him to new activity; and, pocketing the revolver, he switched off the light in the study and looked out of the window.

Glancing across the court, he thought that he saw a man standing below, peering upward. With his hands resting upon the window ledge, Cairn looked long and steadily.

There certainly was someone standing in the shadow of the tall plane tree —but whether man or woman he could not determine.

The unknown remaining in the same position, apparently watching, Cairn ran downstairs, and, passing out into the Court, walked rapidly across to the tree. There he paused in some surprise; there was no one visible by the tree and the whole court was quite deserted.

"Must have slipped off through the archway," he concluded; and, walking back, he remounted the stair and entered his chambers again.

Feeling a renewed curiosity regarding the silken rope which had so strangely come into his possession, he sat down at the table, and mastering

his distaste for the thing, took it in his hands and examined it closely by the light of the lamp.

He was seated with his back to the windows, facing the door, so that no one could possibly have entered the room unseen by him. It was as he bent down to scrutinise the curious plaiting, that he felt a sensation stealing over him, as though someone were standing very close to his chair.

Grimly determined to resist any hypnotic tricks that might be practised against him, and well assured that there could be no person actually present in the chambers, he sat back, resting his revolver on his knee. Prompted by he knew not what, he slipped the silk cord into the table drawer and turned the key upon it.

As he did so a hand crept over his shoulder—followed by a bare arm of the hue of old ivory—a woman's arm!

Transfixed he sat, his eyes fastened upon the ring of dull metal, bearing a green stone inscribed with a complex figure vaguely resembling a spider, which adorned the index finger.

A faint perfume stole to his nostrils—that of the secret incense; and the ring was the ring of the Witch-Queen!

In this incredible moment he relaxed that iron control of his mind, which, alone, had saved him before. Even as he realised it, and strove to recover himself, he knew that it was too late; he knew that he was lost!

Gloom… blackness, unrelieved by any speck of light; murmuring, subdued, all around; the murmuring of a concourse of people. The darkness was odorous with a heavy perfume.

A voice came—followed by complete silence.

Again the voice sounded, chanting sweetly.

A response followed in deep male voices.

The response was taken up all around—what time a tiny speck grew, in the gloom—and grew, until it took form; and out of the darkness, the shape of a white-robed woman appeared—high up—far away.

Wherever the ray that illumined her figure emanated from, it did not perceptibly dispel the Stygian gloom all about her. She was bathed in dazzling light, but framed in impenetrable darkness.

Her dull gold hair was encircled by a band of white metal—like silver, bearing in front a round, burnished disk, that shone like a minor sun. Above

the disk projected an ornament having the shape of a spider.

The intense light picked out every detail vividly. Neck and shoulders were bare—and the gleaming ivory arms were uplifted—the long slender fingers held aloft a golden casket covered with dim figures, almost undiscernible at that distance.

A glittering zone of the same white metal confined the snowy draperies. Her bare feet peeped out from beneath the flowing robe.

Above, below, and around her was—Memphian darkness!

Silence—the perfume was stifling… A voice, seeming to come from a great distance, cried:—"On your knees to the Book of Thoth! on your knees to the Wisdom Queen, who is deathless, being unborn, who is dead though living, whose beauty is for all men—that all men may die…"

The whole invisible concourse took up the chant, and the light faded, until only the speck on the disk below the spider was visible.

Then that, too, vanished.

A bell was ringing furiously. Its din grew louder and louder; it became insupportable. Cairn threw out his arms and staggered up like a man intoxicated. He grasped at the table-lamp only just in time to prevent it overturning.

The ringing was that of his telephone bell. He had been unconscious, then —under some spell!

He unhooked the receiver—and heard his father's voice.

"That you, Rob?" asked the doctor anxiously.

"Yes, sir," replied Cairn, eagerly, and he opened the drawer and slid his hand in for the silken cord.

"There is something you have to tell me?"

Cairn, without preamble, plunged excitedly into an account of his meeting with Ferrara. "The silk cord," he concluded, "I have in my hand at the present moment, and—"

"Hold on a moment!" came Dr. Cairn's voice, rather grimly.

Followed a short interval; then—

"Hullo, Rob! Listen to this, from to-night's paper: 'A curious discovery was made by an attendant in one of the rooms, of the Indian Section of the British Museum late this evening. A case had been opened in some way, and, although it contained more valuable objects, the only item which the

thief had abstracted was a Thug's strangling-cord from Kundélee (district of Nursingpore).'"

"But, I don't understand—"

"Ferrara *meant* you to find that cord, boy! Remember, he is unacquainted with your chambers and he requires a *focus* for his damnable forces! He knows well that you will have the thing somewhere near to you, and probably he knows something of its awful history! You are in danger! Keep a fast hold upon yourself. I shall be with you in less than half-an-hour!"

XXVII. The Thug's Cord

As Robert Cairn hung up the receiver and found himself cut off again from the outer world, he realised, with terror beyond his control, how in this quiet backwater, so near to the main stream, he yet was far from human companionship.

He recalled a night when, amid such a silence as this which now prevailed about him, he had been made the subject of an uncanny demonstration; how his sanity, his life, had been attacked; how he had fled from the crowding horrors which had been massed against him by his supernaturally endowed enemy.

There was something very terrifying in the quietude of the court—a quietude which to others might have spelt peace, but which, to Robert Cairn, spelled menace. That Ferrara's device was aimed at his freedom, that his design was intended to lead to the detention of his enemy whilst he directed his activities in other directions, seemed plausible, if inadequate. The carefully planned incident at the Museum whereby the constable had become possessed of Cairn's card; the distinct possibility that a detective might knock upon his door at any moment—with the inevitable result of his detention pending inquiries—formed a chain which had seemed complete, save that Antony Ferrara, was the schemer. For another to have compassed so much, would have been a notable victory; for Ferrara, such a victory would be trivial.

What then, did it mean? His father had told him, and the uncanny events of the evening stood evidence of Dr. Cairn's wisdom. The mysterious and evil force which Antony Ferrara controlled was being focussed upon him!

Slight sounds from time to time disturbed the silence and to these he listened attentively. He longed for the arrival of his father—for the strong, calm counsel of the one man in England fitted to cope with the Hell Thing which had uprisen in their midst. That he had already been subjected to some kind of hypnotic influence, he was unable to doubt; and having once been subjected to this influence, he might at any moment (it Was a terrible reflection) fall a victim to it again.

Cairn directed all the energies of his mind to resistance; ill-defined reflection must at all costs be avoided, for the brain vaguely employed he knew to be more susceptible to attack than that directed in a well-ordered channel.

Clocks were chiming the hour—he did not know what hour, nor did he seek to learn. He felt that he was at rapier play with a skilled antagonist, and that to glance aside, however momentarily, was to lay himself open to a fatal thrust.

He had not moved from the table, so that only the reading lamp upon it was lighted, and much of the room lay in half shadow. The silken cord, coiled snake-like, was close to his left hand; the revolver was close to his right. The muffled roar of traffic—diminished, since the hour grew late—reached his ears as he sat. But nothing disturbed the stillness of the court, and nothing disturbed the stillness of the room.

The notes which he had made in the afternoon at the Museum, were still spread open before him, and he suddenly closed the book, fearful of anything calculated to distract him from the mood of tense resistance. His life, and more than his life, depended upon his successfully opposing the insidious forces which beyond doubt, invisibly surrounded that lighted table.

There is a courage which is not physical, nor is it entirely moral; a courage often lacking in the most intrepid soldier. And this was the kind of courage which Robert Cairn now called up to his aid. The occult inquirer can face, unmoved, horrors which would turn the brain of many a man who wears the V.C.; on the other hand it is questionable if the possessor of this peculiar type of bravery could face a bayonet charge. Pluck of the physical sort, Cairn had in plenty; pluck of that more subtle kind he was acquiring from growing intimacy with the terrors of the Borderland.

"Who's there?"

He spoke the words aloud, and the eerie sound of his own voice added a new dread to the enveloping shadows.

His revolver grasped in his hand, he stood up, but slowly and cautiously, in order that his own movements might not prevent him from hearing any repetition of that which had occasioned his alarm. And what had occasioned this alarm?

Either he was become again a victim of the strange trickery which already had borne him, though not physically, from Fleet Street to the secret temple of Méydûm, or with his material senses he had detected a soft rapping upon the door of his room.

He knew that his outer door was closed; he knew that there was no one else in his chambers; yet he had heard a sound as of knuckles beating upon the panels of the door—the closed door of the room in which he sat!

Standing upright, he turned deliberately, and faced in that direction.

The light pouring out from beneath the shade of the table-lamp scarcely touched upon the door at all. Only the edges of the lower panels were clearly perceptible; the upper part of the door was masked in greenish shadow.

Intent, tensely strung, he stood; then advanced in the direction of the switch in order to light the lamp fixed above the mantel-piece and to illuminate the whole of the room. One step forward he took, then… the soft rapping was repeated.

"Who's there?"

This time he cried the words loudly, and acquired some new assurance from the imperative note in his own voice. He ran to the switch and pressed it down. The lamp did not light!

"The filament has burnt out," he muttered.

Terror grew upon him—a terror akin to that which children experience in the darkness. But he yet had a fair mastery of his emotions; when—not suddenly, as is the way of a failing electric lamp—but slowly, uncannily, unnaturally, the table-lamp became extinguished!

Darkness… Cairn turned towards the window. This was a moonless night, and little enough illumination entered the room from the court.

Three resounding raps were struck upon the door.

At that, terror had no darker meaning for Cairn; he had plumbed its ultimate deeps; and now, like a diver, he arose again to the surface.

Heedless of the darkness, of the seemingly supernatural means by which it had been occasioned, he threw open the door and thrust his revolver out into the corridor.

For terrors, he had been prepared—for some gruesome shape such as we read of in *The Magus*. But there was nothing. Instinctively he had looked straight ahead of him, as one looks who expects to encounter a human

enemy. But the hall-way was empty. A dim light, finding access over the door from the stair, prevailed there, yet, it was sufficient to have revealed the presence of anyone or anything, had anyone or anything been present.

Cairn stepped out from the room and was about to walk to the outer door. The idea of flight was strong upon him, for no man can fight the invisible; when, on a level with his eyes—flat against the wall, as though someone crouched there—he saw two white hands!

They were slim hands, like the hands of a woman, and, upon one of the tapered fingers, there dully gleamed a green stone.

A peal of laughter came chokingly from his lips; he knew that his reason was tottering. For these two white hands which now moved along the wall, as though they were sidling to the room which Cairn had just quitted, were attached to no visible body; just two ivory hands were there… *and nothing more*!

That he was in deadly peril, Cairn realised fully. His complete subjection by the will-force of Ferrara had been interrupted by the ringing of the telephone bell But now, the attack had been renewed!

The hands vanished.

Too well he remembered the ghastly details attendant upon the death of Sir Michael Ferrara to doubt that these slim hands were directed upon murderous business.

A soft swishing sound reached him. Something upon the writing-table had been moved.

The strangling cord!

Whilst speaking to his father he had taken it out from the drawer, and when he quitted the room it had lain upon the blotting-pad.

He stepped back towards the outer door.

Something fluttered past his face, and he turned in a mad panic. The dreadful, bodiless hands groped in the darkness between himself and the exit!

Vaguely it came home to him that the menace might be avoidable. He was bathed in icy perspiration.

He dropped the revolver into his pocket, and placed his hands upon his throat. Then he began to grope his way towards the closed door of his bedroom.

Lowering his left hand, he began to feel for the doorknob. As he did so, he saw—and knew the crowning horror of the night—that he had made a false move. In retiring he had thrown away his last, his only, chance.

The phantom hands, a yard apart and holding the silken cord stretched tightly between them, were approaching him swiftly!

He lowered his head, and charged along the passage, with a wild cry.

The cord, stretched taut, struck him under the chin.

Back he reeled.

The cord was about his throat!

"God!" he choked, and thrust up his hands.

Madly, he strove to pluck the deadly silken thing from his neck. It was useless. A grip of steel was drawing it tightly—and ever more tightly—about him…

Despair touched him, and almost he resigned himself. Then,

"Rob! Rob! open the door!"

Dr. Cairn was outside.

A new strength came—and he knew that it was the last atom left to him. To remove the rope was humanly impossible. He dropped his cramped hands, bent his body by a mighty physical effort, and hurled himself forward upon the door.

The latch, now, was just above his head.

He stretched up… and was plucked back. But the fingers of his right hand grasped the knob convulsively.

Even as that superhuman force jerked him back, he turned the knob—and fell.

All his weight hung upon the fingers which were locked about that brass disk in a grip which even the powers of Darkness could not relax.

The door swung open, and Cairn swung back with it.

He collapsed, an inert heap, upon the floor. Dr. Cairn leapt in over him.

When he reopened his eyes, he lay in bed, and his father was bathing his inflamed throat.

"All right, boy! There's no damage done, thank God…"

"The hands!—"

"I quite understand. But *I* saw no hands but your own, Rob; and if it had come to an inquest I could not even have raised my voice against a verdict

of suicide!"

"But I—opened the door!"

"They would have said that you repented your awful act, too late. Although it is almost impossible for a man to strangle himself under such conditions, there is no jury in England who would have believed that Antony Ferrara had done the deed."

XXVIII. The High Priest, Hortotef

The breakfast-room of Dr. Cairn's house in Half-Moon Street presented a cheery appearance, and this despite the gloom of the morning; for thunderous clouds hung low in the sky, and there were distant mutterings ominous of a brewing storm.

Robert Cairn stood looking out of the window. He was thinking of an afternoon at Oxford, when, to such an accompaniment as this, he had witnessed the first scene in the drama of evil wherein the man called Antony Ferrara sustained the leading *rôle*.

That the *denouément* was at any moment to be anticipated, his reason told him; and some instinct that was not of his reason forewarned him, too, that he and his father, Dr. Cairn, were now upon the eve of that final, decisive struggle which should determine the triumph of good over evil—or of evil over good. Already the doctor's house was invested by the uncanny forces marshalled by Antony Ferrara against them. The distinguished patients, who daily flocked to the consulting-room of the celebrated specialist, who witnessed his perfect self-possession and took comfort from his confidence, knowing it for the confidence of strength, little suspected that a greater ill than any flesh is heir to, assailed the doctor to whom they came for healing.

A menace, dreadful and unnatural, hung over that home as now the thunder clouds hung over it. This well-ordered household, so modern, so typical of twentieth century culture and refinement, presented none of the appearances of a beleaguered garrison; yet the house of Dr. Cairn in Half-Moon Street, was nothing less than an invested fortress.

A peal of distant thunder boomed from the direction of Hyde Park. Robert Cairn looked up at the lowering sky as if seeking a portent. To his eyes it seemed that a livid face, malignant with the malignancy of a devil, looked down out of the clouds.

Myra Duquesne came into the breakfast-room.

He turned to greet her, and, in his capacity of accepted lover, was about to kiss the tempting lips, when he hesitated—and contented himself with kissing her hand. A sudden sense of the proprieties had assailed him; he

reflected that the presence of the girl beneath the same roof as himself—although dictated by imperative need—might be open to misconstruction by the prudish. Dr. Cairn had decided that for the present Myra Duquesne must dwell beneath his own roof, as, in feudal days, the Baron at first hint of an approaching enemy formerly was, accustomed to call within the walls of the castle, those whom it was his duty to protect. Unknown to the world, a tremendous battle raged in London, the outer works were in the possession of the enemy—and he was now before their very gates.

Myra, though still pale from her recent illness, already was recovering some of the freshness of her beauty, and in her simple morning dress, as she busied herself about the breakfast table, she was a sweet picture enough, and good to look upon. Robert Cairn stood beside her, looking into her eyes, and she smiled up at him with a happy contentment, which filled him with a new longing. But:

"Did you dream again, last night?" he asked, in a voice which he strove to make matter-of-fact.

Myra nodded—and her face momentarily clouded over.

"The same dream?"

"Yes," she said in a troubled way; "at least—in some respects—"

Dr. Cairn came in, glancing at his watch.

"Good morning!" he cried, cheerily. "I have actually overslept myself."

They took their seats at the table.

"Myra has been dreaming again, sir," said Robert Cairn slowly.

The doctor, serviette in hand, glanced up with an inquiry in his grey eyes.

"We must not overlook any possible weapon," he replied. "Give us particulars of your dream, Myra."

As Marston entered silently with the morning fare, and, having placed the dishes upon the table, as silently withdrew, Myra began:

"I seemed to stand again in the barn-like building which I have described to you before. Through the rafters of the roof I could see the cracks in the tiling, and the moonlight shone through, forming light and irregular patches upon the floor. A sort of door, like that of a stable, with a heavy bar across, was dimly perceptible at the further end of the place. The only furniture was a large deal table and a wooden chair of a very common kind. Upon the table, stood a lamp—"

"What kind of lamp?" jerked Dr. Cairn.

"A silver lamp"—she hesitated, looking from Robert to his father—"one that I have seen in—Antony's rooms. Its shaded light shone upon a closed iron box. I immediately recognised this box. You know that I described to you a dream which—terrified me on the previous night?"

Dr. Cairn nodded, frowning darkly.

"Repeat your account of the former dream," he said. "I regard it as important."

"In my former dream," the girl resumed—and her voice had an odd, far-away quality—"the scene was the same, except that the light of the lamp was shining down upon the leaves of an open book—a very, very old book, written in strange characters. These characters appeared to dance before my eyes—almost as though they lived."

She shuddered slightly; then:

"The same iron box, but open, stood upon the table, and a number of other, smaller, boxes, around it. Each of these boxes was of a different material. Some were wooden; one, I think, was of ivory; one was of silver—and one, of some dull metal, which might have been gold. In the chair, by the table, Antony was sitting. His eyes were fixed upon me, with such a strange expression that I awoke, trembling frightfully—"

Dr. Cairn nodded again.

"And last night?" he prompted.

"Last night," continued Myra, with a note of trouble in her sweet voice—"at four points around this table, stood four smaller lamps and upon the floor were rows of characters apparently traced in luminous paint. They flickered up and then grew dim, then flickered up again, in a sort of phosphorescent way. They extended from lamp to lamp, so as entirely to surround the table and the chair.

"In the chair Antony Ferrara was sitting. He held a wand in his right hand—a wand with several copper rings about it; his left hand rested upon the iron box. In my dream, although I could see this all very clearly, I seemed to see it from a distance; yet, at the same time, I stood apparently close by the tables—I cannot explain. But I could hear nothing; only by the movements of his lips, could I tell that he was speaking—or chanting."

She looked across at Dr. Cairn as if fearful to proceed, but presently continued:

"Suddenly, I saw a frightful shape appear on the far side of the circle; that is to say, the table was between me and this shape. It was just like a grey cloud having the vague outlines of a man, but with two eyes of red fire glaring out from it—horribly—oh! horribly! It extended its shadowy arms as if saluting Antony. He turned and seemed to question it. Then with a look of ferocious anger—oh! it was frightful! he dismissed the shape, and began to walk up and down beside the table, but never beyond the lighted circle, shaking his fists in the air, and, to judge by the movements of his lips, uttering most awful imprecations. He looked gaunt and ill. I dreamt no more, but awoke conscious of a sensation as though some dead weight, which had been pressing upon me had been suddenly removed."

Dr. Cairn glanced across at his son significantly, but the subject was not renewed throughout breakfast.

Breakfast concluded:

"Come into the library, Rob," said Dr. Cairn, "I have half-an-hour to spare, and there are some matters to be discussed."

He led the way into the library with its orderly rows of obscure works, its store of forgotten wisdom, and pointed to the red leathern armchair. As Robert Cairn seated himself and looked across at his father, who sat at the big writing-table, that scene reminded him of many dangers met and overcome in the past; for the library at Half-Moon Street was associated in his mind with some of the blackest pages in the history of Antony Ferrara.

"Do you understand the position, Rob?" asked the doctor, abruptly.

"I think so, sir. This I take it is his last card; this outrageous, ungodly Thing which he has loosed upon us."

Dr. Cairn nodded grimly.

"The exact frontier," he said, "dividing what we may term hypnotism from what we know as sorcery, has yet to be determined; and to which territory the doctrine of Elemental Spirits belongs, it would be purposeless at the moment to discuss. We may note, however, remembering with whom we are dealing, that the one-hundred-and-eighth chapter of the Ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, is entitled 'The Chapter of Knowing the Spirits of the West.' Forgetting, *pro tem.*, that we dwell in the twentieth century, and looking at the situation from the point of view, say, of Eliphas Lévi, Cornelius Agrippa, or the Abbé de Villars—the man whom we know as

Antony Ferrara, is directing against this house, and those within it, a type of elemental spirit, known as a Salamander!"

Robert Cairn smiled slightly.

"Ah!" said the doctor, with an answering smile in which there was little mirth, "we are accustomed to laugh at this mediæval terminology; but by what other can we speak of the activities of Ferrara?"

"Sometimes I think that we are the victims of a common madness," said his son, raising his hand to his head in a manner almost pathetic.

"We are the victims of a common enemy," replied his father sternly. "He employs weapons which, often enough, in this enlightened age of ours, have condemned poor souls, as sane as you or I, to the madhouse! Why, in God's name," he cried with a sudden excitement, "does science persistently ignore all those laws which cannot be examined in the laboratory! Will the day never come when some true man of science shall endeavour to explain the movements of a table upon which a ring of hands has been placed? Will no exact scientist condescend to examine the properties of a *planchette*? Will no one do for the phenomena termed thought-forms, what Newton did for that of the falling apple? Ah! Rob, in some respects, this is a darker age than those which bear the stigma of darkness."

Silence fell for a few moments between them; then:

"One thing is certain," said Robert Cairn, deliberately, "we are in danger!"

"In the greatest danger!"

"Antony Ferrara, realising that we are bent upon his destruction, is making a final, stupendous effort to compass ours. I know that you have placed certain seals upon the windows of this house, and that after dusk these windows are never opened. I know that imprints, strangely like the imprints of *fiery hands*, may be seen at this moment upon the casements of Myra's room, your room, my room, and elsewhere. I know that Myra's dreams are not ordinary, meaningless dreams. I have had other evidence. I don't want to analyse these things; I confess that my mind is not capable of the task. I do not even want to know the meaning of it all; at the present moment, I only want to know one thing: *Who is Antony Ferrara?*"

Dr. Cairn stood up, and turning, faced his son.

"The time has come," he said, "when that question, which you have asked me so many times before, shall be answered. I will tell you all I know, and

leave you to form your own opinion. For ere we go any further, I assure you that I do not know for certain who he is!"

"You have said so before, sir. Will you explain what you mean?"

"When his adoptive father, Sir Michael Ferrara," resumed the doctor, beginning to pace up and down the library—"when Sir Michael and I were in Egypt, in the winter of 1893, we conducted certain inquiries in the Fayûm. We camped for over three months beside the Méydûm Pyramid. The object of our inquiries was to discover the tomb of a certain queen. I will not trouble you with the details, which could be of no interest to anyone but an Egyptologist, I will merely say that apart from the name and titles by which she is known to the ordinary student, this queen is also known to certain inquirers as the Witch-Queen. She was not an Egyptian, but an Asiatic. In short, she was the last high priestess of a cult which became extinct at her death. Her secret mark—I am not referring to a cartouche or anything of that kind—was a spider; it was the mark of the religion or cult which she practised. The high priest of the principal Temple of Ra, during the reign of the Pharaoh who was this queen's husband, was one Hortotef. This was his official position, but secretly he was also the high-priest of the sinister creed to which I have referred. The temple of this religion—a religion allied to Black Magic—was the Pyramid of Méydûm.

"So much we knew—or Ferrara knew, and imparted to me—but for any corroborative evidence of this cult's existence we searched in vain. We explored the interior of the pyramid foot by foot, inch by inch—and found nothing. We knew that there was some other apartment in the pyramid, but in spite of our soundings, measurements and laborious excavations, we did not come upon the entrance to it. The tomb of the queen we failed to discover, also, and therefore concluded that her mummy was buried in the secret chamber of the pyramid. We had abandoned our quest in despair, when, excavating in one of the neighbouring mounds, we made a discovery."

He opened a box of cigars, selected one, and pushed the box towards his son. Robert shook his head, almost impatiently, but Dr. Cairn lighted the cigar ere resuming:

"Directed, as I now believe, by a malignant will, we blundered upon the tomb of the high priest—"

"You found his mummy?"

"We found his mummy—yes. But owing to the carelessness—and the fear—of the native labourers it was exposed to the sun and crumpled—was lost. I would a similar fate had attended the other one which we found!"

"What, another mummy?"

"We discovered"—Dr. Cairn spoke very deliberately—"a certain papyrus. The translation of this is contained"—he rested the point of his finger upon the writing-table—"in the unpublished book of Sir Michael Ferrara, which lies here. That book, Rob, will never be published now! Furthermore, we discovered the mummy of a child—"

"A child."

"A boy. Not daring to trust the natives, we removed it secretly at night to our own tent. Before we commenced the task of unwrapping it, Sir Michael —the most brilliant scholar of his age—had proceeded so far in deciphering the papyrus, that he determined to complete his reading before we proceeded further. It contained directions for performing a certain process. This process had reference to the mummy of the child."

"Do I understand—?"

"Already, you are discrediting the story! Ah! I can see it! but let me finish. Unaided, we performed this process upon the embalmed body of the child. Then, in accordance with the directions of that dead magician—that accursed, malignant being, who thus had sought to secure for himself a new tenure of evil life—we laid the mummy, treated in a certain fashion, in the King's Chamber of the Méydûm Pyramid. It remained there for thirty days; from moon to moon—"

"You guarded the entrance?"

"You may assume what you like, Rob; but I could swear before any jury, that no one entered the pyramid throughout that time. Yet since we were only human, we may have been deceived in this. I have only to add, that when at the rising of the new moon in the ancient Sothic month of Panoi, we again entered the chamber, a living baby, some six months old, perfectly healthy, solemnly blinked up at the lights which we held in our trembling hands!"

Dr. Cairn reseated himself at the table, and turned the chair so that he faced his son. With the smouldering cigar between his teeth, he sat, a slight smile upon his lips.

Now it was Robert's turn to rise and begin feverishly to pace the floor.

"You mean, sir, that this infant—which lay in the pyramid—was—adopted by Sir Michael?"

"Was adopted, yes. Sir Michael engaged nurses for him, reared him here in England, educating him as an Englishman, sent him to a public school, sent him to—"

"To Oxford! Antony Ferrara! What! Do you seriously tell me that this is the history of Antony Ferrara?"

"On my word of honour, boy, that is all I know of Antony Ferrara. Is it not enough?"

"Merciful God! it is incredible," groaned Robert Cairn.

"From the time that he attained to manhood," said Dr. Cairn evenly, "this adopted son of my poor old friend has passed from crime to crime. By means which are beyond my comprehension, and which alone serve to confirm his supernatural origin, he has acquired—knowledge. According to the Ancient Egyptian beliefs the *Khu* (or magical powers) of a fully-equipped Adept, at the death of the body, could enter into anything prepared for its reception. According to these ancient beliefs, then, the *Khu* of the high priest Hortotef entered into the body of this infant who was his son, and whose mother was the Witch-Queen; and to-day in this modern London, a wizard of Ancient Egypt, armed with the lost lore of that magical land, walks amongst us! What that lore is worth, it would be profitless for us to discuss, but that he possesses it—*all* of it—I know, beyond doubt. The most ancient and most powerful magical book which has ever existed was the *Book of Thoth*."

He walked across to a distant shelf, selected a volume, opened it at a particular page, and placed it on his son's knees.

"Read there!" he said, pointing.

The words seemed to dance before the younger man's eyes, and this is what he read:

"To read two pages, enables you to enchant the heavens, the earth, the abyss, the mountains, and the sea; you shall know what the birds of the sky and the crawling things are saying… and when the second page is read, if you are in the world of ghosts, you will grow again in the shape you were on earth…"

"Heavens!" whispered Robert Cairn, "is this the writing of a madman? or can such things possibly be!" He read on:

"This book is in the middle of the river at Koptos, in an iron box—"

"An iron box," he muttered—"an iron box."

"So you recognise the iron box?" jerked Dr. Cairn.

His son read on:

"In the iron box, is a bronze box; in the bronze box, is a sycamore box; in the sycamore box, is an ivory and ebony box; in the ivory and ebony box, is a silver box; in the silver box, is a golden box; and in that is the book. It is twisted all round with snakes, and scorpions, and all the other crawling things…"

"The man who holds the *Book of Thoth*," said Dr. Cairn, breaking the silence, "holds a power which should only belong to God. The creature who is known to the world as Antony Ferrara, holds that book—do you doubt it?—therefore you know now, as I have known long enough, with what manner of enemy we are fighting. You know that, this time, it is a fight to the death—"

He stopped abruptly, staring out of the window.

A man with a large photographic camera, standing upon the opposite pavement, was busily engaged in focussing the house!

"What is this?" muttered Robert Cairn, also stepping to the window.

"It is a link between sorcery and science!" replied the doctor. "You remember Ferrara's photographic gallery at Oxford?—the Zenana, you used to call it!—You remember having seen in his collection photographs of persons who afterwards came to violent ends?"

"I begin to understand!"

"Thus far, his endeavours to concentrate the whole of the evil forces at his command upon this house have had but poor results: having merely caused Myra to dream strange dreams—clairvoyant dreams, instructive dreams, more useful to us than to the enemy; and having resulted in certain marks upon the outside of the house adjoining the windows—windows which I have sealed in a particular manner. You understand?"

"By means of photographs he—concentrates, in some way, malignant forces upon certain points—"

"He focusses his will—yes! The man who can really control his will, Rob, is supreme, below the Godhead. Ferrara can almost do this now. Before he has become wholly proficient—"

"I understand, sir," snapped his son grimly.

"He is barely of age, boy," Dr. Cairn said, almost in a whisper. "In another year, he would menace the world. Where are you going?"

He grasped his son's arm as Robert started for the door.

"That man yonder—"

"Diplomacy, Rob!—Guile against guile. Let the man do his work, which he does in all innocence; *then* follow him. Learn where his studio is situated, and, from that point, proceed to learn—"

"The situation of Ferrara's hiding-place?" cried his son, excitedly. "I understand! Of course; you are right, sir."

"I will leave the inquiry in your hands, Rob. Unfortunately other duties call me."

XXIX. The Wizard's Den

Robert Cairn entered a photographer's shop in Baker Street.

"You recently arranged to do views of some houses in the West End for a gentleman?" he said to the girl in charge.

"That is so," she replied, after a moment's hesitation. "We did pictures of the house of some celebrated specialist—for a magazine article they were intended. Do you wish us to do something similar?"

"Not at the moment," replied Robert Cairn, smiling slightly. "I merely want the address of your client."

"I do not know that I can give you that," replied the girl doubtfully, "but he will be here about eleven o'clock for proofs, if you wish to see him."

"I wonder if I can confide in you," said Robert Cairn, looking the girl frankly in the eyes.

She seemed rather confused.

"I hope there is nothing wrong," she murmured.

"You have nothing to fear," he replied, "but unfortunately there *is* something wrong, which, however, I cannot explain. Will you promise me not to tell your client—I do not ask his name—that I have been here, or have been making any inquiries respecting him?"

"I think I can promise that," she replied.

"I am much indebted to you."

Robert Cairn hastily left the shop, and began to look about him for a likely hiding-place from whence, unobserved, he might watch the photographer's. An antique furniture dealer's, some little distance along on the opposite side, attracted his attention. He glanced at his watch. It was half-past ten.

If, upon the pretence of examining some of the stock, he could linger in the furniture shop for half-an-hour, he would be enabled to get upon the track of Ferrara!

His mind made up, he walked along and entered the shop. For the next half-an-hour, he passed from item to item of the collection displayed there, surveying each in the leisurely manner of a connoisseur; but always he kept

a watch, through the window, upon the photographer's establishment beyond.

Promptly at eleven o'clock a taxi cab drew up at the door, and from it a slim man alighted. He wore, despite the heat of the morning, an overcoat of some woolly material; and in his gait, as he crossed the pavement to enter the shop, there was something revoltingly effeminate; a sort of cat-like grace which had been noticeable in a woman, but which in a man was unnatural, and for some obscure reason, sinister.

It was Antony Ferrara!

Even at that distance and in that brief time, Robert Cairn could see the ivory face, the abnormal, red lips, and the long black eyes of this arch fiend, this monster masquerading as a man. He had much ado to restrain his rising passion; but, knowing that all depended upon his cool action, he waited until Ferrara had entered the photographer's. With a word of apology to the furniture dealer, he passed quickly into Baker Street. Everything rested, now, upon his securing a cab before Ferrara came out again. Ferrara's cabman, evidently, was waiting for him.

A taxi driver fortunately hailed Cairn at the very moment that he gained the pavement; and Cairn, concealing himself behind the vehicle, gave the man rapid instructions:

"You see that taxi outside the photographer's?" he said.

The man nodded.

"Wait until someone comes out of the shop and is driven off in it; then follow. Do not lose sight of the cab for a moment. When it draws up, and wherever it draws up, drive right past it. Don't attract attention by stopping. You understand?"

"Quite, sir," said the man, smiling slightly. And Cairn entered the cab.

The cabman drew up at a point some little distance beyond, from whence he could watch. Two minutes later Ferrara came out and was driven off. The pursuit commenced.

His cab, ahead, proceeded to Westminster Bridge, across to the south side of the river, and by way of that commercial thoroughfare at the back of St. Thomas' Hospital, emerged at Vauxhall. Thence the pursuit led to Stockwell, Herne Hill, and yet onward towards Dulwich.

It suddenly occurred to Robert Cairn that Ferrara was making in the direction of Mr. Saunderson's house at Dulwich Common; the house in

which Myra had had her mysterious illness, in which she had remained until it had become evident that her safety depended upon her never being left alone for one moment.

"What can be his object?" muttered Cairn.

He wondered if Ferrara, for some inscrutable reason, was about to call upon Mr. Saunderson. But when the cab ahead, having passed the park, continued on past the lane in which the house was situated, he began to search for some other solution to the problem of Ferrara's destination.

Suddenly he saw that the cab ahead had stopped. The driver of his own cab without slackening speed, pursued his way. Cairn crouched down upon the floor, fearful of being observed. No house was visible to right nor left, merely open fields; and he knew that it would be impossible for him to delay in such a spot without attracting attention.

Ferrara's cab passed:

"Keep on till I tell you to stop!" cried Cairn.

He dropped the speaking-tube, and, turning, looked out through the little window at the back.

Ferrara had dismissed his cab; he saw him entering a gate and crossing a field on the right of the road. Cairn turned again and took up the tube.

"Stop at the first house we come to!" he directed. "Hurry!"

Presently a deserted-looking building was reached, a large straggling house which obviously had no tenant. Here the man pulled up and Cairn leapt out. As he did so, he heard Ferrara's cab driving back by the way it had come.

"Here," he said, and gave the man half a sovereign, "wait for me."

He started back along the road at a run. Even had he suspected that he was followed, Ferrara could not have seen him. But when Cairn came up level with the gate through which Ferrara had gone, he slowed down and crept cautiously forward.

Ferrara, who by this time had reached the other side of the field, was in the act of entering a barn-like building which evidently at some time had formed a portion of a farm. As the distant figure, opening one of the big doors, disappeared within:

"The place of which Myra has been dreaming!" muttered Cairn.

Certainly, viewed from that point, it seemed to answer, externally, to the girl's description. The roof was of moss-grown red tiles, and Cairn could

imagine how the moonlight would readily find access through the chinks which beyond doubt existed in the weather-worn structure. He had little doubt that this was the place dreamt of, or seen clairvoyantly, by Myra, that this was the place to which Ferrara had retreated in order to conduct his nefarious operations.

It was eminently suited to the purpose, being entirely surrounded by unoccupied land. For what ostensible purpose Ferrara has leased it, he could not conjecture, nor did he concern himself with the matter. The purpose for which actually he had leased the place was sufficiently evident to the man who had suffered so much at the hands of this modern sorcerer.

To approach closer would have been indiscreet; this he knew; and he was sufficiently diplomatic to resist the temptation to obtain a nearer view of the place. He knew that everything depended upon secrecy. Antony Ferrara must not suspect that his black laboratory was known. Cairn decided to return to Half-Moon Street without delay, fully satisfied with the result of his investigation.

He walked rapidly back to where the cab waited, gave the man his father's address, and, in three-quarters of an hour, was back in Half-Moon Street.

Dr. Cairn had not yet dismissed the last of his patients; Myra, accompanied by Miss Saunderson, was out shopping; and Robert found himself compelled to possess his soul in patience. He paced restlessly up and down the library, sometimes taking a book at random, scanning its pages with unseeing eyes, and replacing it without having formed the slightest impression of its contents. He tried to smoke; but his pipe was constantly going out, and he had littered the hearth untidily with burnt matches, when Dr. Cairn suddenly opened the library door, and entered.

"Well?" he said eagerly.

Robert Cairn leapt forward.

"I have tracked him, sir!" he cried. "My God! while Myra was at Saunderson's, she was almost next door to the beast! His den is in a field no more than a thousand yards from the garden wall—from Saunderson's orchid-houses!"

"He is daring," muttered Dr. Cairn, "but his selection of that site served two purposes. The spot was suitable in many ways; and we were least likely

to look for him next-door, as it were. It was a move characteristic of the accomplished criminal."

Robert Cairn nodded.

"It is the place of which Myra dreamt, sir. I have not the slightest doubt about that. What we have to find out is at what times of the day and night he goes there—"

"I doubt," interrupted Dr. Cairn, "if he often visits the place during the day. As you know, he has abandoned his rooms in Piccadilly, but I have no doubt, knowing his sybaritic habits, that he has some other palatial place in town. I have been making inquiries in several directions, especially in—certain directions—"

He paused, raising his eyebrows, significantly.

"Additions to the Zenana!" inquired Robert.

Dr. Cairn nodded his head grimly.

"Exactly," he replied. "There is not a scrap of evidence upon which, legally, he could be convicted; but since his return from Egypt, Rob, he has added other victims to the list!"

"The fiend!" cried the younger man, "the unnatural fiend!"

"Unnatural is the word; he is literally unnatural; but many women find him irresistible; he is typical of the unholy brood to which he belongs. The evil beauty of the Witch-Queen sent many a soul to perdition; the evil beauty of her son has zealously carried on the work."

"What must we do?"

"I doubt if we can do anything to-day. Obviously the early morning is the most suitable time to visit his den at Dulwich Common."

"But the new photographs of the house? There will be another attempt upon us to-night."

"Yes, there will be another attempt upon us, to-night," said the doctor wearily. "This is the year 1914; yet, here in Half-Moon Street, when dusk falls, we shall be submitted to an attack of a kind to which mankind probably has not been submitted for many ages. We shall be called upon to dabble in the despised magical art; we shall be called upon to place certain seals upon our doors and windows; to protect ourselves against an enemy, who, like Eros, laughs at locks and bars."

"Is it possible for him to succeed?"

"Quite possible, Rob, in spite of all our precautions. I feel in my very bones that to-night he will put forth a supreme effort."

A bell rang.

"I think," continued the doctor, "that this is Myra. She must get all the sleep she can, during the afternoon; for to-night I have determined that she, and you, and I, must not think of sleep, but must remain together, here in the library. We must not lose sight of one another—you understand?"

"I am glad that you have proposed it!" cried Robert Cairn eagerly, "I, too, feel that we have come to a critical moment in the contest."

"To-night," continued the doctor, "I shall be prepared to take certain steps. My preparations will occupy me throughout the rest of to-day."

XXX. The Elemental

At dusk that evening, Dr. Cairn, his son, and Myra Duquesne met together in the library. The girl looked rather pale.

An odour of incense pervaded the house, coming from the doctor's study, wherein he had locked himself early in the evening, issuing instructions that he was not to be disturbed. The exact nature of the preparations which he had been making, Robert Cairn was unable to conjecture; and some instinct warned him that his father would not welcome any inquiry upon the matter. He realised that Dr. Cairn proposed to fight Antony Ferrara with his own weapons, and now, when something in the very air of the house seemed to warn them of a tremendous attack impending, that the doctor, much against his will, was entering the arena in the character of a practical magician—a character new to him, and obviously abhorrent.

At half-past ten, the servants all retired in accordance With Dr. Cairn's orders. From where he stood by the tall mantel-piece, Robert Cairn could watch Myra Duquesne, a dainty picture in her simple evening-gown, where she sat reading in a distant corner, her delicate beauty forming a strong contrast to the background of sombre volumes. Dr. Cairn sat by the big table, smoking, and apparently listening. A strange device which he had adopted every evening for the past week, he had adopted again to-night—there were little white seals, bearing a curious figure, consisting in interlaced triangles, upon the insides of every window in the house, upon the doors, and even upon the fire-grates.

Robert Cairn at another time might have thought his father mad, childish, thus to play at wizardry; but he had had experiences which had taught him to recognise that upon such seemingly trivial matters, great issues might turn, that in the strange land over the Border, there were stranger laws—laws which he could but dimly understand. There he acknowledged the superior wisdom of Dr. Cairn; and did not question it.

At eleven o'clock a comparative quiet had come upon Half-Moon Street. The sound of the traffic had gradually subsided, until it seemed to him that the house stood, not in the busy West End of London, but isolated, apart from its neighbours; it seemed to him an abode, marked out and separated

from the other abodes of man, a house enveloped in an impalpable cloud, a cloud of evil, summoned up and directed by the wizard hand of Antony Ferrara, son of the Witch-Queen.

Although Myra pretended to read, and Dr. Cairn, from his fixed expression, might have been supposed to be pre-occupied, in point of fact they were all waiting, with nerves at highest tension, for the opening of the attack. In what form it would come—whether it would be vague moanings and tappings upon the windows, such as they had already experienced, whether it would be a phantasmal storm, a clap of phenomenal thunder—they could not conjecture, if the enemy would attack suddenly, or if his menace would grow, threatening from afar off, and then gradually penetrating into the heart of the garrison.

It came, then, suddenly and dramatically.

Dropping her book, Myra uttered a piercing scream, and with eyes glaring madly, fell forward on the carpet, unconscious!

Robert Cairn leapt to his feet with clenched fists. His father stood up so rapidly as to overset his chair, which fell crashingly upon the floor.

Together they turned and looked in the direction in which the girl had been looking. They fixed their eyes upon the drapery of the library window—which was drawn together. The whole window was luminous as though a bright light shone outside, but luminous, as though that light were the light of some unholy fire!

Involuntarily they both stepped back, and Robert Cairn clutched his father's arm convulsively.

The curtains seemed to be rendered transparent, as if some powerful ray were directed upon them; the window appeared through them as a rectangular blue patch. Only two lamps were burning in the library, that in the corner by which Myra had been reading, and the green shaded lamp upon the table. The best end of the room by the window, then, was in shadow, against which this unnatural light shone brilliantly.

"My God!" whispered Robert Cairn—"that's Half-Moon Street—outside. There can be no light—"

He broke off, for now he perceived the Thing which had occasioned the girl's scream of horror.

In the middle of the rectangular patch of light, a grey shape, but partially opaque, moved—shifting, luminous clouds about it—was taking form,

growing momentarily more substantial!

It had some remote semblance of a man; but its unique characteristic was its awful *greyness*. It had the greyness of a rain cloud, yet rather that of a column of smoke. And from the centre of the dimly defined head, two eyes —balls of living fire—glared out into the room!

Heat was beating into the library from the window—physical heat, as though a furnace door had been opened… and the shape, ever growing more palpable, was moving forward towards them—approaching—the heat every instant growing greater.

It was impossible to look at those two eyes of fire; it was almost impossible to move. Indeed Robert Cairn was transfixed in such horror as, in all his dealings with the monstrous Ferrara, he had never known before. But his father, shaking off the dread which possessed him also, leapt at one bound to the library table.

Robert Cairn vaguely perceived that a small group of objects, looking like balls of wax, lay there. Dr. Cairn had evidently been preparing them in the locked study. Now he took them all up in his left hand, and confronted the Thing—which seemed to be *growing* into the room—for it did not advance in the ordinary sense of the word.

One by one he threw the white pellets into that vapoury greyness. As they touched the curtain, they hissed as if they had been thrown into a fire; they melted; and upon the transparency of the drapings, as upon a sheet of gauze, showed faint streaks, where, melting, they trickled down the tapestry.

As he cast each pellet from his hand, Dr. Cairn took a step forward, and cried out certain words in a loud voice—words which Robert Cairn knew he had never heard uttered before, words in a language which some instinct told him to be Ancient Egyptian.

Their effect was to force that dreadful shape gradually to disperse, as a cloud of smoke might disperse when the fire which occasions it is extinguished slowly. Seven pellets in all he threw towards the window—and the seventh struck the curtains, now once more visible in their proper form.

The Fire Elemental had been vanquished!

Robert Cairn clutched his hair in a sort of frenzy. He glared at the draped window, feeling that he was making a supreme effort to retain his sanity. Had it ever looked otherwise? Had the tapestry ever faded before him,

becoming visible in a great light which had shone through it from behind? Had the Thing, a Thing unnameable, indescribable, stood there?

He read his answer upon the tapestry.

Whitening streaks showed where the pellets, melting, had trickled down the curtain!

"Lift Myra on the settee!"

It was Dr. Cairn speaking, calmly, but in a strained voice.

Robert Cairn, as if emerging from a mist, turned to the recumbent white form upon the carpet. Then, with a great cry, he leapt forward and raised the girl's head.

"Myra!" he groaned. "Myra, speak to me."

"Control yourself, boy," rapped Dr. Cairn, sternly; "she cannot speak until you have revived her! She has swooned—nothing worse."

"And—"

"We have conquered!"

XXXI. The Book of Thoth

The mists of early morning still floated over the fields, when these two, set upon strange business, walked through the damp grass to the door of the barn, where-from radiated the deathly waves which on the previous night had reached them, or almost reached them, in the library at Half-Moon Street.

The big double doors were padlocked, but for this they had come provided. Ten minutes work upon the padlock sufficed—and Dr. Cairn swung wide the doors.

A suffocating smell—the smell of that incense with which they had too often come in contact, was wafted out to them. There was a dim light inside the place, and without hesitation both entered.

A deal table and chair constituted the sole furniture of the interior. A part of the floor was roughly boarded, and a brief examination of the boarding sufficed to discover the hiding place in which Antony Ferrara kept the utensils of his awful art.

Dr. Cairn lifted out two heavy boards; and in a recess below lay a number of singular objects. There were four antique lamps of most peculiar design; there was a larger silver lamp, which both of them had seen before in various apartments occupied by Antony Ferrara. There were a number of other things which Robert Cairn could not have described, had he been called upon to do so, for the reason that he had seen nothing like them before, and had no idea of their nature or purpose.

But, conspicuous amongst this curious hoard, was a square iron box of workmanship dissimilar from any workmanship known to Robert Cairn. Its lid was covered with a sort of scroll work, and he was about to reach down, in order to lift it out, when:

"Do not touch it!" cried the doctor—"for God's sake, do not touch it!"

Robert Cairn started back, as though he had seen a snake. Turning to his father, he saw that the latter was pulling on a pair of white gloves. As he fixed his eyes upon these in astonishment, he perceived that they were smeared all over with some white preparation.

"Stand aside, boy," said the doctor—and for once his voice shook slightly. "Do not look again until I call to you. Turn your head aside!"

Silent with amazement, Robert Cairn obeyed. He heard his father lift out the iron box. He heard him open it, for he had already perceived that it was not locked. Then quite distinctly, he heard him close it again, and replace it in the *cache*.

"Do not turn, boy!" came a hoarse whisper.

He did not turn, but waited, his heart beating painfully, for what should happen next.

"Stand aside from the door," came the order, "and when I have gone out, do not look after me. I will call to you when it is finished."

He obeyed, without demur.

His father passed him, and he heard him walking through the damp grass outside the door of the barn. There followed an intolerable interval. From some place, not very distant, he could hear Dr. Cairn moving, hear the chink of glass upon glass, as though he were pouring out something from a stoppered bottle. Then a faint acrid smell was wafted to his nostrils, perceptible even above the heavy odour of the incense from the barn.

"Relock the door!" came the cry.

Robert Cairn reclosed the door, snapped the padlock fast, and began to fumble with the skeleton keys with which they had come provided. He discovered that to reclose the padlock was quite as difficult as to open it. His hands were trembling too; he was all anxiety to see what had taken place behind him. So that when at last a sharp click told of the task accomplished, he turned in a flash and saw his father placing tufts of grass upon a charred patch from which a faint haze of smoke still arose. He walked over and joined him.

"What have you done, sir?"

"I have robbed him of his armour," replied the doctor, grimly. His face was very pale, his eyes were very bright. "I have destroyed the *Book of Thoth*!"

"Then, he will be unable—"

"He will still be able to summon his dreadful servant, Rob. Having summoned him once, he can summon him again, but—"

"Well, sir?"

"He cannot control him."

"Good God!"

That night brought no repetition of the uncanny attack; and in the grey half light before the dawn, Dr. Cairn and his son, themselves like two phantoms, again crept across the field to the barn.

The padlock hung loose in the ring.

"Stay where you are, Rob!" cautioned the doctor.

He gently pushed the door open—wider—wider—and looked in. There was an overpowering odour of burning flesh. He turned to Robert, and spoke in a steady voice.

"The brood of the Witch-Queen is extinct!" he said.

Footnotes

[A] *Note*.—"It seems exceedingly probable that… the mummy-case (sarcophagus), with its painted presentment of the living person, was the material basis for the preservation of the… *Khu* (magical powers) of a fully-equipped Adept."

Collectanea Hermetica. Vol. VIII.

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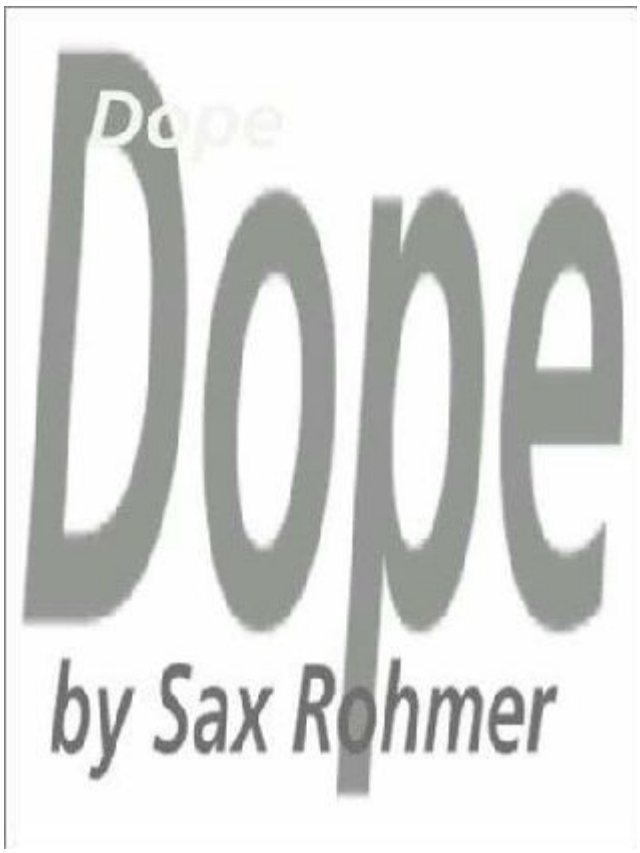


Contents

PART FIRST

KAZMAH THE DREAM-READER

I. A Message for Irvin
II. The Apartments of Kazmah
III. Kazmah
IV. The Closed Door
V. The Door is Opened
VI. Red Kerry
VII. Further Evidence
VIII. Kerry Consults the Oracle
IX. A Packet of Cigarettes
X. Sir Lucien's Study Window
XI. The Drug Syndicate

PART SECOND
MRS SIN

XII. The Maid of the Masque
XIII. A Chandu Party
XIV. In the Shade of the Lonely Palm
XV. Metamorphosis
XVI. Limehouse
XVII. The Black Smoke
XVIII. The Dream of Sin Sin Wa
XIX. The Traffic
XX. Kazmah's Methods
XXI. The Cigarettes From Buenos Ayres
XXII. The Strangle-Hold

PART THIRD
THE MAN FROM WHITEHALL

XXIII. Chief Inspector Kerry Resigns
XXIV. To Introduce 719
XXV. Night-Life of Soho
XXVI. The Moods of Mollie

XXVII. Crown Evidence
XXVIII. The Gilded Joss
XXIX. Doubts and Fears
XXX. The Fight in the Dark
XXXI. The Story of 719
XXXII. On the Isle of Dogs

PART FOURTH
THE EYE OF SIN SIN WA

XXXIII. Chinese Magic
XXXIV. Above and Below
XXXV. Beyond the Veil
XXXVI. Sam Tuk Moves
XXXVII. Seton Pasha Reports
XXXVIII. The Song of Sin Sin Wa
XXXIX. The Empty Wharf
XL. Coil of the Pigtail
XLI. The Finding of Kazmah
XLII. A Year Later
XLIII. The Story of the Crime

PART FIRST

KAZMAH THE DREAM-READER

I. A MESSAGE FOR IRVIN

Monte Irvin, alderman of the city and prospective Lord Mayor of London, paced restlessly from end to end of the well-appointed library of his house in Prince's Gate. Between his teeth he gripped the stump of a burnt-out cigar. A tiny spaniel lay beside the fire, his beady black eyes following the nervous movements of the master of the house.

At the age of forty-five Monte Irvin was not ill-looking, and, indeed, was sometimes spoken of as handsome. His figure was full without being corpulent; his well-groomed black hair and moustache and fresh if rather coarse complexion, together with the dignity of his upright carriage, lent him something of a military air. This he assiduously cultivated as befitting an ex-Territorial officer, although as he had seen no active service he modestly refrained from using any title of rank.

Some quality in his brilliant smile, an oriental expressiveness of the dark eyes beneath their drooping lids, hinted a Semitic strain; but it was otherwise not marked in his appearance, which was free from vulgarity, whilst essentially that of a successful man of affairs.

In fact, Monte Irvin had made a success of every affair in life with the lamentable exception of his marriage. Of late his forehead had grown lined, and those business friends who had known him for a man of abstemious habits had observed in the City chophouse at which he lunched almost daily that whereas formerly he had been a noted trencherman, he now ate little but drank much.

Suddenly the spaniel leapt up with that feverish, spider-like activity of the toy species and began to bark.

Monte Irvin paused in his restless patrol and listened.

"Lie down!" he said. "Be quiet."

The spaniel ran to the door, sniffing eagerly. A muffled sound of voices became audible, and Irvin, following a moment of hesitation, crossed and opened the door. The dog ran out, yapping in his irritating staccato fashion, and an expression of hope faded from Irvin's face as he saw a tall fair girl standing in the hallway talking to Hinkes, the butler. She wore soiled Burberry, high-legged tan boots, and a peaked cap of distinctly military

appearance. Irvin would have retired again, but the girl glanced up and saw him where he stood by the library door. He summoned up a smile and advanced.

"Good evening, Miss Halley," he said, striving to speak genially—for of all of his wife's friends he liked Margaret Halley the best. "Were you expecting to find Rita at home?"

The girl's expression was vaguely troubled. She had the clear complexion and bright eyes of perfect health, but to-night her eyes seemed over-bright, whilst her face was slightly pale.

"Yes," she replied; "that is, I hoped she might be at home."

"I am afraid I cannot tell you when she is likely to return. But please come in, and I will make inquiries."

"Oh, no, I would rather you did not trouble and I won't stay, thank you nevertheless. I expect she will ring me up when she comes in."

"Is there any message I can give her?"

"Well"—she hesitated for an instant—"you might tell her, if you would, that I only returned home at eight o'clock, so that I could not come around any earlier." She glanced rapidly at Irvin, biting her lip. "I wish I could have seen her," she added in a low voice.

"She wishes to see you particularly?"

"Yes. She left a note this afternoon." Again she glanced at him in a troubled way. "Well, I suppose it cannot be helped," she added and smilingly extended her hand. "Good night, Mr Irvin. Don't bother to come to the door."

But Irvin passed Hinkes and walked out under the porch with Margaret Halley. Humid yellow mist floated past the street lamps, and seemed to have gathered in a moving reef around the little runabout car which was standing outside the house, its motor chattering tremulously.

"Phew! a beastly night!" he said. "Foggy and wet."

"It's a brute isn't it?" said the girl laughingly, and turned on the steps so that the light shining out of the hallway gleamed on her white teeth and upraised eyes. She was pulling on big, ugly, furred gloves, and Monte Irvin mentally contrasted her fresh, athletic type of beauty with the delicate, exotic charm of his wife.

She opened the door of the little car, got in and drove off, waving one hugely gloved hand to Irvin as he stood in the porch looking after her.

When the red tail-light had vanished in the mist he returned to the house and re-entered the library. If only all his wife's friends were like Margaret Halley, he mused, he might have been spared the insupportable misgivings which were goading him to madness. His mind filled with poisonous suspicions, he resumed his pacing of the library, awaiting and dreading that which should confirm his blackest theories. He was unaware of the fact that throughout the interview he had held the stump of cigar between his teeth. He held it there yet, pacing, pacing up and down the long room.

Then came the expected summons. The telephone bell rang. Monte Irvin clenched his hands and inhaled deeply. His color changed in a manner that would have aroused a physician's interest. Regaining his self-possession by a visible effort, he crossed to a small side-table upon which the instrument rested. Rolling the cigar stump into the left corner of his mouth, he took up the receiver.

"Hallo!" he said.

"Someone named Brisley, sir, wishes—"

"Put him through to me here."

"Very good, sir."

A short interval, then:

"Yes?" said Monte Irvin.

"My name is Brisley. I have a message for Mr Monte Irvin."

"Monte Irvin speaking. Anything to report, Brisley?"

Irvin's deep, rich voice was not entirely under control.

"Yes, sir. The lady drove by taxicab from Prince's Gate to Albemarle Street."

"Ah!"

"Went up to chambers of Sir Lucien Pyne and was admitted."

"Well?"

"Twenty minutes later came out. Lady was with Sir Lucien. Both walked around to old Bond Street. The Honorable Quentin Gray—"

"Ah!" breathed Irvin.

"—Overtook them there. He got out of a cab. He joined them. All three up to apartments of a professional crystal-gazer styling himself Kazmah 'the dream-reader.'"

A puzzled expression began to steal over the face of Monte Irvin. At the sound of the telephone bell he had paled somewhat. Now he began to

recover his habitual florid coloring.

"Go on," he directed, for the speaker had paused.

"Seven to ten minutes later," resumed the nasal voice, "Mr Gray came down. He hailed a passing cab, but man refused to stop. Mr Gray seemed to be very irritable."

The fact that the invisible speaker was reading from a notebook he betrayed by his monotonous intonation and abbreviated sentences, which resembled those of a constable giving evidence in a police court.

"He walked off rapidly in direction of Piccadilly. Colleague followed. Near the Ritz he obtained a cab. He returned in same to old Bond Street. He ran upstairs and was gone from four-and-a-half to five minutes. He then came down again. He was very pale and agitated. He discharged cab and walked away. Colleague followed. He saw Mr Gray enter Prince's Restaurant. In the hall Mr Gray met a gent unknown by sight to colleague. Following some conversation both gents went in to dinner. They are there now. Speaking from Dover Street Tube."

"Yes, yes. But the lady?"

"A native, possibly Egyptian, apparently servant of Kazmah, came out a few minutes after Mr Gray had gone for cab, and went away. Sir Lucien Pyne and lady are still in Kazmah's rooms."

"What!" cried Irvin, pulling out his watch and glancing at the disk. "But it's after eight o'clock!"

"Yes, sir. The place is all shut up, and other offices in block closed at six. Door of Kazmah's is locked. I knocked and got no reply."

"Damn it! You're talking nonsense! There must be another exit."

"No, sir. Colleague has just relieved me. Left two gents over their wine at Prince's."

Monte Irvin's color began to fade slowly.

"Then it's Pyne!" he whispered. The hand which held the receiver shook. "Brisley—meet me at the Piccadilly end of Bond Street. I am coming now."

He put down the telephone, crossed to the wall and pressed a button. The cigar stump held firmly between his teeth, he stood on the rug before the hearth, facing the door. Presently it opened and Hinkes came in.

"The car is ready, Hinkes?"

"Yes, sir, as you ordered. Shall Pattison come round to the door?"

"At once."

"Very good, sir."

He withdrew, closing the door quietly, and Monte Irvin stood staring across the library at the full-length portrait in oils of his wife in the pierrot dress which she had worn in the third act of The Maid of the Masque.

The clock in the hall struck half-past eight.

II. THE APARTMENTS OF KAZMAH

It was rather less than two hours earlier on the same evening that Quentin Gray came out of the confectioner's shop in old Bond Street carrying a neat parcel. Yellow dusk was closing down upon this bazaar of the New Babylon, and many of the dealers in precious gems, vendors of rich stuffs, and makers of modes had already deserted their shops. Smartly dressed show-girls, saleswomen, girl clerks and others crowded the pavements, which at high noon had been thronged with ladies of fashion. Here a tailor's staff, there a hatter's lingered awhile as iron shutters and gratings were secured, and bidding one another good night, separated and made off towards Tube and bus. The working day was ended. Society was dressing for dinner.

Gray was about to enter the cab which awaited him, and his fresh-colored, boyish face wore an expression of eager expectancy, which must have betrayed the fact to an experienced beholder that he was hurrying to keep an agreeable appointment. Then, his hand resting on the handle of the cab-door, this expression suddenly changed to one of alert suspicion.

A tall, dark man, accompanied by a woman muffled in grey furs and wearing a silk scarf over her hair, had passed on foot along the opposite side of the street. Gray had seen them through the cab windows.

His smooth brow wrinkled and his mouth tightened to a thin straight line beneath the fair "regulation" moustache. He fumbled under his overcoat for loose silver, drew out a handful and paid off the taximan.

Sometimes walking in the gutter in order to avoid the throngs upon the pavement, regardless of the fact that his glossy dress-boots were becoming spattered with mud, Gray hurried off in pursuit of the pair. Twenty yards ahead he overtook them, as they were on the point of passing a picture

dealer's window, from which yellow light streamed forth into the humid dusk. They were walking slowly, and Gray stopped in front of them.

"Hello, you two!" he cried. "Where are you off to? I was on my way to call for you, Rita."

Flushed and boyish he stood before them, and his annoyance was increased by their failure to conceal the fact that his appearance was embarrassing if not unwelcome. Mrs Monte Irvin was a petite, pretty woman, although some of the more wonderful bronzed tints of her hair suggested the employment of henna, and her naturally lovely complexion was delicately and artistically enhanced by art. Nevertheless, the flower-like face peeping out from the folds of a gauzy scarf, like a rose from a mist, whilst her soft little chin nestled into the fur, might have explained even in the case of an older man the infatuation which Quentin Gray was at no pains to hide.

She glanced up at her companion, Sir Lucien Pyne, a swarthy, cynical type of aristocrat, imperturbably. Then: "I had left a note for you, Quentin," she said hurriedly. She seemed to be in a dangerously high-strung condition.

"But I have booked a table and a box," cried Gray, with a hint of juvenile petulance.

"My dear Gray," said Sir Lucien coolly, "we are men of the world—and we do not look for consistency in womenfolk. Mrs Irvin has decided to consult a palmist or a hypnotist or some such occult authority before dining with you this evening. Doubtless she seeks to learn if the play to which you propose to take her is an amusing one."

His smile of sardonic amusement Gray found to be almost insupportable, and although Sir Lucien refrained from looking at Mrs Irvin whilst he spoke, it was evident enough that his words held some covert significance, for:

"You know perfectly well that I have a particular reason for seeing him," she said.

"A woman's particular reason is a man's feeble excuse," murmured Sir Lucien rudely. "At least, according to a learned Arabian philosopher."

"I was going to meet you at Prince's," said Mrs Irvin hurriedly, and again glancing at Gray. There was a pathetic hesitancy in her manner, the hesitancy of a weak woman who adheres to a purpose only by supreme effort.

"Might I ask," said Gray, "the name of the pervert you are going to consult?"

Again she hesitated and glanced rapidly at Sir Lucien, but he was staring coolly in another direction.

"Kazmah," she replied in a low voice.

"Kazmah!" cried Gray. "The man who sells perfume and pretends to read dreams? What an extraordinary notion. Wouldn't tomorrow do? He will surely have shut up shop!"

"I have been at pains to ascertain," replied Sir Lucien, "at Mrs Irvin's express desire, that the man of mystery is still in session and will receive her."

Beneath the mask of nonchalance which he wore it might have been possible to detect excitement repressed with difficulty; and had Gray been more composed and not obsessed with the idea that Sir Lucien had deliberately intruded upon his plans for the evening, he could not have failed to perceive that Mrs Monte Irvin was feverishly preoccupied with matters having no relation to dinner and the theatre. But his private suspicions grew only the more acute.

"Then if the dinner is not off," he said, "may I come along and wait for you?"

"At Kazmah's?" asked Mrs Irvin. "Certainly." She turned to Sir Lucien. "Shall you wait? It isn't much use as I'm dining with Quentin."

"If I do not intrude," replied the baronet, "I will accompany you as far as the cave of the oracle, and then bid you good night."

The trio proceeded along old Bond Street. Quentin Gray regarded the story of Kazmah as a very poor lie devised on the spur of the moment. If he had been less infatuated, his natural sense of dignity must have dictated an offer to release Mrs Irvin from her engagement. But jealousy stimulates the worst instincts and destroys the best. He was determined to attach himself as closely as the old Man of the Sea attached himself to Es-Sindibad, in order that the lie might be unmasked. Mrs Irvin's palpable embarrassment and nervousness he ascribed to her perception of his design.

A group of shop girls and others waiting for buses rendered it impossible for the three to keep abreast, and Gray, falling to the rear, stepped upon the foot of a little man who was walking close behind them.

"Sorry, sir," said the man, suppressing an exclamation of pain—for the fault had been Gray's.

Gray muttered an ungenerous acknowledgment, all anxiety to regain the side of Mrs Irvin; for she seemed to be speaking rapidly and excitedly to Sir Lucien.

He recovered his place as the two turned in at a lighted doorway. Upon the wall was a bronze plate bearing the inscription:

KAZMAH
Second Floor

Gray fully expected Mrs Irvin to suggest that he should return later. But without a word she began to ascend the stairs. Gray followed, Sir Lucien standing aside to give him precedence. On the second floor was a door painted in Oriental fashion. It possessed neither bell nor knocker, but as one stepped upon the threshold this door opened noiselessly as if dumbly inviting the visitor to enter the square apartment discovered. This apartment was richly furnished in the Arab manner, and lighted by a fine brass lamp swung upon chains from the painted ceiling. The intricate perforations of the lamp were inset with colored glass, and the result was a subdued and warm illumination. Odd-looking oriental vessels, long-necked jars, jugs with tenuous spouts and squat bowls possessing engraved and figured covers emerged from the shadows of niches. A low divan with gaily colored mattresses extended from the door around one corner of the room where it terminated beside a kind of mushrabiyeh cabinet or cupboard. Beyond this cabinet was a long, low counter laden with statuettes of Nile gods, amulets, mummy-beads and little stoppered flasks of blue enamel ware. There were two glass cases filled with other strange-looking antiquities. A faint perfume was perceptible.

Sir Lucien entering last of the party, the door closed behind him, and from the cabinet on the right of the divan a young Egyptian stepped out. He wore the customary white robe, red sash and red slippers, and a tarbush, the little scarlet cap commonly called a fez, was set upon his head. He walked to a door on the left of the counter, and slid it noiselessly open. Bowing gravely, "The Sheikh el Kazmah awaits," he said, speaking with the soft intonation of a native of Upper Egypt.

It now became evident, even to the infatuated Gray, that Mrs Irvin was laboring under the influence of tremendous excitement. She turned to him quickly, and he thought that her face looked almost haggard, whilst her eyes seemed to have changed color—become lighter, although he could not be certain that this latter effect was not due to the peculiar illumination of the room. But when she spoke her voice was unsteady.

"Will you see if you can find a cab," she said. "It is so difficult at night, and my shoes will get frightfully muddy crossing Piccadilly. I shall not be more than a few minutes." She walked through the doorway, the Egyptian standing aside as she passed. He followed her, but came out again almost immediately, reclosed the door, and retired into the cabinet, which was evidently his private cubicle.

Silence claimed the apartment. Sir Lucien threw himself nonchalantly upon the divan, and took out his cigarette-case.

"Will you have a cigarette, Gray?" he asked.

"No thanks," replied the other, in tones of smothered hostility. He was ill at ease, and paced the apartment nervously. Pyne lighted a cigarette, and tossed the extinguished match into a brass bowl.

"I think," said Gray jerkily, "I shall go for a cab. Are you remaining?"

"I am dining at the club," answered Pyne, "but I can wait until you return."

"As you wish," jerked Gray. "I don't expect to be long."

He walked rapidly to the outer door, which opened at his approach and closed noiselessly behind him as he made his exit.

III. KAZMAH

Mrs Monte Irvin entered the inner room. The air was heavy with the perfume of frankincense which smouldered in a brass vessel set upon a tray. This was the audience chamber of Kazmah. In marked contrast to the overcrowded appointments, divans and cupboards of the first room, it was sparsely furnished. The floor was thickly carpeted, but save for an ornate inlaid table upon which stood the tray and incense- burner, and a long, low-cushioned seat placed immediately beneath a hanging lamp burning dimly

in a globular green shade, it was devoid of decoration. The walls were draped with green curtains, so that except for the presence of the painted door, the four sides of the apartment appeared to be uniform.

Having conducted Mrs Irvin to the seat, the Egyptian bowed and retired again through the doorway by which they had entered. The visitor found herself alone.

She moved nervously, staring across at the blank wall before her. With her little satin shoe she tapped the carpet, biting her under lip and seeming to be listening. Nothing stirred. Not even an echo of busy Bond Street penetrated to the place. Mrs Irvin unfastened her cloak and allowed it to fall back upon the settee. Her bare shoulders looked waxen and unnatural in the weird light which shone down upon them. She was breathing rapidly.

The minutes passed by in unbroken silence. So still was the room that Mrs Irvin could hear the faint crackling sound made by the burning charcoal in the brass vessel near her. Wisps of blue-grey smoke arose through the perforated lid and she began to watch them fascinatedly, so lithe they seemed, like wraiths of serpents creeping up the green draperies.

So she was seated, her foot still restlessly tapping, but her gaze arrested by the hypnotic movements of the smoke, when at last a sound from the outer world, penetrated to the room. A church clock struck the hour of seven, its clangor intruding upon the silence only as a muffled boom. Almost coincident with the last stroke came the sweeter note of a silver gong from somewhere close at hand.

Mrs Irvin started, and her eyes turned instantly in the direction of the greenly draped wall before her. Her pupils had grown suddenly dilated, and she clenched her hands tightly.

The light above her head went out.

Now that the moment was come to which she had looked forward with mingled hope and terror, long pent-up emotion threatened to overcome her, and she trembled wildly.

Out of the darkness dawned a vague light and in it a shape seemed to take form. As the light increased the effect was as though part of the wall had become transparent so as to reveal the interior of an inner room where a figure was seated in a massive ebony chair. The figure was that of an oriental, richly robed and wearing a white turban. His long slim hands, of the color of old ivory, rested upon the arms of the chair, and on the first

finger of the right hand gleamed a big talismanic ring. The face of the seated man was lowered, but from under heavy brows his abnormally large eyes regarded her fixedly.

So dim the light remained that it was impossible to discern the details with anything like clearness, but that the clean-shaven face of the man with those wonderful eyes was strikingly and intellectually handsome there could be no doubt.

This was Kazmah, "the dream reader," and although Mrs Irvin had seen him before, his statuesque repose and the weirdness of his unfaltering gaze thrilled her uncannily.

Kazmah slightly raised his hand in greeting: the big ring glittered in the subdued light.

"Tell me your dream," came a curious mocking voice; "and I will read its portent."

Such was the set formula with which Kazmah opened all interviews. He spoke with a slight and not unmusical accent. He lowered his hand again. The gaze of those brilliant eyes remained fixed upon the woman's face. Moistening her lips, Mrs Irvin spoke.

"Dreams! What I have to say does not belong to dreams, but to reality!" She laughed unmirthfully. "You know well enough why I am here."

She paused.

"Why are you here?"

"You know! You know!" Suddenly into her voice had come the unmistakable note of hysteria. "Your theatrical tricks do not impress me. I know what you are! A spy—an eavesdropper who watches—watches, and listens! But you may go too far! I am nearly desperate—do you understand? —nearly desperate. Speak! Move! Answer me!"

But Kazmah preserved his uncanny repose.

"You are distracted," he said. "I am sorry for you. But why do you come to me with your stories of desperation? You have insisted upon seeing me. I am here."

"And you play with me—taunt me!"

"The remedy is in your hands."

"For the last time, I tell you I will never do it! Never, never, never!"

"Then why do you complain? If you cannot afford to pay for your amusements, and you refuse to compromise in a simple manner, why do

you approach me?"

"Oh, my God!" She moaned and swayed dizzily—"have pity on me! Who are you, what are you, that you can bring ruin on a woman because—" She uttered a choking sound, but continued hoarsely, "Raise your head. Let me see your face. As heaven is my witness, I am ruined—ruined!"

"Tomorrow—"

"I cannot wait for tomorrow—"

That quivering, hoarse cry betrayed a condition of desperate febrile excitement. Mrs Irvin was capable of proceeding to the wildest extremities. Clearly the mysterious Egyptian recognized this to be the case, for slowly raising his hand:

"I will communicate with you," he said, and the words were spoken almost hurriedly. "Depart in peace—"; a formula wherewith he terminated every seance. He lowered his hand.

The silver gong sounded again—and the dim light began to fade.

Thereupon the unhappy woman acted; the long suppressed outburst came at last. Stepping rapidly to the green transparent veil behind which Kazmah was seated, she wrenched it asunder and leapt toward the figure in the black chair.

"You shall not trick me!" she panted. "Hear me out or I go straight to the police—now—now!" She grasped the hands of Kazmah as they rested motionless, on the chair-arms.

Complete darkness came.

Out of it rose a husky, terrified cry—a second, louder cry; and then a long, wailing scream . . . horror-laden as that of one who has touched some slumbering reptile. . . .

IV. THE CLOSED DOOR

Rather less than five minutes later a taxicab drew up in old Bond Street, and from it Quentin Gray leapt out impetuously and ran in at the doorway leading to Kazmah's stairs. So hurried was his progress that he collided violently with a little man who, carrying himself with a pronounced stoop, was slinking furtively out.

The little man reeled at the impact and almost fell, but:

"Hang it all!" cried Gray irritably. "Why the devil don't you look where you're going!"

He glared angrily into the face of the other. It was a peculiar and rememberable face, notable because of a long, sharp, hooked nose and very little, foxy, brown eyes; a sly face to which a small, fair moustache only added insignificance. It was crowned by a wide-brimmed bowler hat which the man wore pressed down upon his ears like a Jew pedlar.

"Why!" cried Gray, "this is the second time tonight you have jostled me!"

He thought he had recognized the man for the same who had been following himself, Mrs Irvin and Sir Lucien Pyne along old Bond Street.

A smile, intended to be propitiatory, appeared upon the pale face.

"No, sir, excuse me, sir—"

"Don't deny it!" said Gray angrily. "If I had the time I should give you in charge as a suspicious loiterer."

Calling to the cabman to wait, he ran up the stairs to the second floor landing. Before the painted door bearing the name of Kazmah he halted, and as the door did not open, stamped impatiently, but with no better result.

At that, since there was neither bell nor knocker, he raised his fist and banged loudly.

No one responded to the summons.

"Hi, there!" he shouted. "Open the door! Pyne! Rita!"

Again he banged—and yet again. Then he paused, listening, his ear pressed to the panel.

He could detect no sound of movement within. Fists clenched, he stood staring at the closed door, and his fresh color slowly deserted him and left him pale.

"Damn him!" he muttered savagely. "Damn him! he has fooled me!"

Passionate and self-willed, he was shaken by a storm of murderous anger. That Pyne had planned this trick, with Rita Irvin's consent, he did not doubt, and his passive dislike of the man became active hatred of the woman he dared not think. He had for long looked upon Sir Lucien in the light of a rival, and the irregularity of his own infatuation for another's wife in no degree lessened his resentment.

Again he pressed his ear to the door, and listened intently. Perhaps they were hiding within. Perhaps this charlatan, Kazmah, was an accomplice in

the pay of Sir Lucien. Perhaps this was a secret place of rendezvous.

To the manifest absurdity of such a conjecture he was blind in his anger. But that he was helpless, befooled, he recognized; and with a final muttered imprecation he turned and slowly descended the stair. A lingering hope was dispelled when, looking right and left along Bond Street, he failed to perceive the missing pair.

The cabman glanced at him interrogatively. "I shall not require you," said Gray, and gave the man half-a-crown.

Busy with his poisonous conjectures, he remained all unaware of the presence of a furtive, stooping figure which lurked behind the railings of the arcade at this point linking old Bond Street to Albemarle Street. Nor had the stooping stranger any wish to attract Gray's attention. Most of the shops in the narrow lane were already closed, although the florist's at the corner remained open, but of the shadow which lay along the greater part of the arcade this alert watcher took every advantage. From the recess formed by a shop door he peered out at Gray, where the light of a street lamp fell upon him, studying his face, his movements, with unrelaxing vigilance.

Gray, following some moments of indecision, strode off towards Piccadilly. The little man came out cautiously from his hiding-place and looked after him. Out of a dark porch, ten paces along Bond Street, appeared a burly figure to fall into step a few yards behind Gray. The little man licked his lips appreciatively and returned to the doorway below the premises of Kazmah.

Reaching Piccadilly, Gray stood for a time on the corner, indifferent to the jostling of passers-by. Finally he crossed, walked along to the Prince's Restaurant, and entered the lobby. He glanced at his wrist- watch. It registered the hour of seven-twenty-five.

He cancelled his order for a table and was standing staring moodily towards the entrance when the doors swung open and a man entered who stepped straight up to him, hand extended, and:

"Glad to see you, Gray," he said. "What's the trouble?"

Quentin Gray stared as if incredulous at the speaker, and it was with an unmistakable note of welcome in his voice that he replied:

"Seton! Seton Pasha!"

The frown disappeared from Gray's forehead, and he gripped the other's hand in hearty greeting. But:

"Stick to plain Seton!" said the new-comer, glancing rapidly about him. "Ottoman titles are not fashionable."

The speaker was a man of arresting personality. Above medium height, well but leanly built, the face of Seton "Pasha" was burned to a deeper shade than England's wintry sun is capable of producing. He wore a close-trimmed beard and moustache, and the bronze on his cheeks enhanced the brightness of his grey eyes and rendered very noticeable a slight frosting of the dark hair above his temples. He had the indescribable air of a "sure" man, a sound man to have beside one in a tight place; and looking into the rather grim face, Quentin Gray felt suddenly ashamed of himself. From Seton Pasha he knew that he could keep nothing back. He knew that presently he should find himself telling this quiet, brown-skinned man the whole story of his humiliation—and he knew that Seton would not spare his feelings.

"My dear fellow," he said, "you must pardon me if I sometimes fail to respect your wishes in this matter. When I left the East the name of Seton Pasha was on everybody's tongue. But are you alone?"

"I am. I only arrived in London tonight and in England this morning."

"Were you thinking of dining here?"

"No; I saw you through the doorway as I was passing. But this will do as well as another place. I gather that you are disengaged. Perhaps you will dine with me?"

"Splendid!" cried Gray. "Wait a moment. Perhaps my table hasn't gone!"

He ran off in his boyish, impetuous fashion, and Seton watched him, smiling quietly.

The table proved to be available, and ere long the two were discussing an excellent dinner. Gray lost much of his irritability and began to talk coherently upon topics of general interest. Presently, following an interval during which he had been covertly watching his companion:

"Do you know, Seton," he said, "you are the one man in London whose company I could have tolerated tonight."

"My arrival was peculiarly opportune."

"Your arrivals are always peculiarly opportune." Gray stared at Seton with an expression of puzzled admiration. "I don't think I shall ever understand your turning up immediately before the Senussi raid in Egypt. Do you remember? I was with the armored cars."

"I remember perfectly."

"Then you vanished in the same mysterious fashion, and the C. O. was a sphinx on the subject. I next saw you strolling out of the gate at Baghdad. How the devil you'd got to Baghdad, considering that you didn't come with us and that you weren't with the cavalry, heaven only knows!"

"No," said Seton judicially, gazing through his uplifted wine-glass; "when one comes to consider the matter without prejudice it is certainly odd. But do I know the lady to whose non-appearance I owe the pleasure of your company tonight?"

Quentin Gray stared at him blankly.

"Really, Seton, you amaze me. Did I say that I had an appointment with a lady?"

"My dear Gray, when I see a man standing biting his nails and glaring out into Piccadilly from a restaurant entrance I ask myself a question. When I learn that he has just cancelled an order for a table for two I answer it."

Gray laughed. "You always make me feel so infernally young, Seton."

"Good!"

"Yes, it's good to feel young, but bad to feel a young fool; and that's what I feel—and what I am. Listen!"

Leaning across the table so that the light of the shaded lamp fell fully upon his flushed, eager face, Gray, not without embarrassment, told his companion of the "dirty trick"—so he phrased it—which Sir Lucien Pyne had played upon him. In conclusion:

"What would you do, Seton?" he asked.

Seton sat regarding him in silence with a cool, calculating stare which some men had termed insolent, absently tapping his teeth with the gold rim of a monocle which he carried but apparently never used for any other purpose; and it was at about this time that a long low car passed near the door of the restaurant, crossing the traffic stream of Piccadilly to draw up at the corner of old Bond Street.

From the car Monte Irvin alighted and, telling the man to wait, set out on foot. Ten paces along Bond Street he encountered a small, stooping figure which became detached from the shadows of a shop door. The light of a street lamp shone down upon the sharp, hooked nose and into the cunning little brown eyes of Brisley, of Spinker's Detective Agency. Monte Irvin started.

"Ah, Brisley!" he said, "I was looking for you. Are they still there?"

"Probably, sir." Brisley licked his lips. "My colleague, Gunn, reports no one came out whilst I was away 'phoning."

"But the whole thing seems preposterous. Are there no other offices in the block where they might be?"

"I personally saw Mr Gray, Sir Lucien Pyne and the lady go into Kazmah's. At that time—roughly, ten to seven—all the other offices had been closed, approximately, one hour."

"There is absolutely no possibility that they might have come out unseen by you?"

"None, sir. I should not have troubled a client if in doubt. Here's Gunn."

Old Bond Street now was darkened and deserted; the yellow mist had turned to fine rain, and Gunn, his hands thrust in his pockets, was sheltering under the porch of the arcade. Gunn possessed a purple complexion which attained to full vigor of coloring in the nasal region. His moustache of dirty grey was stained brown in the centre as if by frequent potations of stout, and his bulky figure was artificially enlarged by the presence of two overcoats, the outer of which was a waterproof and the inner a blue garment appreciably longer both in sleeve and skirt than the former. The effect produced was one of great novelty. Gunn touched the brim of his soft felt hat, which he wore turned down all round apparently in imitation of a flower-pot.

"All snug, sir," he said, hoarsely and confidentially, bending forward and breathing the words into Irvin's ear. "Snug as a bee in a hive. You're as good as a bachelor again."

Monte Irvin mentally recoiled.

"Lead the way to the door of this place," he said tersely.

"Yes, sir, this way, sir. Be careful of the step there. You may remark that the outer door is not yet closed. I am informed upon reliable authority as the last to go locks the door. Hence we perceive that the last has not yet gone. It is likewise opened by the first to come of a mornin'. Here we are, sir; door on the right."

The landing was in darkness, but as Gunn spoke he directed the ray of a pocket lamp upon a bronze plate bearing the name "Kazmah." He rested one hand upon his hip.

"All snug," he repeated; "as snug as a eel in mud. The decree nisi is yours, sir. As an alderman of the City of London and a Justice of the Peace you are entitled to call a police officer—"

"Hold your tongue!" rapped Irvin. "You've been drinking: and I place no reliance whatever in your evidence. I do not believe that my wife or any one else but ourselves is upon these premises."

The watery eyes of the insulted man protruded unnaturally. "Drinkin'!" he whispered, "drink—"

But indignation now deprived Gunn of speech and:

"Excuse me, sir," interrupted the nasal voice of Brisley, "but I can absolutely answer for Gunn. Reputation of the Agency at stake. Worked with us for three years. Parties undoubtedly on the premises as reported."

"Drink—" whispered Gunn.

"I shall be glad," said Monte Irvin, and his voice shook emotionally, "if you will lend me your pocket lamp. I am naturally upset. Will you kindly both go downstairs. I will call if I want you."

The two men obeyed, Gunn muttering hoarsely to Brisley; and Monte Irvin was left standing on the landing, the lamp in his hand. He waited until he knew from the sound of their footsteps that the pair had regained the street, then, resting his arm against the closed door, and pressing his forehead to the damp sleeve of his coat, he stood awhile, the lamp, which he held limply, shining down upon the floor.

His lips moved, and almost inaudibly he murmured his wife's name.

V. THE DOOR IS OPENED

Quentin Gray and Seton strolled out of Prince's and both paused whilst Seton lighted a long black cheroot.

"It seems a pity to waste that box," said Gray. "Suppose we look in at the Gaiety for an hour?"

His humor was vastly improved, and he watched the passing throngs with an expression more suited to his boyish good looks than that of anger and mortification which had rested upon him an hour earlier.

Seton Pasha tossed a match into the road.

"My official business is finished for the day," he replied. "I place myself unreservedly in your hands."

"Well, then," began Gray—and paused.

A long, low car, the chauffeur temporarily detained by the stoppage of a motorbus ahead, had slowed up within three yards of the spot where they were standing. Gray seized Seton's arm in a fierce grip.

"Seton," he said, his voice betraying intense excitement, "Look! There is Monte Irvin!"

"In the car?"

"Yes, yes! But—he has two police with him! Seton, what can it mean?"

The car moved away, swinging to the right across the traffic stream and clearly heading for old Bond Street. Quentin Gray's mercurial color deserted him, and he turned to Seton a face grown suddenly pale.

"Good God," he whispered, "something has happened to Rita!"

Neglectful of his personal safety, he plunged out into the traffic, dodging this way and that, and making after Monte Irvin's car. Of the fact that his friend was close beside him he remained unaware until, on the corner of old Bond Street, a firm grip settled upon his shoulder. Gray turned angrily. But the grip was immovable, and he found himself staring into the unemotional face of Seton Pasha.

"Seton, for God's sake, don't detain me! I must learn what's wrong."

"Pull up, Gray."

Quentin Gray clenched his teeth.

"Listen to me, Seton. This is no time for interference. I—"

"You are about to become involved in some very unsavory business; and I repeat—pull up. In a moment we shall learn all there is to be learned. But are you determined openly to thrust yourself into the family affairs of Mr Monte Irvin?"

"If anything has happened to Rita I'll kill that damned cur Pyne!"

"You are determined to intrude upon this man in your present frame of mind at a time of evident trouble?"

But Gray was deaf to the promptings of prudence and good taste alike.

"I'm going to see the thing through," he said hoarsely.

"Quite so. Rely upon me. But endeavor to behave more like a man of the world and less like a dangerous lunatic, or we shall quarrel atrociously."

Quentin Gray audibly gnashed his teeth, but the cool stare of the other's eyes was quelling, and now as their glances met and clashed, a sympathetic smile softened the lines of Seton's grim mouth, and:

"I quite understand, old chap," he said, linking his arm in Gray's. "But can't you see how important it is, for everybody's sake, that we should tackle the thing coolly?"

"Seton"—Gray's voice broke—"I'm sorry. I know I'm mad; but I was with her only an hour ago, and now—"

"And now 'her' husband appears on the scene accompanied by a police inspector and a sergeant. What are your relations with Mr Monte Irvin?"

They were walking rapidly again along Bond Street.

"What do you mean, Seton?" asked Gray.

"I mean does he approve of your friendship with his wife, or is it a clandestine affair?"

"Clandestine?—certainly not. I was on my way to call at the house when I met her with Pyne this evening."

"That is what I wanted to know. Very well; since you intend to follow the thing up, it simplifies matters somewhat. Here is the car."

"At Kazmah's door! What in heaven's name does it mean?"

"It means that we shall get a very poor reception if we intrude. Question the chauffeur."

But Gray had already approached the man, who touched his cap in recognition.

"What's the trouble, Pattison?" he demanded breathlessly. "I saw police in the car a moment ago."

"Yes, sir. I don't rightly know, sir, what's happened. But Mr Irvin drove from home to the corner of old Bond Street a quarter of an hour ago and told me to wait, then came back again and drove round to Vine Street to fetch the police. They're inside now."

Even as he spoke, with excitement ill-concealed, a police-sergeant came out of the doorway, and:

"Move on, there," he said to Seton and Gray. "You mustn't hang about this door."

"Excuse me, Sergeant," cried Gray, "but if the matter concerns Mrs Monte Irvin I can probably supply information."

The Sergeant stared at him hard, saw that both he and his friend wore evening dress, and grew proportionately respectful.

"What is your name, sir?" he asked. "I'll mention it to the officer in charge."

"Quentin Gray. Inform Mr Monte Irvin that I wish to speak to him."

"Very good, sir." He turned to the chauffeur. "Hand me out the bag I gave you at Vine Street." Pattison leaned over the door at the front of the car, and brought out a big leather grip. With this in hand the police-sergeant returned into the doorway.

"We're in for it now," said Seton grimly, "whatever it is."

Gray returned no answer, moving restlessly up and down before the door in a fever of excitement and dread. Presently the Sergeant reappeared.

"Step this way, please," he said.

Followed by Seton and Gray he led the way up to the landing before Kazmah's apartments. It was vaguely lighted by two police-lanterns. Four men were standing there, and four pairs of eyes were focussed upon the stair-head.

Monte Irvin, his features a distressing ashen color, spoke.

"That you, Gray?" Quentin Gray would not have recognized the voice. "Thanks for offering your help. God knows I need all I can get. You were with Rita tonight. What happened? Where is she?"

"Heaven knows where she is!" cried Gray. "I left her here with Pyne shortly after seven o'clock."

He paused, fixing his gaze upon the face of Brisley, whose shifty eyes avoided him and who was licking his lips in the manner of a dog who has seen the whip.

"Why," said Gray, "I believe you are the fellow who has been following me all night for some reason."

He stepped toward the foxy little man but:

"Never mind, Gray," interrupted Irvin. "I was to blame. But he was following my wife, not you. Tell me quickly: Why did she come here?"

Gray raised his hand to his brow with a gesture of bewilderment.

"To consult this man, Kazmah. I actually saw her enter the inner room, I went to get a cab, and when I returned the door was locked."

"You knocked?"

"Of course. I made no end of a row. But I could get no reply and went away."

Monte Irvin turned, a pathetic figure, to the Inspector who stood beside him.

"We may as well proceed, Inspector Whiteleaf," he said. "Mr Gray's evidence throws no light on the matter at all."

"Very well, sir," was the reply; "we have the warrant, and have given the usual notice to whoever may be hiding inside. Burton!"

The Sergeant stepped forward, placed the leather bag on the floor, and stooping, opened it, revealing a number of burglarious-looking instruments.

"Shall I try to cut through the panel?" he asked.

"No, no!" cried Monte Irvin. "Waste no time. You have a crowbar there. Force the door from its hinges. Hurry, man!"

"It doesn't work on hinges!" Gray interrupted excitedly. "It slides to the right by means of some arrangement concealed under the mat."

"Pass that lantern," directed Burton, glancing over his shoulder to Gunn.

Setting it beside him, the Sergeant knelt and examined the threshold of the door.

"A metal plate," he said. "The weight moves a lever, I suppose, which opens the door if it isn't locked. The lock will be on the left of the door as it opens to the right. Let's see what we can do."

He stood up, crowbar in hand, and inserted the chisel blade of the implement between the edge of the door and the doorcase.

"Hold steady!" said the Inspector, standing at his elbow.

The dull metallic sound of hammer blows on steel echoed queerly around the well of the staircase. Brisley and Gunn, standing very close together on the bottom step of the stair to the third floor, watched the police furtively. Irvin and Gray found a common fascination in the door itself, and Seton, cheroot in mouth, looked from group to group with quiet interest.

"Right!" cried the Sergeant.

The blows ceased.

Firmly grasping the bar, Burton brought all his weight to bear upon it. There was a dull, cracking sound and a sort of rasping. The door moved slightly.

"There's where it locks!" said the Inspector, directing the light of a lantern upon the crevice created. "Three inches lower. But it may be bolted

as well."

"We'll soon get at the bolts," replied Burton, the lust of destruction now strong upon him.

Wrenching the crowbar from its place he attacked the lower panel of the door, and amid a loud splintering and crashing created a hole big enough to allow of the passage of a hand and arm.

The Inspector reached in, groped about, and then uttered an exclamation of triumph.

"I've unfastened the bolt," he said. "If there isn't another at the top you ought to be able to force the door now, Burton."

The jimmy was thrust back into position, and:

"Stand clear!" cried Burton.

Again he threw his weight upon the bar—and again.

"Drive it further in!" said Monte Irvin; and snatching up the heavy hammer, he rained blows upon the steel butt. "Now try."

Burton exerted himself to the utmost.

"Take hold up here, someone!" he panted. "Two of us can pull."

Gray leapt forward, and the pair of them bent to the task.

There came a dull report of parting mechanism, more sounds of splintering wood . . . and the door rolled open!

A moment of tense silence, then:

"Is anyone inside there?" cried the Inspector loudly.

Not a sound came from the dark interior.

"The lantern!" whispered Monte Irvin.

He stumbled into the room, from which a heavy smell of perfume swept out upon the landing. Quentin Gray, snatching the lantern from the floor, where it had been replaced, was the next to enter.

"Look for the switch, and turn the lights on!" called the Inspector, following.

Even as he spoke, Gray had found the switch, and the apartment of Kazmah became flooded with subdued light.

A glance showed it to be unoccupied.

Gray ran across to the mushrabiyeh cabinet and jerked the curtains aside. There was no one in the cabinet. It contained a chair and a table. Upon the latter was a telephone and some papers and books. "This way!" he cried, his voice high pitched and unnatural.

He burst through the doorway into the inner room which he had seen Mrs Irvin enter. The air was laden with the smell of frankincense.

"A lantern!" he called. "I left one on the divan."

But Monte Irvin had caught it up and was already at his elbow. His hand was shaking so that the light danced wildly now upon the carpet, now upon the green walls. This room also was deserted. A black gap in the curtain showed where the material had been roughly torn. Suddenly:

"My God, look!" muttered the Inspector, who, with the others, now stood in the curious draped apartment.

A thin stream of blood was trickling out from beneath the torn hangings!

Monte Irvin staggered and fell back against the Inspector, clutching at him for support. But Sergeant Burton, who carried the second lantern, crossed the room and wrenched the green draperies bodily from their fastenings.

They had masked a wooden partition or stout screen, having an aperture in the centre which could be closed by means of another of the sliding doors. A space some five feet deep was thus walled off from this second room. It contained a massive ebony chair. Behind the chair, and dividing the second room into yet a third section, extended another wooden partition in one end of which was an ordinary office door; and immediately at the back of the chair appeared a little opening or window, some three feet up from the floor. The sound of a groan, followed by that of a dull thud, came from the outer room.

"Hullo!" cried Inspector Whiteleaf. "Mr Irvin has fainted. Lend a hand."

"I am here," replied the quiet voice of Seton Pasha.

"My God!" whispered Gray. "Seton! Seton!"

"Touch nothing," cried the Inspector from outside, "until I come!"

And now the narrow apartment became filled with all the awe-stricken company, only excepting Monte Irvin, and Brisley, who was attending to the swooning man.

Flat upon the floor, between the door and the ebony chair, arms extended and eyes staring upward at the ceiling, lay Sir Lucien Pyne, his white shirt front redly dyed. In the hush which had fallen, the footsteps of Inspector Whiteleaf sounded loudly as he opened the final door, and swept the interior of an inner room with the rays of the lantern.

The room was barely furnished as an office. There was another half-glazed door opening on to a narrow corridor. This door was locked.

"Pyne!" whispered Gray, pale now to the lips. "Do you understand, Seton? It's Pyne! Look! He has been stabbed!"

Sergeant Burton knelt down and gingerly laid his hand upon the stained linen over the breast of Sir Lucien.

"Dead?" asked the Inspector, speaking from the inner doorway.

"Yes."

"You say, sir," turning to Quentin Gray, "that this is Sir Lucien Pyne?"

"Yes."

Inspector Whiteleaf rather clumsily removed his cap. The odor of Seton's cheroot announced itself above the oriental perfume with which the place was laden.

"Burton!"

"Yes?"

"See if this telephone in the office is in order. It appears to be an extension from the outer room."

While the others stood grouped about that still figure on the floor, Sergeant Burton entered the little office.

"Hello!" he cried. "Yes?" A momentary interval, then: "It's all right, sir. What number?"

"Gentlemen," said the Inspector, firmly and authoritatively, "I am about to telephone to Vine Street for instructions. No one will leave the premises."

Amid an intense hush:

"Regent 201," called Sergeant Burton.

VI. RED KERRY

Chief Inspector Kerry, of the Criminal Investigation Department, stood before the empty grate of his cheerless office in New Scotland Yard, one hand thrust into the pocket of his blue reefer jacket and the other twirling a malacca cane, which was heavily silver-mounted and which must have excited the envy of every sergeant-major beholding it. Chief Inspector Kerry wore a very narrow-brimmed bowler hat, having two ventilation

holes conspicuously placed immediately above the band. He wore this hat tilted forward and to the right.

"Red Kerry" wholly merited his sobriquet, for the man was as red as fire. His hair, which he wore cropped close as a pugilist's, was brilliantly red, and so was his short, wiry, aggressive moustache. His complexion was red, and from beneath his straight red eyebrows he surveyed the world with a pair of unblinking, intolerant steel-blue eyes. He never smoked in public, as his taste inclined towards Irish twist and a short clay pipe; but he was addicted to the use of chewing-gum, and as he chewed—and he chewed incessantly—he revealed a perfect row of large, white, and positively savage-looking teeth. High cheek bones and prominent maxillary muscles enhanced the truculence indicated by his chin.

But, next to this truculence, which was the first and most alarming trait to intrude itself upon the observer's attention, the outstanding characteristic of Chief Inspector Kerry was his compact neatness. Of no more than medium height but with shoulders like an acrobat, he had slim, straight legs and the feet of a dancing master. His attire, from the square-pointed collar down to the neat black brogues, was spotless. His reefer jacket fitted him faultlessly, but his trousers were cut so unfashionably narrow that the protuberant thigh muscles and the line of a highly developed calf could quite easily be discerned. The hand twirling the cane was small but also muscular, freckled and covered with light down. Red Kerry was built on the lines of a whippet, but carried the equipment of an Irish terrier.

The telephone bell rang. Inspector Kerry moved his square shoulders in a manner oddly suggestive of a wrestler, laid the malacca cane on the mantleshelf, and crossed to the table. Taking up the telephone:

"Yes?" he said, and his voice was high-pitched and imperious.

He listened for a moment.

"Very good, sir."

He replaced the receiver, took up a wet oilskin overall from the back of a chair and the cane from the mantleshelf. Then rolling chewing-gum from one corner of his mouth into the other, he snapped off the electric light and walked from the room.

Along the corridor he went with a lithe, silent step, moving from the hips and swinging his shoulders. Before a door marked "Private" he paused. From his waistcoat pocket he took a little silver convex mirror and surveyed

himself critically therein. He adjusted his neat tie, replaced the mirror, knocked at the door and entered the room of the Assistant Commissioner.

This important official was a man constructed on huge principles, a man of military bearing, having tired eyes and a bewildered manner. He conveyed the impression that the collection of documents, books, telephones, and other paraphernalia bestrewing his table had reduced him to a state of stupor. He looked up wearily and met the fierce gaze of the chief inspector with a glance almost apologetic.

"Ah, Chief Inspector Kerry?" he said, with vague surprise. "Yes. I told you to come. Really, I ought to have been at home hours ago. It's most unfortunate. I have to do the work of three men. This is your department, is it not, Chief Inspector?"

He handed Kerry a slip of paper, at which the Chief Inspector stared fiercely.

"Murder!" rapped Kerry. "Sir Lucien Pyne. Yes, sir, I am still on duty."

His speech, in moments of interest, must have suggested to one overhearing him from an adjoining room, for instance, the operation of a telegraphic instrument. He gave to every syllable the value of a rap and certain words he terminated with an audible snap of his teeth.

"Ah," murmured the Assistant Commissioner. "Yes. Divisional Inspector —Somebody (I cannot read the name) has detained all the parties. But you had better report at Vine Street. It appears to be a big case."

He sighed wearily.

"Very good, sir. With your permission I will glance at Sir Lucien's pedigree."

"Certainly—certainly," said the Assistant Commissioner, waving one large hand in the direction of a bookshelf.

Kerry crossed the room, laid his oilskin and cane upon a chair, and from the shelf where it reposed took a squat volume. The Assistant Commissioner, hand pressed to brow, began to study a document which lay before him.

"Here we are," said Kerry, sotto voce. "Pyne, Sir Lucien St. Aubyn, fourth baronet, son of General Sir Christian Pyne, K.C.B. H'm! Born Malta. . . . Oriel College; first in classics. . . . H'm. Blue. . . . India, Burma. . . . Contested Wigan. . . . attached British Legation. . . . H'm! . . ."

He returned the book to its place, took up his overall and cane, and:

"Very good, sir," he said. "I will proceed to Vine Street."

"Certainly—certainly," murmured the Assistant Commissioner, glancing up absently. "Good night."

"Good night, sir."

"Oh, Chief Inspector!"

Kerry turned, his hand on the door-knob.

"Sir?"

"I—er—what was I going to say? Oh, yes! The social importance of the murdered man raises the case from the—er—you follow me? Public interest will become acute, no doubt. I have therefore selected you for your well known discretion. I met Sir Lucien once. Very sad. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

Kerry passed out into the corridor, closing the door quietly. The Assistant Commissioner was a man for whom he entertained the highest respect. Despite the bewildered air and wandering manner, he knew this big, tired-looking soldier for an administrator of infinite capacity and inexhaustive energy.

Proceeding to a room further along the corridor, Chief Inspector Kerry opened the door and looked in.

"Detective-Sergeant Coombes." he snapped, and rolled chewing-gum from side to side of his mouth.

Detective-Sergeant Coombes, a plump, short man having lank black hair and a smile of sly contentment perpetually adorning his round face, rose hurriedly from the chair upon which he had been seated. Another man who was in the room rose also, as if galvanized by the glare of the fierce blue eyes.

"I'm going to Vine Street," said Kerry succinctly; "you're coming with me," turned, and went on his way.

Two taxicabs were standing in the yard, and into the first of these Inspector Kerry stepped, followed by Coombes, the latter breathing heavily and carrying his hat in his hand, since he had not yet found time to put it on.

"Vine Street," shouted Kerry. "Brisk."

He leaned back in the cab, chewing industriously. Coombes, having somewhat recovered his breath, essayed speech.

"Is it something big?" he asked.

"Sure," snapped Kerry. "Do they send me to stop dog-fights?"

Knowing the man and recognizing the mood, Coombes became silent, and this silence he did not break all the way to Vine Street. At the station:

"Wait," said Chief Inspector Kerry, and went swinging in, carrying his overall and having the malacca cane tucked under his arm.

A few minutes later he came out again and reentered the cab.

"Piccadilly corner of Old Bond Street," he directed the man.

"Is it burglary?" asked Detective-Sergeant Coombes with interest.

"No," said Kerry. "It's murder; and there seems to be stacks of evidence. Sharpen your pencil."

"Oh!" murmured Coombes.

They were almost immediately at their destination, and Chief Inspector Kerry, dismissing the cabman, set off along Bond Street with his lithe, swinging gait, looking all about him intently. Rain had ceased, but the air was damp and chilly, and few pedestrians were to be seen.

A car was standing before Kazmah's premises, the chauffeur walking up and down on the pavement and flapping his hands across his chest in order to restore circulation. The Chief Inspector stopped, "Hi, my man!" he said.

The chauffeur stood still.

"Whose car?"

"Mr Monte Irvin's."

Kerry turned on his heel and stepped to the office door. It was ajar, and Kerry, taking an electric torch from his overall pocket, flashed the light upon the name-plate. He stood for a moment, chewing and looking up the darkened stairs. Then, torch in hand he ascended.

Kazmah's door was closed, and the Chief Inspector rapped loudly. It was opened at once by Sergeant Burton, and Kerry entered, followed by Coombes.

The room at first sight seemed to be extremely crowded. Monte Irvin, very pale and haggard, sat upon the divan beside Quentin Gray. Seton was standing near the cabinet, smoking. These three had evidently been conversing at the time of the detective's arrival with an alert-looking, clean-shaven man whose bag, umbrella, and silk hat stood upon one of the little inlaid tables. Just inside the second door were Brisley and Gunn, both palpably ill at ease, and glancing at Inspector Whiteleaf, who had been interrogating them.

Kerry chewed silently for a moment, bestowing a fierce stare upon each face in turn, then:

"Who's in charge?" he snapped.

"I am," replied Whiteleaf.

"Why is the lower door open?"

"I thought—"

"Don't think. Shut the door. Post your Sergeant inside. No one is to go out. Grab anybody who comes in. Where's the body?"

"This way," said Inspector Whiteleaf hurriedly; then, over his shoulder: "Go down to the door, Burton."

He led Kerry towards the inner room, Coombes at his heels. Brisley and Gunn stood aside to give them passage; Gray and Monte Irvin prepared to follow. At the doorway Kerry turned.

"You will all be good enough to stay where you are," he said. He directed the aggressive stare in Seton's direction. "And if the gentleman smoking a cheroot is not satisfied that he has quite destroyed any clue perceptible by the sense of smell I should be glad to send out for some fireworks."

He tossed his oilskin and his cane on the divan and went into the room of seance, savagely biting at a piece of apparently indestructible chewing-gum.

The torn green curtain had been laid aside and the electric lights turned on in the inside rooms. Pallid, Sir Lucien Pyne lay by the ebony chair glaring horribly upward.

Always with the keen eyes glancing this way and that, Inspector Kerry crossed the little audience room and entered the enclosure contained between the two screens. By the side of the dead man he stood, looking down silently. Then he dropped upon one knee and peered closely into the white face. He looked up.

"He has not been moved?"

"No."

Kerry bent yet lower, staring closely at a discolored abrasion on Sir Lucien's forehead. His glance wandered from thence to the carved ebony chair. Still kneeling, he drew from his waistcoat pocket a powerful lens contained in a washleather bag. He began to examine the back and sides of the chair. Once he laid his finger lightly on a protruding point of the carving, and then scrutinised his finger through the glass. He examined the

dead man's hands, his nails, his garments. Then he crawled about, peering closely at the carpet.

He stood up suddenly. "The doctor," he snapped.

Inspector Whiteleaf retired, but returned immediately with the clean-shaven man to whom Monte Irvin had been talking when Kerry arrived.

"Good evening, doctor," said Kerry. "Do I know your name? Start your notes, Coombes."

"My name is Dr. Wilbur Weston, and I live in Albemarle Street."

"Who called you?"

"Inspector Whiteleaf telephoned to me about half an hour ago."

"You examined the dead man?"

"I did."

"You avoided moving him?"

"It was unnecessary to move him. He was dead, and the wound was in the left shoulder. I pulled his coat open and unbuttoned his shirt. That was all."

"How long dead?"

"I should say he had been dead not more than an hour when I saw him."

"What had caused death?"

"The stab of some long, narrow-bladed weapon, such as a stiletto."

"Why a stiletto?" Kerry's fierce eyes challenged him. "Did you ever see a wound made by a stiletto?"

"Several—in Italy, and one at Saffron Hill. They are characterised by very little external bleeding."

"Right, doctor. It had reached his heart?"

"Yes. The blow was delivered from behind."

"How do you know?"

"The direction of the wound is forward. I have seen an almost identical wound in the case of an Italian woman stabbed by a jealous rival."

"He would fall on his back."

"Oh, no. He would fall on his face, almost certainly."

"But he lies on his back."

"In my opinion he had been moved."

"Right. I know he had. Good night, doctor. See him out, Inspector."

Dr. Weston seemed rather startled by this abrupt dismissal, but the steel-blue eyes of Inspector Kerry were already bent again upon the dead man,

and, murmuring "good night," the doctor took his departure, followed by Whiteleaf.

"Shut this door," snapped Kerry after the Inspector. "I will call when I want you. You stay, Coombes. Got it all down?"

Sergeant Coombes scratched his head with the end of a pencil, and:

"Yes," he said, with hesitancy. "That is, except the word after 'narrow-bladed weapon such as a' I've got what looks like 'steelhatto.'"

Kerry glared.

"Try taking the cotton-wool out of your ears," he suggested. "The word was stiletto, s-t-i-l-e-t-t-o—stiletto."

"Oh," said Coombes, "thanks."

Silence fell between the two men from Scotland Yard. Kerry stood awhile, chewing and staring at the ghastly face of Sir Lucien. Then:

"Go through all pockets," he directed.

Sergeant Coombes placed his notebook and pencil upon the seat of the chair and set to work. Kerry entered the inside room or office. It contained a writing-table (upon which was a telephone and a pile of old newspapers), a cabinet, and two chairs. Upon one of the chairs lay a crush-hat, a cane, and an overcoat. He glanced at some of the newspapers, then opened the drawers of the writing-table. They were empty. The cabinet proved to be locked, and a door which he saw must open upon a narrow passage running beside the suite of rooms was locked also. There was nothing in the pockets of the overcoat, but inside the hat he found pasted the initials L. P. He rolled chewing- gum, stared reflectively at the little window immediately above the table, through which a glimpse might be obtained of the ebony chair, and went out again.

"Nothing," reported Coombes.

"What do you mean—nothing?"

"His pockets are empty!"

"All of them?"

"Every one."

"Good," said Kerry. "Make a note of it. He wears a real pearl stud and a good signet ring; also a gold wrist watch, face broken and hands stopped at seven-fifteen. That was the time he died. He was stabbed from behind as he stood where I'm standing now, fell forward, struck his head on the leg of the chair, and lay face downwards."

"I've got that," muttered Coombes. "What stopped the watch?"

"Broken as he fell. There are tiny fragments of glass stuck in the carpet, showing the exact position in which his body originally lay; and for God's sake stop smiling."

Kerry threw open the door.

"Who first found the body?" he demanded of the silent company.

"I did," cried Quentin Gray, coming forward. "I and Seton Pasha."

"Seton Pasha!" Kerry's teeth snapped together, so that he seemed to bite off the words. "I don't see a Turk present."

Seton smiled quietly.

"My friend uses a title which was conferred upon me some years ago by the ex-Khedive," he said. "My name is Greville Seton."

Inspector Kerry glanced back across his shoulder.

"Notes," he said. "Unlock your ears, Coombes." He looked at Gray. "What is your name?"

"Quentin Gray."

"Who are you, and in what way are you concerned in this case?"

"I am the son of Lord Wrexborough, and I—"

He paused, glancing helplessly at Seton. He had recognized that the first mention of Rita Irvin's name in the police evidence must be made by himself.

"Speak up, sir," snapped Kerry. "Sergeant Coombes is deaf."

Gray's face flushed, and his eyes gleamed angrily.

"I should be glad, Inspector," he said, "if you would remember that the dead man was a personal acquaintance and that other friends are concerned in this ghastly affair."

"Coombes will remember it," replied Kerry frigidly. "He's taking notes."

"Look here—" began Gray.

Seton laid his hand upon the angry man's shoulder.

"Pull up, Gray," he said quietly. "Pull up, old chap." He turned his cool regard upon Chief Inspector Kerry, twirling the cord of his monocle about one finger. "I may remark, Inspector Kerry—for I understand this to be your name—that your conduct of the inquiry is not always characterised by the best possible taste."

Kerry rolled chewing-gum, meeting Seton's gaze with a stare intolerant and aggressive. He imparted that odd writhing movement to his shoulders.

"For my conduct I am responsible to the Commissioner," he replied. "And if he's not satisfied the Commissioner can have my written resignation at any hour in the twenty-four that he's short of a pipe-lighter. If it would not inconvenience you to keep quiet for two minutes I will continue my examination of this witness."

VII. FURTHER EVIDENCE

The examination of Quentin Gray was three times interrupted by telephone messages from Vine Street; and to the unsatisfactory character of these the growing irascibility of Chief Inspector Kerry bore testimony. Then the divisional surgeon arrived, and Burton incurred the wrath of the Chief Inspector by deserting his post to show the doctor upstairs.

"If inspired idiocy can help the law," shouted Kerry, "the man who did this job is as good as dead!" He turned his fierce gaze in Gray's direction. "Thank you, sir. I need trouble you no further."

"Do you wish me to remain?"

"No. Inspector Whiteleaf, see these two gentlemen past the Sergeant on duty."

"But damn it all!" cried Gray, his pent-up emotions at last demanding an outlet, "I won't submit to your infernal dragooning! Do you realize that while you're standing here, doing nothing—absolutely nothing—an unhappy woman is—"

"I realize," snapped Kerry, showing his teeth in canine fashion, "that if you're not outside in ten seconds there's going to be a cloud of dust on the stairs!"

White with passion, Gray was on the point of uttering other angry and provocative words when Seton took his arm in a firm grip. "Gray!" he said sharply. "You leave with me now or I leave alone."

The two walked from the room, followed by Whiteleaf. As they disappeared:

"Read out all the times mentioned in the last witness's evidence," directed Kerry, undisturbed by the rencontre.

Sergeant Coombes smiled rather uneasily, consulting his notebook.

"'At about half-past six I drove to Bond Street,'" he began.

"I said the times," rapped Kerry. "I know to what they refer. Just give me the times as mentioned."

"Oh," murmured Coombes, "Yes. 'About half-past six.'" He ran his finger down the page. "'A quarter to seven.' 'Seven o'clock.' 'Twenty-five minutes past seven.' 'Eight o'clock.'"

"Stop!" said Kerry. "That's enough." He fixed a baleful glance upon Gunn, who from a point of the room discreetly distant from the terrible red man was watching with watery eyes. "Who's the smart in all the overcoats?" he demanded.

"My name is James Gunn," replied this greatly insulted man in a husky voice.

"Who are you? What are you? What are you doing here?"

"I'm employed by Spinker's Agency, and—"

"Oh!" shouted Kerry, moving his shoulders. He approached the speaker and glared menacingly into his purple face. "Ho, ho! So you're one of the queer birds out of that roost, are you? Spinker's Agency! Ah, yes!" He fixed his gaze now upon the pale features of Brisley. "I've seen you before, haven't I?"

"Yes, Chief Inspector," said Brisley, licking his lips. "Hayward's Heath. We have been retained by—"

"You have been retained!" shouted Kerry. "You have!"

He twisted round upon his heel, facing Monte Irvin. Angry words trembled on his tongue. But at sight of the broken man who sat there alone, haggard, a subtle change of expression crept into his fierce eyes, and when he spoke again the high-pitched voice was almost gentle. "You had employed these men, sir, to watch—"

He paused, glancing towards Whiteleaf, who had just entered again, and then in the direction of the inner room where the divisional surgeon was at work.

"To watch my wife, Inspector. Thank you, but all the world will know tomorrow. I might as well get used to it."

Monte Irvin's pallor grew positively alarming. He swayed suddenly and extended his hands in a significant groping fashion. Kerry sprang forward and supported him.

"All right, Inspector—all right," muttered Irvin. "Thank you. It has been a great shock. At first I feared—"

"You thought your wife had been attacked, I understand? Well—it's not so bad as that, sir. I am going to walk downstairs to the car with you."

"But there is so much you will want to know—"

"It can keep until tomorrow. I've enough work in this peep-show here to have me busy all night. Come along. Lean on my arm."

Monte Irvin rose unsteadily. He knew that there was cardiac trouble in his family, but he had never realized before the meaning of his heritage. He felt physically ill.

"Inspector"—his voice was a mere whisper—"have you any theory to explain—"

"Mrs Irvin's disappearance? Don't worry, sir. Without exactly having a theory I think I may say that in my opinion she will turn up presently."

"God bless you," murmured Irvin, as Kerry assisted him out on to the landing.

Inspector Whiteleaf held back the sliding door, the mechanism of which had been broken so that the door now automatically remained half closed.

"Funny, isn't it," said Gunn, as the two disappeared and Inspector Whiteleaf re-entered, "that a man should be so upset about the disappearance of a woman he was going to divorce?"

"Damn funny!" said Whiteleaf, whose temper was badly frayed by contact with Kerry. "I should have a good laugh if I were you."

He crossed the room, going in to where the surgeon was examining the victim of this mysterious crime. Gunn stared after him dismally.

"A person doesn't get much sympathy from the police, Brisley," he declared. "That one's almost as bad as him," jerking his thumb in the direction of the landing.

Brisley smiled in a somewhat sickly manner.

"Red Kerry is a holy terror," he agreed, sotto voce, glancing aside to where Coombes was checking his notes. "Look out! Here he comes."

"Now," cried Kerry, swinging into the room, "what's the game? Plotting to defeat the ends of justice?"

He stood with hands thrust in reefer pockets, feet wide apart, glancing fiercely from Brisley to Gunn, and from Gunn back again to Brisley.

Neither of the representatives of Spinker's Agency ventured any remark, and:

"How long have you been watching Mrs Monte Irvin?" demanded Kerry.

"Nearly a fortnight," replied Brisley.

"Got your evidence in writing?"

"Yes."

"Up to tonight?"

"Yes."

"Dictate to Sergeant Coombes."

He turned on his heel and crossed to the divan upon which his oilskin overall was lying. Rapidly he removed his reefer and his waistcoat, folded them, and placed them neatly beside his overall. He retained his bowler at its jaunty angle.

A cud of presumably flavorless chewing-gum he deposited in a brass bowl, and from a little packet which he had taken out of his jacket pocket he drew a fresh piece, redolent of mint. This he put into his mouth, and returned the packet to its resting-place. A slim, trim figure, he stood looking round him reflectively.

"Now," he muttered, "what about it?"

VIII. KERRY CONSULTS THE ORACLE

The clock of Brixton Town Hall was striking the hour of 1 a.m. as Chief Inspector Kerry inserted his key in the lock of the door of his house in Spenser Road.

A light was burning in the hallway, and from the little dining-room on the left the reflection of a cheerful fire danced upon the white paint of the half-open door. Kerry deposited his hat, cane, and overall upon the rack, and moving very quietly entered the room and turned on the light. A modestly furnished and scrupulously neat apartment was revealed. On the sheepskin rug before the fire a Manx cat was dozing beside a pair of carpet slippers. On the table some kind of cold repast was laid, the viands concealed under china covers. At a large bottle of Guinness's Extra Stout Kerry looked with particular appreciation.

He heaved a long sigh of contentment, and opened the bottle of stout. Having poured out a glass of the black and foaming liquid and satisfied an evidently urgent thirst, he explored beneath the covers, and presently was seated before a spread of ham and tongue, tomatoes, and bread and butter.

A door opened somewhere upstairs, and:

"Is that yoursel', Dan?" inquired a deep but musical female voice.

"Sure it is," replied Kerry; and no one who had heard the high official tones of the imperious Chief Inspector would have supposed that they could be so softened and modulated. "You should have been asleep hours ago, Mary."

"Have ye to go out again?"

"I have, bad luck; but don't trouble to come down. I've all I want and more."

"If 'tis a new case I'll come down."

"It's the devil's own case; but you'll get your death of cold."

Sounds of movement in the room above followed, and presently footsteps on the stairs. Mrs Kerry, enveloped in a woollen dressing-gown, which obviously belonged to the Inspector, came into the room. Upon her Kerry directed a look from which all fierceness had been effaced, and which expressed only an undying admiration. And, indeed, Mary Kerry was in many respects a remarkable character. Half an inch taller than Kerry, she fully merited the compliment designed by that trite apothegm, "a fine woman." Large-boned but shapely, as she came in with her long dark hair neatly plaited, it seemed to her husband—who had remained her lover—that he saw before him the rosy-cheeked lass whom ten years before he had met and claimed on the chilly shores of Loch Broom. By all her neighbors Mrs Kerry was looked upon as a proud, reserved person, who had held herself much aloof since her husband had become Chief Inspector; and the reputation enjoyed by Red Kerry was that of an aggressive and uncompanionable man. Now here was a lover's meeting, not lacking the shy, downward glance of dark eyes as steel- blue eyes flashed frank admiration.

Kerry, who quarrelled with everybody except the Assistant Commissioner, had only found one cause of quarrel with Mary. He was a devout Roman Catholic, and for five years he had clung with the bull-dog tenacity which was his to the belief that he could convert his wife to the

faith of Rome. She remained true to the Scottish Free Church, in whose precepts she had been reared, and at the end of the five years Kerry gave it up and admired her all the more for her Caledonian strength of mind. Many and heated were the debates he had held with worthy Father O'Callaghan respecting the validity of a marriage not solemnized by a priest, but of late years he had grown reconciled to the parting of the ways on Sunday morning; and as the early mass was over before the Scottish service he was regularly to be seen outside a certain Presbyterian chapel waiting for his heretical spouse.

He pulled her down on to his knee and kissed her.

"It's twelve hours since I saw you," he said.

She rested her arm on the back of the saddle-back chair, and her dark head close beside Kerry's fiery red one.

"I kenned ye had a new case on," she said, "when it grew so late. How long can ye stay?"

"An hour. No more. There's a lot to do before the papers come out in the morning. By breakfast time all England, including the murderer, will know I'm in charge of the case. I wish I could muzzle the Press."

"'Tis a murder, then? The Lord gi'e us grace. Ye'll be wishin' to tell me?"

"Yes. I'm stumped!"

"Ye've time for a rest an' a smoke. Put ye're slippers on."

"I've no time for that, Mary."

She stood up and took the slippers from the hearth.

"Put ye're slippers on," she repeated firmly.

Kerry stooped without another word and began to unlace his brogues. Meanwhile from a side-table his wife brought a silver tobacco-box and a stumpy Irish clay. The slippers substituted for his shoes, Kerry lovingly filled the cracked and blackened bowl with strong Irish twist, which he first teased carefully in his palm. The bowl rested almost under his nostrils when he put the pipe in his mouth, and how he contrived to light it without burning his moustache was not readily apparent. He succeeded, however, and soon was puffing clouds of pungent smoke into the air with the utmost contentment.

"Now," said his wife, seating herself upon the arm of the chair, "tell me, Dan."

Thereupon began a procedure identical to that which had characterized the outset of every successful case of the Chief Inspector. He rapidly outlined the complexities of the affair in old Bond Street, and Mary Kerry surveyed the problem with a curious and almost fey detachment of mind, which enabled her to see light where all was darkness to the man on the spot. With the clarity of a trained observer Kerry described the apartments of Kazmah, the exact place where the murdered man had been found, and the construction of the rooms. He gave the essential points from the evidence of the several witnesses, quoting the exact times at which various episodes had taken place. Mary Kerry, looking straightly before her with unseeing eyes, listened in silence until he ceased speaking; then:

"There are really but twa rooms," she said, in a faraway voice, "but the second o' these is parteetioned into three parts?"

"That's it."

"A door free the landing opens upon the fairst room, a door free a passage opens upon the second. Where does yon passage lead?"

"From the main stair along beside Kazmah's rooms to a small back stair. This back stair goes from top to bottom of the building, from the end of the same hallway as the main stair."

"There is na either way out but by the front door?"

"No."

"Then if the evidence o' the Spinker man is above suspeecion, Mrs Irvin and this Kazmah were still on the premises when ye arrived?"

"Exactly. I gathered that much at Vine Street before I went on to Bond Street. The whole block was surrounded five minutes after my arrival, and it still is."

"What ither offices are in this passage?"

"None. It's a blank wall on the left, and one door on the right—the one opening into the Kazmah office. There are other premises on the same floor, but they are across the landing."

"What premises?"

"A solicitor and a commission agent."

"The floor below?"

"It's all occupied by a modiste, Renan."

"The top floor?"

"Cubanis Cigarette Company, a servants' and an electrician."

"Nae more?"

"No more."

"Where does yon back stair open on the topmaist floor?"

"In a corridor similar to that alongside Kazmah's. It has two windows on the right overlooking a narrow roof and the top of the arcade, and on the left is the Cubanis Cigarette Company. The other offices are across the landing."

Mary Kerry stared into space awhile.

"Kazmah and Mrs Irvin could ha' come down to the fairst floor, or gene up to the thaird floor unseen by the Spinker man," she said dreamily.

"But they couldn't have reached the street, my dear!" cried Kerry.

"No—they couldn'a ha' gained the street."

She became silent again, her husband watching her expectantly. Then:

"If puir Sir Lucien Pyne was killed at a quarter after seven—the time his watch was broken—the native sairvent did no' kill him. Frae the Spinker's evidence the black man went awe' before then," she said. "Mrs Irvin?"

Kerry shook his head.

"From all accounts a slip of a woman," he replied. "It was a strong hand that struck the blow."

"Kazmah?"

"Probably."

"Mr Quentin Gray came back wi' a cab and went upstairs, free the Spinker's evidence, at aboot a quarter after seven, and came doon five meenites later sair pale an' fretful."

Kerry surrounded himself and the speaker with wreaths of stifling smoke.

"We have only the bare word of Mr Gray that he didn't go in again, Mary; but I believe him. He's a hot-headed fool, but square."

"Then 'twas yon Kazmah," announced Mrs Kerry. "Who is Kazmah?"

Her husband laughed shortly.

"That's the point at which I got stumped," he replied. "We've heard of him at the Yard, of course, and we know that under the cloak of a dealer in Eastern perfumes he carried on a fortune-telling business. He managed to avoid prosecution, though. It took me over an hour tonight to explore the thought-reading mechanism; it's a sort of Maskelyne's Mysteries worked from the inside room. But who Kazmah is or what's his nationality I know no more than the man in the moon."

"Pairfume?" queried the far-away voice.

"Yes, Mary. The first room is a sort of miniature scent bazaar. There are funny little imitation antique flasks of Kazmah preparations, creams, perfumes and incense, also small square wooden boxes of a kind of Turkish delight, and a stock of Egyptian mummy-beads, statuettes, and the like, which may be genuine for all I know."

"Nae books or letters?"

"Not a thing, except his own advertisements, a telephone directory, and so on."

"The inside office bureau?"

"Empty as Mother Hubbard's cupboard!"

"The place was ransacked by the same folk that emptied the dead man's pockets so as tee leave nae clue," pronounced the sibyl-like voice. "Mr Gray said he had choc'lates wi' him. Where did he leave them?"

"Mary, you're a wonder!" exclaimed the admiring Kerry. "The box was lying on the divan in the first room where he said he had left it on going out for a cab."

"Does nane o' the evidence show if Mrs Irvin had been to Kazmah's before?"

"Yes. She went there fairly regularly to buy perfume."

"No' for the fortune-tellin'?"

"No. According to Mr Gray, to buy perfume."

"Had Mr Gray been there wi' her before?"

"No. Sir Lucien Pyne seems to have been her pretty constant companion."

"Do ye suspect she was his lady-love?"

"I believe Mr Gray suspects something of the kind."

"And Mr Gray?"

"He is not such an old friend as Sir Lucien was. But I fancy nevertheless it was Mr Gray that her husband doubted."

"Do ye suspect the puir soul had cause, Dan?"

"No," replied Kerry promptly; "I don't. The boy is mad about her, but I fancy she just liked his company. He's the heir of Lord Wrexborough, and Mrs Irvin used to be a stage beauty. It's a usual state of affairs, and more often than not means nothing."

"I dinna ken sich folk," declared Mary Kerry. "They a'most desairve all they get. They are bound tee come tee nae guid end. Where did ye say Sir Lucien lived?"

"Albemarle Street; just round the corner."

"Ye told me that he only kepit twa sairvents: a cook, hoosekeper, who lived awe', an' a man—a foreigner?"

"A kind of half-baked Dago, named Juan Mareno. A citizen of the United States according to his own account."

"Ye dinna like Juan Mareno?"

"He's a hateful swine!" flashed Kerry, with sudden venom. "I'm watching Mareno very closely. Coombes is at work upon Sir Lucien's papers. His life was a bit of a mystery. He seems to have had no relations living, and I can't find that he even employed a solicitor."

"Ye'll be sairchin' for yon Egyptian?"

"The servant? Yes. We'll have him by the morning, and then we shall know who Kazmah is. Meanwhile, in which of the offices is Kazmah hiding?"

Mary Kerry was silent for so long that her husband repeated the question:

"In which of the offices is Kazmah hiding?"

"In nane," she said dreamily. "Ye surrounded the buildings too late, I ken."

"Eh!" cried Kerry, turning his head excitedly. "But the man Brisley was at the door all night!"

"It doesna' matter. They have escapit."

Kerry scratched his close-cropped head in angry perplexity.

"You're always right, Mary," he said. "But hang me if—Never mind! When we get the servant we'll soon get Kazmah."

"Aye," murmured his wife. "If ye hae na' got Kazmah the now."

"But—Mary! This isn't helping me! It's mystifying me deeper than ever!"

"It's no' clear eno', Dan. But for sure behind this mystery o' the death o' Sir Lucien there's a darker mystery still; sair dark. 'Tis the biggest case ye ever had. Dinna look for Kazmah. Look tee find why the woman went tee him; and try tee find the meanin' o' the sma' window behind the big chair. . . . Yes"—she seemed to be staring at some distant visible object—"watch the man Mareno—"

"But—Mrs Irvin—"

"Is in God's guid keepin'—"

"You don't think she's dead!"

"She is wairse than dead. Her sins have found her out." The fey light suddenly left her eyes, and they became filled with tears. She turned impulsively to her husband. "Oh, Dan! Ye must find her! Ye must find her! Puir weak hairt—dinna ye ken how she is suffering!"

"My dear," he said, putting his arms around her, "What is it? What is it?"

She brushed the tears from her eyes and tried to smile. "'Tis something like the second sight, Dan," she answered simply. "And it's escapit me again. I a'most had the clue to it a' oh, there's some horrible wickedness in it, an' cruelty an' shame."

The clock on the mantel shelf began to peal. Kerry was watching his wife's rosy face with a mixture of loving admiration and wonder. She looked so very bonny and placid and capable that he was puzzled anew at the strange gift which she seemingly inherited from her mother, who had been equally shrewd, equally comely and similarly endowed.

"God bless us all!" he said, kissed her heartily, and stood up. "Back to bed you go, my dear. I must be off. There's Mr Irvin to see in the morning, too."

A few minutes later he was swinging through the deserted streets, his mind wholly occupied with lover-like reflections to the exclusion of those professional matters which properly should have been engaging his attention. As he passed the end of a narrow court near the railway station, the gleam of his silver mounted malacca attracted the attention of a couple of loafers who were leaning one on either side of an iron pillar in the shadow of the unsavory alley. Not another pedestrian was in sight, and only the remote night-sounds of London broke the silence.

Twenty paces beyond, the footpads silently closed in upon their prey. The taller of the pair reached him first, only to receive a back- handed blow full in his face which sent him reeling a couple of yards.

Round leapt the assaulted man to face his second assailant.

"If you two smarts really want handling," he rapped ferociously, "say the word, and I'll bash you flat."

As he turned, the light of a neighboring lamp shone down upon the savage face, and a smothered yell came from the shorter ruffian:

"Blimey, Bill! It's Red Kerry!"

Whereupon, as men pursued by devils, the pair made off like the wind!

Kerry glared after the retreating figures for a moment, and a grin of fierce satisfaction revealed his gleaming teeth. He turned again and swung on his way toward the main road. The incident had done him good. It had banished domestic matters from his mind, and he was become again the highly trained champion of justice, standing, an unseen buckler, between society and the criminal.

IX. A PACKET OF CIGARETTES

Following their dismissal by Chief Inspector Kerry, Seton and Gray walked around to the latter's chambers in Piccadilly. They proceeded in silence, Gray too angry for speech, and Seton busy with reflections. As the man admitted them:

"Has anyone 'phoned, Willis?" asked Gray.

"No one, sir."

They entered a large room which combined the characteristics of a library with those of a military gymnasium. Gray went to a side table and mixed drinks. Placing a glass before Seton, he emptied his own at a draught.

"If you'll excuse me for a moment," he said, "I should like to ring up and see if by any possible chance there's news of Rita."

He walked out to the telephone, and Seton heard him making a call. Then:

"Hullo! Is that you, Hinkes?" he asked. . . . "Yes, speaking. Is Mrs Irvin at home?"

A few moments of silence followed, and:

"Thanks! Good-bye," said Gray.

He rejoined his friend.

"Nothing," he reported, and made a gesture of angry resignation. "Evidently Hinkes is still unaware of what has happened. Irvin hasn't returned yet. Seton, this business is driving me mad."

He refilled his glass, and having looked in his cigarette-case, began to ransack a small cupboard.

"Damn it all!" he exclaimed. "I haven't got a cigarette in the place!"

"I don't smoke them myself," said Seton, "but I can offer you a cheroot."

"Thanks. They are a trifle too strong. Hullo! here are some."

From the back of a shelf he produced a small, plain brown packet, and took out of it a cigarette at which he stared oddly. Seton, smoking one of the inevitable cheroots, watched him, tapping his teeth with the rim of his eyeglass.

"Poor old Pyne!" muttered Gray, and, looking up, met the inquiring glance. "Pyne left these here only the other day," he explained awkwardly. "I don't know where he got them, but they are something very special. I suppose I might as well."

He lighted one, and, uttering a weary sigh, threw himself into a deep leather-covered arm-chair. Almost immediately he was up again. The telephone bell had rung. His eyes alight with hope, he ran out, leaving the door open so that his conversation was again audible to the visitor.

"Yes, yes, speaking. What?" His tone changed "Oh, it's you, Margaret. What? . . . Certainly, delighted. No, there's nobody here but old Seton Pasha. What? You've heard the fellows talk about him who were out East. . . . Yes, that's the chap. . . . Come right along."

"You don't propose to lionise me, I hope, Gray?" said Seton, as Gray returned to his seat.

The other laughed.

"I forgot you could hear me," he admitted. "It's my cousin, Margaret Halley. You'll like her. She's a tip-top girl, but eccentric. Goes in for pilling."

"Pilling?" inquired Seton gravely.

"Doctoring. She's an M.R.C.S., and only about twenty-four or so. Fearfully clever kid; makes me feel an infant."

"Flat heels, spectacles, and a judicial manner?"

"Flat heels, yes. But not the other. She's awfully pretty, and used to look simply terrific in khaki. She was an M.O. in Serbia, you know, and afterwards at some nurses' hospital in Kent. She's started in practice for herself now round in Dover Street. I wonder what she wants."

Silence fell between them; for, although prompted by different reasons, both were undesirous of discussing the tragedy; and this silence prevailed until the ringing of the doorbell announced the arrival of the girl. Willis opening the door, she entered composedly, and Gray introduced Seton.

"I am so glad to have met you at last, Mr Seton," she said laughingly. "From Quentin's many accounts I had formed the opinion that you were a kind of Arabian Nights myth."

"I am glad to disappoint you," replied Seton, finding something very refreshing in the company of this pretty girl, who wore a creased Burberry, and stray locks of whose abundant bright hair floated about her face in the most careless fashion imaginable.

She turned to her cousin, frowning in a rather puzzled way.

"Whatever have you been burning here?" she asked. "There is such a curious smell in the room."

Gray laughed more heartily than he had laughed that night, glancing in Seton's direction.

"So much for your taste in cigars!" he cried

"Oh!" said Margaret, "I'm sure it's not Mr Seton's cigar. It isn't a smell of tobacco."

"I don't believe they're made of tobacco!" cried Gray, laughing louder yet, although his merriment was forced.

Seton smiled good-naturedly at the joke, but he had perceived at the moment of Margaret's entrance the fact that her gaiety also was assumed. Serious business had dictated her visit, and he wondered the more to note how deeply this odor, real or fancied, seemed to intrigue her.

She sat down in the chair which Gray placed by the fireside, and her cousin unceremoniously slid the brown packet of cigarettes across the little table in her direction.

"Try one of these, Margaret," he said. "They are great, and will quite drown the unpleasant odor of which you complain."

Whereupon the observant Seton saw a quick change take place in the girl's expression. She had the same clear coloring as her cousin, and now this freshness deserted her cheeks, and her pretty face became quite pale. She was staring at the brown packet. "Where did you get them?" she asked quietly.

A smile faded from Gray's lips. Those five words had translated him in spirit to that green-draped room in which Sir Lucien Pyne was lying dead. He glanced at Seton in the appealing way which sometimes made him appear so boyish.

"Er—from Pyne," he replied. "I must tell you, Margaret—"

"Sir Lucien Pyne?" she interrupted.

"Yes."

"Not from Rita Irvin?"

Quentin Gray started upright in his chair.

"No! But why do you mention her?"

Margaret bit her lip in sudden perplexity.

"Oh, I don't know." She glanced apologetically toward Seton. He rose immediately.

"My dear Miss Halley," he said, "I perceive, indeed I had perceived all along, that you have something of a private nature to communicate to your cousin."

But Gray stood up, and:

"Seton! . . . Margaret!" he said, looking from one to the other. "I mean to say, Margaret, if you've anything to tell me about Rita . . . Have you? Have you?"

He fixed his gaze eagerly upon her.

"I have—yes."

Seton prepared to take his leave, but Gray impetuously thrust him back, immediately turning again to his cousin.

"Perhaps you haven't heard, Margaret," he began. "I have heard what has happened tonight—to Sir Lucien."

Both men stared at her silently for a moment.

"Seton has been with me all the time," said Gray. "If he will consent to stay, with your permission, Margaret, I should like him to do so."

"Why, certainly," agreed the girl. "In fact, I shall be glad of his advice."

Seton inclined his head, and without another word resumed his seat. Gray was too excited to sit down again. He stood on the tiger-skin rug before the fender, watching his cousin and smoking furiously.

"Firstly, then," continued Margaret, "please throw that cigarette in the fire, Quentin."

Gray removed the cigarette from between his lips, and stared at it dazedly. He looked at the girl, and the clear grey eyes were watching him with an inscrutable expression.

"Right-o!" he said awkwardly, and tossed the cigarette in the fire. "You used to smoke like a furnace, Margaret. Is this some new 'cult'?"

"I still smoke a great deal more than is good for me," she confessed, "but I don't smoke opium."

The effect of these words upon the two men who listened was curious. Gray turned an angry glance upon the brown packet lying on the table, and "Faugh!" he exclaimed, and drawing a handkerchief from his sleeve began disgustedly to wipe his lips. Seton stared hard at the speaker, tossed his cheroot into the fire, and taking up the packet withdrew a cigarette and sniffed at it critically. Margaret watched him.

He tore the wrapping off, and tasted a strand of the tobacco.

"Good heavens!" he whispered. "Gray, these things are doped!"

X. SIR LUCIEN'S STUDY WINDOW

Old Bond Street presented a gloomy and deserted prospect to Chief Inspector Kerry as he turned out of Piccadilly and swung along toward the premises of Kazmah. He glanced at the names on some of the shop windows as he passed, and wondered if the furriers, jewelers and other merchants dealing in costly wares properly appreciated the services of the Metropolitan Police Force. He thought of the peacefully slumbering tradesmen in their suburban homes, the safety of their stocks wholly dependent upon the vigilance of that Unsleeping Eye—for to an unsleeping eye he mentally compared the service of which he was a member.

A constable stood on duty before the door of the block. Red Kerry was known by sight and reputation to every member of the force, and the constable saluted as the celebrated Chief Inspector appeared.

"Anything to report, constable?"

"Yes, sir."

"What?"

"The ambulance has been for the body, and another gentleman has been."

Kerry stared at the man.

"Another gentleman? Who the devil's the other gentleman?"

"I don't know, sir. He came with Inspector Whiteleaf, and was inside for nearly an hour."

"Inspector Whiteleaf is off duty. What time was this?"

"Twelve-thirty, sir."

Kerry chewed reflectively ere nodding to the man and passing on.

"Another gentleman!" he muttered, entering the hallway. "Why didn't Inspector Warley report this? Who the devil—" Deep in thought he walked upstairs, finding his way by the light of the pocket torch which he carried. A second constable was on duty at Kazmah's door. He saluted.

"Anything to report?" rapped Kerry.

"Yes, sir. The body has been removed, and the gentleman with Inspector —"

"Damn that for a tale! Describe this gentleman."

"Rather tall, pale, dark, clean-shaven. Wore a fur-collared overcoat, collar turned up. He was accompanied by Inspector Whiteleaf."

"H'm. Anything else?"

"Yes. About an hour ago I heard a noise on the next floor—"

"Eh!" snapped Kerry, and shone the light suddenly into the man's face so that he blinked furiously.

"Eh? What kind of noise?"

"Very slight. Like something moving."

"Like something! Like what thing? A cat or an elephant?"

"More like, say, a box or a piece of furniture."

"And you did—what?"

"I went up to the top landing and listened."

"What did you hear?"

"Nothing at all."

Chief Inspector Kerry chewed audibly.

"All quiet?" he snapped.

"Absolutely. But I'm certain I heard something all the same."

"How long had Inspector Whiteleaf and this dark horse in the fur coat been gone at the time you heard the noise?"

"About half an hour, sir."

"Do you think the noise came from the landing or from one of the offices above?"

"An office I should say. It was very dim."

Chief Inspector Kerry pushed upon the broken door, and walked into the rooms of Kazmah. Flashing the ray of his torch on the wall, he found the switch and snapped up the lights. He removed his overall and tossed it on a

divan with his cane. Then, tilting his bowler further forward, he thrust his hands into his reefer pockets, and stood staring toward the door, beyond which lay the room of the murder, in darkness.

"Who is he?" he muttered. "What's it mean?"

Taking up the torch, he walked through and turned on the lights in the inner rooms. For a long time he stood staring at the little square window low down behind the ebony chair, striving to imagine uses for it as his wife had urged him to do. The globular green lamp in the second apartment was worked by three switches situated in the inside room, and he had discovered that in this way the visitor who came to consult Kazmah was treated to the illusion of a gradually falling darkness. Then, the door in the first partition being opened, whoever sat in the ebony chair would become visible by the gradual uncovering of a light situated above the chair. On this light being covered again the figure would apparently fade away.

It was ingenious, and, so far, quite clear. But two things badly puzzled the inquirer; the little window down behind the chair, and the fact that all the arrangements for raising and lowering the lights were situated not in the narrow chamber in which Kazmah's chair stood, and in which Sir Lucien had been found, but in the room behind it—the room with which the little window communicated.

The table upon which the telephone rested was set immediately under this mysterious window, the window was provided with a green blind, and the switchboard controlling the complicated lighting scheme was also within reach of anyone seated at the table.

Kerry rolled mint gum from side to side of his mouth, and absently tried the handle of the door opening out from this interior room— evidently the office of the establishment—into the corridor. He knew it to be locked. Turning, he walked through the suite and out on to the landing, passing the constable and going upstairs to the top floor, torch in hand.

From the main landing he walked along the narrow corridor until he stood at the head of the back stairs. The door nearest to him bore the name: "Cubanis Cigarette Company." He tried the handle. The door was locked, as he had anticipated. Kneeling down, he peered into the keyhole, holding the electric torch close beside his face and chewing industriously.

Ere long he stood up, descended again, but by the back stair, and stood staring reflectively at the door communicating with Kazmah's inner room.

Then walking along the corridor to where the man stood on, the landing, he went in again to the mysterious apartments, but only to get his cane and his overall and to turn out the lights.

Five minutes later he was ringing the late Sir Lucien's door-bell.

A constable admitted him, and he walked straight through into the study where Coombes, looking very tired but smiling undauntedly, sat at a littered table studying piles of documents.

"Anything to report?" rapped Kerry.

"The man, Mareno, has gone to bed, and the expert from the Home office has been—"

Inspector Kerry brought his cane down with a crash upon the table, whereat Coombes started nervously.

"So that's it!" he shouted furiously, "an 'expert from the Home office'! So that's the dark horse in the fur coat. Coombes! I'm fed up to the back teeth with this gun from the Home office! If I'm not to have entire charge of the case I'll throw it up. I'll stand for no blasted overseer checking my work! Wait till I see the Assistant Commissioner! What the devil has the job to do with the Home office!"

"Can't say," murmured Coombes. "But he's evidently a big bug from the way Whiteleaf treated him. He instructed me to stay in the kitchen and keep an eye on Mareno while he prowled about in here."

"Instructed you!" cried Kerry, his teeth gleaming and his steel-blue eyes creating upon Coombes' mind an impression that they were emitting sparks. "Instructed you! I'll ask you a question, Detective-Sergeant Coombes: Who is in charge of this case?"

"Well, I thought you were."

"You thought I was?"

"Well, you are."

"I am? Very well—you were saying—?"

"I was saying that I went into the kitchen—"

"Before that! Something about 'instructed.'"

Poor Coombes smiled pathetically.

"Look here," he said, bravely meeting the ferocious glare of his superior, "as man to man. What could I do?"

"You could stop smiling!" snapped Kerry. "Hell!" He paced several times up and down the room. "Go ahead, Coombes."

"Well, there's nothing much to report. I stayed in the kitchen, and the man from the Home office was in here alone for about half an hour."

"Alone?"

"Inspector Whiteleaf stayed in the dining-room."

"Had he been 'instructed' too?"

"I expect so. I think he just came along as a sort of guide."

"Ah!" muttered Kerry savagely, "a sort of guide! Any idea what the bogey man did in here?"

"He opened the window. I heard him."

"That's funny. It's exactly what I'm going to do! This smart from Whitehall hasn't got a corner in notions yet, Coombes."

The room was a large and lofty one, and had been used by a former tenant as a studio. The toplights had been roofed over by Sir Lucien, however, but the raised platform, approached by two steps, which had probably been used as a model's throne, was a permanent fixture of the apartment. It was backed now by bookcases, except where a blue plush curtain was draped before a French window.

Kerry drew the curtain back, and threw open the folding leaves of the window. He found himself looking out upon the leads of Albemarle Street. No stars and no moon showed through the grey clouds draping the wintry sky, but a dim and ghostly half-light nevertheless rendered the ugly expanse visible from where he stood.

On one side loomed a huge tank, to the brink of which a rickety wooden ladder invited the explorer to ascend. Beyond it were a series of iron gangways and ladders forming part of the fire emergency arrangements of the neighboring institution. Straight ahead a section of building jutted up and revealed two small windows, which seemed to regard him like watching eyes.

He walked out on to the roof, looking all about him. Beyond the tank opened a frowning gully—the Arcade connecting Albemarle Street with old Bond Street; on the other hand, the scheme of fire gangways was continued. He began to cross the leads, going in the direction of Bond Street. Coombes watched him from the study. When he came to the more northerly of the two windows which had attracted his attention, he knelt down and flashed the ray of his torch through the glass.

A kind of small warehouse was revealed, containing stacks of packages. Immediately inside the window was a rough wooden table, and on this table lay a number of smaller packages, apparently containing cigarettes.

Kerry turned his attention to the fastening of the window. A glance showed him that it was unlocked. Resting the torch on the leads, he grasped the sash and gently raised the window, noting that it opened almost noiselessly. Then, taking up the torch again, he stooped and stepped in on to the table below.

It moved slightly beneath his weight. One of the legs was shorter than its fellows. But he reached the floor as quietly as possible, and instantly snapped off the light of the torch.

A heavy step sounded from outside—someone was mounting the stairs—and a disk of light suddenly appeared upon the ground-glass panel of the door.

Kerry stood quite still, chewing steadily.

"Who's there?" came the voice of the constable posted on Kazmah's landing.

The inspector made no reply.

"Is there anyone here?" cried the man.

The disk of light disappeared, and the alert constable could be heard moving along the corridor to inspect the other offices. But the ray had shone upon the frosted glass long enough to enable Kerry to read the words painted there in square black letters. They had appeared reversed, of course, and had read thus:

.OC ETTERAGIC SINABUC

XI. THE DRUG SYNDICATE

At six-thirty that morning Margaret Halley was aroused by her maid—the latter but half awake—and sitting up in bed and switching on the lamp, she looked at the card which the servant had brought to her, and read the following:

CHIEF INSPECTOR KERRY,

C.I.D.
New Scotland Yard, S.W.I.

"Oh, dear," she said sleepily, "what an appallingly early visitor. Is the bath ready yet, Janet?"

"I'm afraid not," replied the maid, a plain, elderly woman of the old-fashioned useful servant type. "Shall I take a kettle into the bathroom?"

"Yes—that will have to do. Tell Inspector Kerry that I shall not be long."

Five minutes later Margaret entered her little consulting-room, where Kerry, having adjusted his tie, was standing before the mirror in the overmantle, staring at a large photograph of the charming lady doctor in military uniform. Kerry's fierce eyes sparkled appreciatively as his glance rested on the tall figure arrayed in a woollen dressing- gown, the masculine style of which by no means disguised the beauty of Margaret's athletic figure. She had hastily arranged her bright hair with deliberate neglect of all affectation. She belonged to that ultra-modern school which scorns to sue masculine admiration, but which cannot dispense with it nevertheless. She aspired to be assessed upon an intellectual basis, an ambition which her unfortunate good looks rendered difficult of achievement.

"Good morning, Inspector," she said composedly. "I was expecting you."

"Really, miss?" Kerry stared curiously. "Then you know what I've come about?"

"I think so. Won't you sit down? I am afraid the room is rather cold. Is it about—Sir Lucien Pyne?"

"Well," replied Kerry, "it concerns him certainly. I've been in communication by telephone with Hinkes, Mr Monte Irvin's butler, and from him I learned that you were professionally attending Mrs Irvin."

"I was not her regular medical adviser, but—"

Margaret hesitated, glancing rapidly at the Inspector, and then down at the writing-table before which she was seated. She began to tap the blotting-pad with an ivory paper-knife. Kerry was watching her intently.

"Upon your evidence, Miss Halley," he said rapidly, "may depend the life of the missing woman."

"Oh!" cried Margaret, "whatever can have happened to her? I rang up as late as two o'clock this morning; after that I abandoned hope."

"There's something underlying the case that I don't understand, miss. I look to you to put me wise."

She turned to him impulsively.

"I will tell you all I know, Inspector," she said. "I will be perfectly frank with you."

"Good!" rapped Kerry. "Now—you have known Mrs Monte Irvin for some time?"

"For about two years."

"You didn't know her when she was on the stage?"

"No. I met her at a Red Cross concert at which she sang."

"Do you think she loved her husband?"

"I know she did."

"Was there any—prior attachment?"

"Not that I know of."

"Mr Quentin Gray?"

Margaret smiled, rather mirthlessly.

"He is my cousin, Inspector, and it was I who introduced him to Rita Irvin. I sincerely wish I had never done so. He lost his head completely."

"There was nothing in Mrs Irvin's attitude towards him to justify her husband's jealousy?"

"She was always frightfully indiscreet, Inspector, but nothing more. You see, she is greatly admired, and is used to the company of silly, adoring men. Her husband doesn't really understand the ways of these Bohemian folks. I knew it would lead to trouble sooner or later."

"Ah!"

Chief Inspector Kerry thrust his hands into the pockets of his jacket.

"Now—Sir Lucien?"

Margaret tapped more rapidly with the paper-knife.

"Sir Lucien belonged to a set of which Rita had been a member during her stage career. I think—he admired her; in fact, I believe he had offered her marriage. But she did not care for him in the least—in that way."

"Then in what way did she care for him?" rapped Kerry.

"Well—now we are coming to the point." Momentarily she hesitated, then: "They were both addicted—"

"Yes?"

"—to drugs."

"Eh?" Kerry's eyes grew hard and fierce in a moment. "What drugs?"

"All sorts of drugs. Shortly after I became acquainted with Rita Irvin I learned that she was a victim of the drug habit, and I tried to cure her. I regret to say that I failed. At that time she had acquired a taste for opium."

Kerry said not a word, and Margaret raised her head and looked at him pathetically.

"I can see that you have no pity for the victims of this ghastly vice, Inspector Kerry," she said.

"I haven't!" he snapped fiercely. "I admit I haven't, miss. It's bad enough in the heathens, but for an Englishwoman to dope herself is downright unchristian and beastly."

"Yet I have come across so many of these cases, during the war and since, that I have begun to understand how easy, how dreadfully easy it is, for a woman especially, to fall into the fatal habit. Bereavement or that most frightful of all mental agonies, suspense, will too often lead the poor victim into the path that promises forgetfulness. Rita Irvin's case is less excusable. I think she must have begun drug-taking because of the mental and nervous exhaustion resulting from late hours and over-much gaiety. The demands of her profession proved too great for her impaired nervous energy, and she sought some stimulant which would enable her to appear bright on the stage when actually she should have been recuperating, in sleep, that loss of vital force which can be recuperated in no other way."

"But opium!" snapped Kerry.

"I am afraid her other drug habits had impaired her will, and shaken her self-control. She was tempted to try opium by its promise of a new and novel excitement."

"Her husband, I take it, was ignorant of all this?"

"I believe he was. Quentin—Mr Gray—had no idea of it either."

"Then it was Sir Lucien Pyne who was in her confidence in the matter?"

Margaret nodded slowly, still tapping the blotting-pad.

"He used to accompany her to places where drugs could be obtained, and on several occasions—I cannot say how many—I believe he went with her to some den in Chinatown. It may have been due to Mr Irvin's discovery that his wife could not satisfactorily account for some of these absences from home which led him to suspect her fidelity."

"Ah!" said Kerry hardly, "I shouldn't wonder. And now"—he thrust out a pointing finger—"where did she get these drugs?"

Margaret met the fierce stare composedly.

"I have said that I shall be quite frank," she replied. "In my opinion she obtained them from Kazmah."

"Kazmah!" shouted Kerry. "Excuse me, miss, but I see I've been wearing blinkers without knowing it! Kazmah's was a dope-shop?"

"That has been my belief for a long time, Inspector. I may add that I have never been able to obtain a shred of evidence to prove it. I am so keenly interested in seeing the people who pander to this horrible vice unmasked and dealt with as they merit, that I have tried many times to find out if my suspicion was correct."

Inspector Kerry was writhing his shoulders excitedly. "Did you ever visit Kazmah?" he asked.

"Yes. I asked Rita Irvin to take me, but she refused, and I could see that the request embarrassed her. So I went alone."

"Describe exactly what took place."

Margaret Halley stared reflectively at the blotting-pad for a moment, and then described a typical seance at Kazmah's. In conclusion:

"As I came away," she said, "I bought a bottle of every kind of perfume on sale, some of the incense, and also a box of sweetmeat; but they all proved to be perfectly harmless. I analyzed them."

Kerry's eyes glistened with admiration.

"We could do with you at the Yard, miss," he said. "Excuse me for saying so."

Margaret smiled rather wanly.

"Now—this man Kazmah," resumed the Chief Inspector. "Did you ever see him again?"

"Never. I have been trying for months and months to find out who he is."

Kerry's face became very grim.

"About ten trained men are trying to find that out at the present moment!" he rapped. "Do you think he wore a make-up?"

"He may have done so," Margaret admitted. "But his features were obviously undisguised, and his eyes one would recognize anywhere. They were larger than any human eyes I have ever seen."

"He couldn't have been the Egyptian who looked after the shop, for instance?"

"Impossible! He did not remotely resemble him. Besides, the man to whom you refer remained outside to receive other visitors. Oh, that's out of the question, Inspector."

"The light was very dim?"

"Very dim indeed, and Kazmah never once raised his head. Indeed, except for a dignified gesture of greeting and one of dismissal, he never moved. His immobility was rather uncanny."

Kerry began to pace up and down the narrow room, and:

"He bore no resemblance to the late Sir Lucien Pyne, for instance?" he rapped.

Margaret laughed outright and her laughter was so inoffensive and so musical that the Chief Inspector laughed also.

"That's more hopeless than ever!" she said. "Poor Sir Lucien had strong, harsh features and rather small eyes. He wore a moustache, too. But Sir Lucien, I feel sure, was one of Kazmah's clients."

"Ah!" said Kerry. "And what leads you to suppose Miss Halley, that this Kazmah dealt in drugs?"

"Well, you see, Rita Irvin was always going there to buy perfumes, and she frequently sent her maid as well."

"But"—Kerry stared—"you say that the perfume was harmless."

"That which was sold to casual visitors was harmless, Inspector. But I strongly suspect that regular clients were supplied with something quite different. You see, I know no fewer than thirty unfortunate women in the West End of London alone who are simply helpless slaves to various drugs, and I think it more than a coincidence that upon their dressing-tables I have almost invariably found one or more of Kazmah's peculiar antique flasks."

Chief Inspector Kerry's jaw muscles protruded conspicuously.

"You speak of patients?" he asked.

Margaret nodded her head.

"When a woman becomes addicted to the drug habit," she explained, "she sometimes shuns her regular medical adviser. I have many patients who came to me originally simply because they dared not face their family doctor. In fact, since I gave up Army work, my little practice has threatened to develop into that of a drug-habit specialist."

"Have you taxed any of these people with obtaining drugs from Kazmah?"

"Not directly. It would have been undiplomatic. But I have tried to surprise them into telling me. Unfortunately, these poor people are as cunning as any other kind of maniac, for, of course, it becomes a form of mania. They recognize that confession might lead to a stoppage of supplies —the eventuality they most dread."

"Did you examine the contents of any of these flasks found on dressing-tables?"

"I rarely had an opportunity; but when I did they proved to contain perfume when they contained anything."

"H'm," mused Kerry, and although in deference to Margaret, he had denied himself chewing-gum, his jaws worked automatically. "I gather that Mrs Monte Irvin had expressed a wish to see you last night?"

"Yes. Apparently she was threatened with a shortage of cocaine."

"Cocaine was her drug?"

"One of them. She had tried them all, poor, silly girl! You must understand that for a habitual drug-taker suddenly to be deprived of drugs would lead to complete collapse, perhaps death. And during the last few days I had noticed a peculiar nervous symptom in Rita Irvin which had interested me. Finally, the day before yesterday, she confessed that her usual source of supply had been closed to her. Her words were very vague, but I gathered that some form of coercion was being employed."

"With what object?"

"I have no idea. But she used the words, 'They will drive me mad,' and seemed to be in a dangerously nervous condition. She said that she was going to make a final attempt to obtain a supply of the poison which had become indispensable to her. 'I cannot do without it!' she said. 'But if they refuse, will you give me some?'"

"What did you say?"

"I begged of her, as I had done on many previous occasions, to place herself in my hands. But she evaded a direct answer, as is the way of one addicted to this vice. 'If I cannot get some by tomorrow,' she said, 'I shall go mad, or dead. Can I rely on you?'"

"I told her that I would prescribe cocaine for her on the distinct understanding that from the first dose she was to place herself under my care for a cure."

"She agreed?"

"She agreed. Yesterday afternoon, while I was away at an important case, she came here. Poor Rita!" Margaret's soft voice trembled. "Look —she left this note."

From a letter-rack she took a square sheet of paper and handed it to the Chief Inspector. He bent his fierce eyes upon the writing—large, irregular and shaky.

"'Dear Margaret,'" he read aloud. "'Why aren't you at home? I am wild with pain, and feel I am going mad. Come to me directly you return, and bring enough to keep me alive. I—', Hullo! there's no finish!"

He glanced up from the page. Margaret Halley's eyes were dim.

"She despaired of my coming and went to Kazmah," she said. "Can you doubt that that was what she went for?"

"No!" snapped Kerry savagely, "I can't. But do you mean to tell me, Miss Halley, that Mrs Irvin couldn't get cocaine anywhere else? I know for a fact that it's smuggled in regularly, and there's more than one receiver."

Margaret looked at him strangely.

"I know it, too, Inspector," she said quietly. "Owing to the lack of enterprise on the part of our British drug-houses, even reputable chemists are sometimes dependent upon illicit stock from Japan and America. But do you know that the price of these smuggled drugs has latterly become so high as to be prohibitive in many cases?"

"I don't. What are you driving at, miss?"

"At this: Somebody had made a corner in contraband drugs. The most wicked syndicate that ever was formed has got control of the lives of, it may be, thousands of drug-slaves!"

Kerry's teeth closed with a sharp snap.

"At last," he said, "I see where the smart from the Home office comes in."

"The Secretary of State has appointed a special independent commissioner to inquire into this hellish traffic," replied Margaret quietly. "I am glad to say that I have helped in getting this done by the representations which I have made to my uncle, Lord Wrexborough. But I give you my word, Inspector Kerry, that I have withheld nothing from you any more than from him."

"Him!" snapped Kerry, eyes fiercely ablaze.

"From the Home Office representative—before whom I have already given evidence."

Chief Inspector Kerry took up his hat, cane and overall from the chair upon which he had placed them and, his face a savage red mask, bowed with a fine courtesy. He burned to learn particulars; he disdained to obtain them from a woman.

"Good morning, Miss Halley," he said. "I am greatly indebted to you."

He walked stiffly from the room and out of the flat without waiting for a servant to open the door.

PART SECOND

MRS SIN

XII. THE MAID OF THE MASQUE

The past life of Mrs Monte Irvin, in which at this time three distinct groups of investigators became interested—namely, those of Whitehall, Scotland Yard, and Fleet Street—was of a character to have horrified the prudish, but to have excited the compassion of the wise.

Daughter of a struggling suburban solicitor, Rita Esden, at the age of seventeen, from a delicate and rather commonplace child began to develop into a singularly pretty girl of an elusive and fascinating type of beauty, almost ethereal in her dainty coloring, and possessed of large and remarkably fine eyes, together with a wealth of copper- red hair, a crown which seemed too heavy for her slender neck to support. Her father viewed her increasing charms and ever-growing list of admirers with the gloomy apprehension of a disappointed man who had come to look upon each gift of the gods as a new sorrow cunningly disguised. Her mother, on the contrary, fanned the girl's natural vanity and ambition with a success which rarely attended the enterprises of this foolish old woman, and Rita proving

to be endowed with a moderately good voice, a stage career was determined upon without reference to the contrary wishes of Mr Esden.

Following the usual brief "training" which is counted sufficient for an aspirant to musical comedy honors, Rita, by the prefixing of two letters to her name, set out to conquer the play-going world as Rita Dresden.

Two years of hard work and disappointment served to dispel the girl's illusions. She learned to appreciate at its true value that masculine admiration which, in an unusual degree, she had the power to excite. Those of her admirers who were in a position to assist her professionally were only prepared to use their influence upon terms which she was unprepared to accept. Those whose intentions were strictly creditable, by some malignancy of fate, possessed no influence whatever. She came to regard herself as a peculiarly unlucky girl, being ignorant of the fact that Fortune, an impish hierophant, imposes identical tests upon every candidate who aspires to the throne of a limelight princess.

Matters stood thus when a new suitor appeared in the person of Sir Lucien Pyne. When his card was brought up to Rita, her heart leaped because of a mingled emotion of triumph and fear which the sight of the baronet's name had occasioned. He was a director of the syndicate in whose production she was playing—a man referred to with awe by every girl in the company as having it in his power to make or mar a professional reputation. Not that he took any active part in the affairs of the concern; on the contrary, he was an aristocrat who held himself aloof from all matters smacking of commerce, but at the same time one who invested his money shrewdly. Sir Lucien's protegee of today was London's idol of tomorrow, and even before Rita had spoken to him she had fought and won a spiritual battle between her true self and that vain, admiration-loving Rita Dresden who favored capitulation.

She knew that Sir Lucien's card represented a signpost at the cross-roads where many a girl, pretty but not exceptionally talented, had hesitated with beating heart. It was no longer a question of remaining a member of the chorus (and understudy for a small part) or of accepting promotion to "lead" in a new production; it was that of accepting whatever Sir Lucien chose to offer—or of retiring from the profession so far as this powerful syndicate was concerned.

Such was the reputation enjoyed at this time by Sir Lucien Pyne among those who had every opportunity of forming an accurate opinion.

Nevertheless, Rita was determined not to succumb without a struggle. She did not count herself untalented nor a girl to be lightly valued, and Sir Lucien might prove to be less black than rumor had painted him. As presently appeared, both in her judgment of herself and in that of Sir Lucien, she was at least partially correct. He was very courteous, very respectful, and highly attentive.

Her less favored companions smiled significantly when the familiar Rolls-Royce appeared at the stage door night after night, never doubting that Rita Dresden was chosen to "star" in the forthcoming production, but, with rare exceptions, frankly envying her this good fortune.

Rita made no attempt to disillusion them, recognizing that it must fail. She was resigned to being misjudged. If she could achieve success at that price, success would have been purchased cheaply.

That Sir Lucien was deeply infatuated she was not slow to discover, and with an address perfected by experience and a determination to avoid the easy path inherited from a father whose scrupulous honesty had ruined his professional prospects, she set to work to win esteem as well as admiration.

Sir Lucien was first surprised, then piqued, and finally interested by such unusual tactics. The second phase was the dangerous one for Rita, and during a certain luncheon at Romanos her fate hung in the balance. Sir Lucien realized that he was in peril of losing his head over this tantalizingly pretty girl who gracefully kept him at a distance, fencing with an adroitness which was baffling, and Sir Lucien Pyne had set out with no intention of doing anything so preposterous as falling in love. Keenly intuitive, Rita scented danger and made a bold move. Carelessly rolling a bread-crumb along the cloth:

"I am giving up the stage when the run finishes," she said.

"Indeed," replied Sir Lucien imperturbably. "Why?"

"I am tired of stage life. I have been invited to go and live with my uncle in New York and have decided to accept. You see"—she bestowed upon him a swift glance of her brilliant eyes—"men in the theatrical world are not all like you. Real friends, I mean. It isn't very nice, sometimes."

Sir Lucien deliberately lighted a cigarette. If Rita was bluffing, he mused, she had the pluck to make good her bluff. And if she did so? He dropped the

extinguished match upon a plate. Did he care? He glanced at the girl, who was smiling at an acquaintance on the other side of the room. Fortune's wheel spins upon a needle point. By an artistic performance occupying less than two minutes, but suggesting that Rita possessed qualities which one day might spell success, she had decided her fate. Her heart was beating like a hammer in her breast, but she preserved an attitude of easy indifference. Without for a moment believing in the American uncle, Sir Lucien did believe, correctly, that Rita Dresden was about to elude him. He realized, too, that he was infinitely more interested than he had ever been hitherto, and more interested than he had intended to become.

This seemingly trivial conversation was a turning point, and twelve months later Rita Dresden was playing the title role in The Maid of the Masque. Sir Lucien had discovered himself to be really in love with her, and he might quite possibly have offered her marriage even if a dangerous rival had not appeared to goad him to that desperate leap—for so he regarded it. Monte Irvin, although considerably Rita's senior, had much to commend him in the eyes of the girl—and in the eyes of her mother, who still retained a curious influence over her daughter. He was much more wealthy than Pyne, and although the latter was a baronet, Irvin was certain to be knighted ere long, so that Rita would secure the appendage of "Lady" in either case. Also, his reputation promised a more reliable husband than Sir Lucien could be expected to make. Moreover, Rita liked him, whereas she had never sincerely liked and trusted Sir Lucien. And there was a final reason— of which Mrs Esden knew nothing.

On the first night that Rita had been entrusted with a part of any consequence—and this was shortly after the conversation at Romanos—she had discovered herself to be in a state of hopeless panic. All her scheming and fencing would have availed her nothing if she were to break down at the critical moment. It was an eventuality which Sir Lucien had foreseen, and he seized the opportunity at once of securing a new hold upon the girl and of rendering her more pliable than he had hitherto found her to be. At this time the idea of marriage had not presented itself to Sir Lucien.

Some hours before the performance he detected her condition of abject fright . . . and from his waistcoat pocket he took a little gold snuff-box.

At first the girl declined to follow advice which instinctively she distrusted, and Sir Lucien was too clever to urge it upon her. But he glanced

casually at his wrist-watch—and poor Rita shuddered. The gold box was hidden again in the baronet's pocket.

To analyze the process which thereupon took place in Rita's mind would be a barren task, since its result was a foregone conclusion. Daring ambition rather than any merely abstract virtue was the keynote of her character. She had rebuffed the advances of Sir Lucien as she had rebuffed others, primarily because her aim in life was set higher than mere success in light comedy. This she counted but a means to a more desirable end—a wealthy marriage. To the achievement of such an alliance the presence of an accepted lover would be an obstacle; and true love Rita Dresden had never known. Yet, short of this final sacrifice which some women so lightly made, there were few scruples which she was not prepared to discard in furtherance of her designs. Her morality, then, was diplomatic, for the vice of ambition may sometimes make for virtue.

Rita's vivacious beauty and perfect self-possession on the fateful night earned her a permanent place in stageland: Rita Dresden became a "star." She had won a long and hard-fought battle; but in avoiding one master she had abandoned herself to another.

The triumph of her debut left her strangely exhausted. She dreaded the coming of the second night almost as keenly as she had dreaded the ordeal of the first. She struggled, poor victim, and only increased her terrors. Not until the clock showed her that in twenty minutes she must make her first entrance did she succumb. But Sir Lucien's gold snuff-box lay upon her dressing-table—and she was trembling. When at last she heard the sustained note of the oboe in the orchestra giving the pitch to the answering violins, she raised the jewelled lid of the box.

So she entered upon the path which leads down to destruction, and since to conjure with the drug which pharmacists know as methylbenzoyl ecgonine is to raise the demon Insomnia, ere long she found herself exploring strange by-paths in quest of sleep.

By the time that she was entrusted with the leading part in The Maid of the Masque, she herself did not recognize how tenacious was the hold which this fatal habit had secured upon her. In the company of Sir Lucien Pyne she met other devotees, and for a time came to regard her unnatural mode of existence as something inseparable from the Bohemian life. To the horrible side of it she was blind.

It was her meeting with Monte Irvin during the run of this successful play which first awakened a dawning comprehension; not because she ascribed his admiration to her artificial vivacity, but because she realized the strength of the link subsisting between herself and Sir Lucien. She liked and respected Irvin, and as a result began to view her conduct from a new standpoint. His life was so entirely open and free from reproach while part of her own was dark and secret. She conceived a desire to be done with that dark and secret life.

This was a shadow-land over which Sir Lucien Pyne presided, and which must be kept hidden from Monte Irvin; and it was not until she thus contemplated cutting herself adrift from it all that she perceived the Gordian knot which bound her to the drug coterie. How far, yet how smoothly, by all but imperceptible stages she had glided down the stream since that night when the gold box had lain upon her dressing- table! Kazmah's drug store in Bond Street had few secrets for her; or so she believed. She knew that the establishment of the strange, immobile Egyptian was a source from which drugs could always be obtained; she knew that the dream-reading business served some double purpose; but she did not know the identity of Kazmah.

Two of the most insidious drugs familiar to modern pharmacy were wooing her to slavery, and there was no strong hand to hold her back. Even the presence of her mother might have offered some slight deterrent at this stage of Rita's descent, but the girl had quitted her suburban home as soon as her salary had rendered her sufficiently independent to do so, and had established herself in a small but elegant flat situated in the heart of theatreland.

But if she had walked blindly into the clutches of cocaine and veronal, her subsequent experiments with chandu were prompted by indefensible curiosity, and a false vanity which urged her to do everything that was "done" by the ultra-smart and vicious set of which she had become a member.

Her first introduction to opium-smoking was made under the auspices of an American comedian then appearing in London, an old devotee of the poppy, and it took place shortly after Sir Lucien Pyne had proposed marriage to Rita. This proposal she had not rejected outright; she had pleaded time for consideration. Monte Irvin was away, and Rita secretly hoped that on his return he would declare himself. Meanwhile she indulged

in every new craze which became fashionable among her associates. A chandu party took place at the American's flat in Duke Street, and Rita, who had been invited, and who had consented to go with Sir Lucien Pyne, met there for the first time the woman variously known as "Lola" and "Mrs Sin."

XIII. A CHANDU PARTY

From the restaurant at which she had had supper with Sir Lucien, Rita proceeded to Duke Street. Alighting from Pyne's car at the door, they went up to the flat of the organizer of the opium party—Mr Cyrus Kilfane. One other guest was already present—a slender, fair woman, who was introduced by the American as Mollie Gretna, but whose weakly pretty face Rita recognized as that of a notorious society divorcee, foremost in the van of every new craze, a past-mistress of the smartest vices.

Kilfane had sallow, expressionless features and drooping, light- colored eyes. His straw-hued hair, brushed back from a sloping brow, hung lankly down upon his coat-collar. Long familiarity with China's ruling vice and contact with those who practiced it had brought about that mysterious physical alteration—apparently reflecting a mental change—so often to be seen in one who has consorted with Chinamen. Even the light eyes seemed to have grown slightly oblique; the voice, the unimpassioned greeting, were those of a son of Cathay. He carried himself with a stoop and had a queer, shuffling gait.

"Ah, my dear daughter," he murmured in a solemnly facetious manner, "how glad I am to welcome you to our poppy circle."

He slowly turned his half-closed eyes in Pyne's direction, and slowly turned them back again.

"Do you seek forgetfulness of old joys?" he asked. "This is my own case and Pyne's. Or do you, as Mollie does, seek new joys—youth's eternal quest?"

Rita laughed with a careless abandon which belonged to that part of her character veiled from the outer world.

"I think I agree with Miss Gretna," she said lightly. "There is not so much happiness in life that I want to forget the little I have had."

"Happiness," murmured Kilfane. "There is no real happiness. Happiness is smoke. Let us smoke."

"I am curious, but half afraid," declared Rita. "I have heard that opium sometimes has no other effect than to make one frightfully ill."

"Oh, my dear!" cried Miss Gretna, with a foolish giggling laugh, "you will love it! Such fascinating dreams! Such delightful adventures!"

"Other drugs," drawled Sir Lucien, "merely stimulate one's normal mental activities. Chandu is a key to another life. Cocaine, for instance enhances our capacity for work. It is only a heretic like De Quincey who prostitutes the magic gum to such base purposes. Chandu is misunderstood in Europe; in Asia it is the companion of the aesthete's leisure."

"But surely," said Rita, "one pipe of opium will not produce all these wonders."

"Some people never experience them at all," interrupted Miss Gretna. "The great idea is to get into a comfortable position, and just resign yourself —let yourself go. Oh, it's heavenly!"

Cyrus Kilfane turned his dull eyes in Rita's direction.

"A question of temperament and adaptability," he murmured. "De Quincey, Pyne"—slowly turning towards the baronet—"is didactic, of course; but his Confessions may be true, nevertheless. He forgets, you see, that he possessed an unusual constitution, and the temperament of a Norwegian herring. He forgets, too, that he was a laudanum drinker, not an opium smoker. Now you, my daughter"—the lustreless eyes again sought Rita's flushed face—"are vivid—intensely vital. If you can succeed in resigning yourself to the hypnosis induced your experiences will be delightful. Trust your Uncle Cy."

Leaving Rita chatting with Miss Gretna, Kilfane took Pyne aside, offering him a cigarette from an ornate, jewelled case.

"Hello," said the baronet, "can you still get these?"

"With the utmost difficulty," murmured Kilfane, returning the case to his pocket. "Lola charges me five guineas a hundred for them, and only supplies them as a favor. I shall be glad to get back home, Pyne. The right stuff is the wrong price in London."

Sir Lucien laughed sardonically, lighting Kilfane's cigarette and then his own.

"I find it so myself," he said. "Everything except opium is to be had at Kazmah's, and nothing except opium interests me."

"He supplies me with cocaine," murmured the comedian. "His figure works out, as nearly as I can estimate it, at 10s 7 1/2d. a grain. I saw him about it yesterday afternoon, pointing out to the brown guy that as the wholesale price is roughly 2 1/4d., I regarded his margin of profit as somewhat broad."

"Indeed!"

"The first time I had ever seen him, Pyne. I brought an introduction from Dr. Silver, of New York, and Kazmah supplied me without question —at a price."

"You always saw Rashid?"

"Yes. If there were other visitors I waited. But yesterday I made a personal appointment with Kazmah. He pretended to think I had come to have a dream interpreted. He is clever, Pyne. He never moved a muscle throughout the interview. But finally he assured me that all the receivers in England had amalgamated, and that the price he charged represented a very narrow margin of profit. Of course he is a liar. He is making a fortune. Do you know him personally?"

"No," replied Sir Lucien, "outside his Bond Street home of mystery he is unknown. A clever man, as you say. You obtain your opium from Lola?"

"Yes. Kazmah sent her to me. She keeps me on ridiculously low rations, and if I had not brought my own outfit I don't think she would have sold me one. Of course, her game is beating up clients for the Limehouse dive."

"You have visited 'The House of a Hundred Raptures'?"

"Many times, at week-ends. Opium, like wine, is better enjoyed in company."

"Does she post you the opium?"

"Oh, no; my man goes to Limehouse for it. Ah! here she is."

A woman came in, carrying a brown leather attache case. She had left her hat and coat in the hall, and wore a smart blue serge skirt and a white blouse. She was not tall, but she possessed a remarkably beautiful figure which the cut of her garments was not intended to disguise, and her height was appreciably increased by a pair of suede shoes having the most

wonderful heels which Rita ever remembered to have seen worn on or off the stage. They seemed to make her small feet appear smaller, and lent to her slender ankles an exaggerated frontal curve.

Her hair was of that true, glossy black which suggests the blue sheen of raven's plumage, and her thickly fringed eyes were dark and southern as her hair. She had full, voluptuous lips, and a bold self- assurance. In the swift, calculating glance which she cast about the room there was something greedy and evil; and when it rested upon Rita Dresden's dainty beauty to the evil greed was added cruelty.

"Another little sister, dear Lola," murmured Kilfane. "Of course, you know who it is? This, my daughter," turning the sleepy glance towards Rita, "is our officiating priestess, Mrs Sin."

The woman so strangely named revealed her gleaming teeth in a swift, unpleasant smile, then her nostrils dilated and she glanced about her suspiciously.

"Someone smokes the chandu cigarettes," she said, speaking in a low tone which, nevertheless, failed to disguise her harsh voice, and with a very marked accent.

"I am the offender, dear Lola," said Kilfane, dreamily waving his cigarette towards her. "I have managed to make the last hundred spin out. You have brought me a new supply?"

"Oh no, indeed," replied Mrs Sin, tossing her head in a manner oddly reminiscent of a once famous Spanish dancer. "Next Tuesday you get some more. Ah! it is no good! You talk and talk and it cannot alter anything. Until they come I cannot give them to you."

"But it appears to me," murmured Kilfane, "that the supply is always growing less."

"Of course. The best goes all to Edinburgh now. I have only three sticks of Yezd left of all my stock."

"But the cigarettes."

"Are from Buenos Ayres? Yes. But Buenos Ayres must get the opium before we get the cigarettes, eh? Five cases come to London on Tuesday, Cy. Be of good courage, my dear."

She patted the sallow cheek of the American with her jewelled fingers, and turned aside, glancing about her.

"Yes," murmured Kilfane. "We are all present, Lola. I have had the room prepared. Come, my children, let us enter the poppy portico."

He opened a door and stood aside, waving one thin yellow hand between the first two fingers of which smouldered the drugged cigarette. Led by Mrs Sin the company filed into an apartment evidently intended for a drawing-room, but which had been hastily transformed into an opium divan.

Tables, chairs, and other items of furniture had been stacked against one of the walls and the floor spread with rugs, skins, and numerous silk cushions. A gas fire was alight, but before it had been placed an ornate Japanese screen whereon birds of dazzling plumage hovered amid the leaves of gilded palm trees. In the centre of the room stood a small card-table, and upon it were a large brass tray and an ivory pedestal exquisitely carved in the form of a nude figure having one arm upraised. The figure supported a lamp, the light of which was subdued by a barrel-shaped shade of Chinese workmanship.

Mollie Gretna giggled hysterically.

"Make yourself comfortable, dear," she cried to Rita, dropping down upon a heap of cushions stacked in a recess beside the fireplace. "I am going to take off my shoes. The last time, Cyrus, when I woke up my feet were quite numb."

"You should come down to my place," said Mrs Sin, setting the leather case on the little card-table beside the lamp. "You have there your own little room and silken sheets to lie in, and it is quiet—so quiet."

"Oh!" cried Mollie Gretna, "I must come! But I daren't go alone. Will you come with me, dear?" turning to Rita.

"I don't know," was the reply. "I may not like opium."

"But if you do—and I know you will?"

"Why," said Rita, glancing rapidly at Pyne, "I suppose it would be a novel experience."

"Let me arrange it for you," came the harsh voice of Mrs Sin. "Lucy will drive you both down—won't you, my dear?" The shadowed eyes glanced aside at Sir Lucien Pyne.

"Certainly," he replied. "I am always at the ladies' service."

Rita Dresden settled herself luxuriously into a nest of silk and fur in another corner of the room, regarding the baronet coquettishly through her half-lowered lashes.

"I won't go unless it is my party, Lucy," she said. "You must let me pay."

"A detail," murmured Pyne, crossing and standing beside her.

Interest now became centred upon the preparations being made by Mrs Sin. From the attache case she took out a lacquered box, silken-lined like a jewel-casket. It contained four singular-looking pipes, the parts of which she began to fit together. The first and largest of these had a thick bamboo stem, an amber mouthpiece, and a tiny, disproportionate bowl of brass. The second was much smaller and was of some dark, highly-polished wood, mounted with silver conceived in an ornate Chinese design representing a long-tailed lizard. The mouthpiece was of jade. The third and fourth pipes were yet smaller, a perfectly matched pair in figured ivory of exquisite workmanship, delicately gold-mounted.

"These for the ladies," said Mrs Sin, holding up the pair. "You"—glancing at Kilfane—"have got your own pipe, I know."

She laid them upon the tray, and now took out of the case a little copper lamp, a smaller lacquered box and a silver spatula, her jewelled fingers handling the queer implements with a familiarity bred of habit.

"What a strange woman!" whispered Rita to Pyne. "Is she an oriental?"

"Cuban-Jewess," he replied in a low voice.

Mrs Sin carefully lighted the lamp, which burned with a short, bluish flame, and, opening the lacquered box, she dipped the spatula into the thick gummy substance which it contained and twisted the little instrument round and round between her fingers, presently withdrawing it with a globule of chandu, about the size of a bean, adhering to the end. She glanced aside at Kilfane.

"Chinese way, eh?" she said.

She began to twirl the prepared opium above the flame of the lamp. From it a slight, sickly smelling vapor arose. No one spoke, but all watched her closely; and Rita was conscious of a growing, pleasurable excitement. When by evaporation the chandu had become reduced to the size of a small pea, and a vague spirituous blue flame began to dance round the end of the spatula, Mrs Sin pressed it adroitly into the tiny bowl of one of the ivory pipes, having first held the bowl inverted for a moment over the lamp. She turned to Rita.

"The guest of the evening," she said. "Do not be afraid. Inhale—oh, so gentle—and blow the smoke from the nostrils. You know how to smoke?"

"The same as a cigarette?" asked Rita excitedly, as Mrs Sin bent over her.
"The same, but very, very gentle."
Rita took the pipe and raised the mouthpiece to the lips.

XIV. IN THE SHADE OF THE LONELY PALM

Persian opium of good quality contains from ten to fifteen percent morphine, and chandu made from opium of Yezd would contain perhaps twenty-five per cent of this potent drug; but because in the act of smoking distillation occurs, nothing like this quantity of morphine reaches the smoker. To the distilling process, also, may be due the different symptoms resulting from smoking chandu and injecting morphia —or drinking tincture of opium, as De Quincey did.

Rita found the flavor of the preparation to be not entirely unpleasant. Having overcome an initial aversion, caused by its marked medicinal tang, she grew reconciled to it and finished her first smoke without experiencing any other effect than a sensation of placid contentment. Deftly, Mrs Sin renewed the pipe. Silence had fallen upon the party.

The second "pill" was no more than half consumed when a growing feeling of nausea seized upon the novice, becoming so marked that she dropped the ivory pipe weakly and uttered a faint moan.

Instantly, silently, Mrs Sin was beside her.

"Lean forward—so," she whispered, softly, as if fearful of intruding her voice upon these sacred rites. "In a moment you will be better. Then, if you feel faint, lie back. It is the sleep. Do not fight against it."

The influence of the stronger will prevailed. Self-control and judgment are qualities among the first to succumb to opium. Rita ceased to think longingly of the clean, fresh air, of escape from these sickly fumes which seemed now to fill the room with a moving vacuum. She bent forward, her chin resting upon her breast, and gradually the deathly sickness passed. Mentally, she underwent a change, too. From an active state of resistance the ego traversed a descending curve ending in absolute passivity. The floor had seemingly begun to revolve and was moving insidiously, so that the pattern of the carpet formed a series of concentric rings. She found this

imaginary phenomenon to be soothing rather than otherwise, and resigned herself almost eagerly to the delusion.

Mrs Sin allowed her to fall back upon the cushions—so gently and so slowly that the operation appeared to occupy several minutes and to resemble that of sinking into innumerable layers of swansdown. The sinuous figure bending over her grew taller with the passage of each minute, until the dark eyes of Mrs Sin were looking down at Rita from a dizzy elevation. As often occurs in the case of a neurotic subject, delusion as to time and space had followed the depression of the sensory cells.

But surely, she mused, this could not be Mrs Sin who towered so loftily above her. Of course, how absurd to imagine that a woman could remain motionless for so many hours. And Rita thought, now, that she had been lying for several hours beneath the shadow of that tall, graceful, and protective shape.

Why—it was a slender palm-tree, which stretched its fanlike foliage over her! Far, far above her head the long, dusty green fronds projected from the mast-like trunk. The sun, a ball of fiery brass, burned directly in the zenith, so that the shadow of the foliage lay like a carpet about her feet. That which she had mistaken for the ever-receding eyes of Mrs Sin, wondering with a delightful vagueness why they seemed constantly to change color, proved to be a pair of brilliantly plumaged parrakeets perched upon a lofty branch of the palm.

This was an equatorial noon, and even if she had not found herself to be under the influence of a delicious abstraction Rita would not have moved; for, excepting the friendly palm, not another vestige of vegetation was visible right away to the horizon; nothing but an ocean of sand whereon no living thing moved. She and the parrakeets were alone in the heart of the Great Sahara.

But stay! Many, many miles away, a speck on the dusty carpet of the desert, something moved! Hours must elapse before that tiny figure, provided it were approaching, could reach the solitary palm. Delightedly, Rita contemplated the infinity of time. Even if the figure moved ever so slowly, she should be waiting there beneath the palm to witness its arrival. Already, she had been there for a period which she was far too indolent to strive to compute—a week, perhaps. She turned her attention to the parrakeets. One of them was moving, and she noted with delight that it had

perceived her far below and was endeavoring to draw the attention of its less observant companion to her presence. For many hours she lay watching it and wondering why, since the one bird was so singularly intelligent, its companion was equally dull. When she lowered her eyes and looked out again across the sands, the figure had approached so close as to be recognizable.

It was that of Mrs Sin. Rita appreciated the fitness of her presence, and experienced no surprise, only a mild curiosity. This curiosity was not concerned with Mrs Sin herself, but with the nature of the burden which she bore upon her head.

She was dressed in a manner which Rita dreamily thought would have been inadequate in England, or even in Cuba, but which was appropriate in the Great Sahara. How exquisitely she carried herself, mused the dreamer; no doubt this fine carriage was due in part to her wearing golden shoes with heels like stilts, and in part to her having been trained to bear heavy burdens upon her head. Rita remembered that Sir Lucien had once described to her the elegant deportment of the Arab women, ascribing it to their custom of carrying water-jars in that way.

The appearance of the speck on the horizon had marked the height of her trance. Her recognition of Mrs Sin had signalized the decline of the chandu influence. Now, the intrusion of a definite, uncontorted memory was evidence of returning cerebral activity.

Rita had no recollection of the sunset; indeed, she had failed to perceive any change in the form and position of the shadow cast by the foliage. It had spread, an ebony patch, equally about the bole of the tree, so that the sun must have been immediately overhead. But, of course, she had lain watching the parrakeets for several hours, and now night had fallen. The desert mounds were touched with silver, the sky was a nest of diamonds, and the moon cast a shadow of the palm like a bar of ebony right across the prospect to the rim of the sky dome.

Mrs Sin stood before her, one half of her lithe body concealed by this strange black shadow and the other half gleaming in the moonlight so that she resembled a beautiful ivory statue which some iconoclast had cut in two.

Placing her burden upon the ground, Mrs Sin knelt down before Rita and reverently kissed her hand, whispering: "I am your slave, my poppy queen."

She spoke in a strange language, no doubt some African tongue, but one which Rita understood perfectly. Then she laid one hand upon the object which she had carried on her head, and which now proved to be a large lacquered casket covered with Chinese figures and bound by three hoops of gold. It had a very curious shape.

"Do you command that the chest be opened?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Rita languidly.

Mrs Sin threw up the lid, and from the interior of the casket which, because of the glare of the moon light, seemed every moment to assume a new form, drew out a bronze lamp.

"The sacred lamp," she whispered, and placed it on the sand. "Do you command that it be lighted?"

Rita inclined her head.

The lamp became lighted; in what manner she did not observe, nor was she curious to learn. Next from the large casket Mrs Sin took another smaller casket and a very long, tapering silver bodkin. The first casket had perceptibly increased in size. It was certainly much larger than Rita had supposed; for now out from its shadowy interior Mrs Sin began to take pipes—long pipes and short pipes, pipes of gold and pipes of silver, pipes of ivory and pipes of jade. Some were carved to represent the heads of demons, some had the bodies of serpents wreathed about them; others were encrusted with precious gems, and filled the night with the venomous sheen of emeralds, the blood-rays of rubies and golden glow of topaz, while the spear-points of diamonds flashed a challenge to the stars.

"Do you command that the pipes be lighted?" asked the harsh voice.

Rita desired to answer, "No," but heard herself saying, "Yes."

Thereupon, from a thousand bowls, linking that lonely palm to the remote horizon, a thousand elfin fires arose—blue-tongued and spirituous. Grey pencilings of smoke stole straightly upward to the sky, so that look where she would Rita could discern nothing but these countless thin, faintly wavering, vertical lines of vapor.

The dimensions of the lacquered casket had increased so vastly as to conceal the kneeling figure of Mrs Sin, and staring at it wonderingly, Rita suddenly perceived that it was not an ordinary casket. She knew at last why its shape had struck her as being unusual.

It was a Chinese coffin.

The smell of the burning opium was stifling her. Those remorseless threads of smoke were closing in, twining themselves about her throat. It was becoming cold, too, and the moonlight was growing dim. The position of the moon had changed, of course, as the night had stolen on towards morning, and now it hung dimly before her. The smoke obscured it.

But was this smoke obscuring the moon? Rita moved her hands for the first time since she had found herself under the palm tree, weakly fending off those vaporous tentacles which were seeking to entwine themselves about her throat. Of course, it was not smoke obscuring the moon, she decided; it was a lamp, upheld by an ivory figure—a lamp with a Chinese shade.

A subdued roaring sound became audible; and this was occasioned by the gas fire, burning behind the Japanese screen on which gaily plumaged birds sported in the branches of golden palms. Rita raised her hands to her eyes. Mist obscured her sight. Swiftly, now, reality was asserting itself and banishing the phantasmagoria conjured up by chandu.

In her dim, cushioned corner Mollie Gretna lay back against the wall, her face pale and her weak mouth foolishly agape. Cyrus Kilfane was indistinguishable from the pile of rugs amid which he sprawled by the table, and of Sir Lucien Pyne nothing was to be seen but the outstretched legs and feet which projected grotesquely from a recess. Seated, oriental fashion, upon an improvised divan near the grand piano and propped up by a number of garish cushions, Rita beheld Mrs Sin. The long bamboo pipe had fallen from her listless fingers. Her face wore an expression of mystic rapture like that characterizing the features of some Chinese Buddhas.

Fear, unaccountable but uncontrollable, suddenly seized upon Rita. She felt weak and dizzy, but she struggled partly upright.

"Lucy!" she whispered.

Her voice was not under control, and once more she strove to call to Pyne.

"Lucy!" came the hoarse whisper again.

The fire continued its muted roaring, but no other sound answered to the appeal. A horror of the companionship in which she found herself thereupon took possession of the girl. She must escape from these sleepers, whose spirits had been expelled by the potent necromancer, opium, from these

empty tenements whose occupants had fled. The idea of the cool night air in the open streets was delicious.

She staggered to her feet, swaying drunkenly, but determined to reach the door. She shuddered, because of a feeling of internal chill which assailed her, but step by step crept across the room, opened the door, and tottered out into the hallway. There was no sound in the flat. Presumably Kilfane's man had retired, or perhaps he, too, was a devotee.

Rita's fur coat hung upon the rack, and although her fingers appeared to have lost all their strength and her arm to have become weak as that of an infant, she succeeded in detaching the coat from the hook. Not pausing to put it on, she opened the door and stumbled out on to the darkened landing. Whereas her first impulse had been to awaken someone, preferably Sir Lucien, now her sole desire was to escape undetected.

She began to feel less dizzy, and having paused for a moment on the landing, she succeeded in getting her coat on. Then she closed the door as quietly as possible, and clutching the handrail began to grope her way downstairs. There was only one flight, she remembered, and a short passage leading to the street door. She reached the passage without mishap, and saw a faint light ahead.

The fastenings gave her some trouble, but finally her efforts were successful, and she found herself standing in deserted Duke Street. There was no moon, but the sky was cloudless. She had no idea of the time, but because of the stillness of the surrounding streets she knew that it must be very late. She set out for her flat, walking slowly and wondering what explanation she should offer if a constable observed her.

Oxford Street showed deserted as far as the eye could reach, and her light footsteps seemed to awaken a hundred echoes. Having proceeded for some distance without meeting anyone, she observed—and experienced a childish alarm—the head-lights of an approaching car. Instantly the idea of hiding presented itself to her, but so rapidly did the big automobile speed along the empty thoroughfare that Rita was just passing a street lamp as the car raced by, and she must therefore have been clearly visible to the occupants.

Never for a moment glancing aside, Rita pressed on as quickly as she could. Then her vague alarm became actual terror. She heard the brakes being applied to the car, and heard the gritty sound of the tires upon the roadway as the vehicle's headlong progress was suddenly checked. She had

been seen—perhaps recognized, and whoever was in the car proposed to return to speak to her.

If her strength had allowed she would have run, but now it threatened to desert her altogether and she tottered weakly. A pattering of footsteps came from behind. Someone was running back to overtake her. Recognizing escape to be impossible, Rita turned just as the runner came up with her.

"Rita!" he cried, rather breathlessly. "Miss Dresden!"

She stood very still, looking at the speaker.

It was Monte Irvin.

XV. METAMORPHOSIS

As Irvin seized her hands and looked at her eagerly, half-fearfully, Rita achieved sufficient composure to speak.

"Oh, Mr Irvin," she said, and found that her voice was not entirely normal, "what must you think—"

He continued to hold her hands, and:

"I think you are very indiscreet to be out alone at three o'clock in the morning," he answered gently. "I was recalled to London by urgent business, and returned by road—fortunately, since I have met you."

"How can I explain—"

"I don't ask you to explain—Miss Dresden. I have no right and no desire to ask. But I wish I had the right to advise you."

"How good you are," she began, "and I—"

Her voice failed her completely, and her sensitive lips began to tremble. Monte Irvin drew her arm under his own and led her back to meet the car, which the chauffeur had turned and which was now approaching.

"I will drive you home," he said, "and if I may call in the morning. I should like to do so."

Rita nodded. She could not trust herself to speak again. And having placed her in the car, Monte Irvin sat beside her, reclaiming her hand and grasping it reassuringly and sympathetically throughout the short drive. They parted at her door.

"Good night," said Irvin, speaking very deliberately because of an almost uncontrollable desire which possessed him to take Rita in his arms, to hold her fast, to protect her from her own pathetic self and from those influences, dimly perceived about her, but which intuitively he knew to be evil.

"If I call at eleven will that be too early?"

"No," she whispered. "Please come early. There is a matinee tomorrow."

"You mean today," he corrected. "Poor little girl, how tired you will be. Good night."

"Good night," she said, almost inaudibly.

She entered, and, having closed the door, stood leaning against it for several minutes. Bleakness and nausea threatened to overcome her anew, and she felt that if she essayed another step she must collapse upon the floor. Her maid was in bed, and had not been awakened by Rita's entrance. After a time she managed to grope her way to her bedroom, where, turning up the light, she sank down helplessly upon the bed.

Her mental state was peculiar, and her thoughts revolved about the journey from Oxford Street homeward. A thousand times she mentally repeated the journey, speaking the same words over and over again, and hearing Monte Irvin's replies.

In those few minutes during which they had been together her sentiments in regard to him had undergone a change. She had always respected Irvin, but this respect had been curiously compounded of the personal and the mercenary; his well-ordered establishment at Prince's Gate had loomed behind the figure of the man forming a pleasing background to the portrait. Without being showy he was a splendid "match" for any woman. His wife would have access to good society, and would enjoy every luxury that wealth could procure. This was the picture lovingly painted and constantly retouched by Rita's mother.

Now it had vanished. The background was gone, and only the man remained; the strong, reserved man whose deep voice had spoken so gently, whose devotion was so true and unselfish that he only sought to shield and protect her from follies the nature of which he did not even seek to learn. She was stripped of her vanity, and felt loathsome and unworthy of such a love.

"Oh," she moaned, rocking to and fro. "I hate myself—I hate myself!"

Now that the victory so long desired seemed at last about to be won, she hesitated to grasp the prize. One solacing reflection she had. She would put the errors of the past behind her. Many times of late she had found herself longing to be done with the feverish life of the stage. Envied by those who had been her companions in the old chorus days, and any one of whom would have counted ambition crowned could she have played The Maid of the Masque, Rita thought otherwise. The ducal mansions and rose-bowered Riviera hotels through which she moved nightly had no charm for her; she sighed for reality, and had wearied long ago of the canvas palaces and the artificial Southern moonlight. In fact, stage life had never truly appealed to her—save as a means to an end.

Again and yet again her weary brain reviewed the episodes of the night since she had left Cyrus Kilfane's flat, so that nearly an hour had elapsed before she felt capable of the operation of undressing. Finally, however, she undressed, shuddering although the room was warmed by an electric radiator. The weakness and sickness had left her, but she was quite wide awake, although her brain demanded rest from that incessant review of the events of the evening.

She put on a warm wrap and seated herself at the dressing-table, studying her face critically. She saw that she was somewhat pale and that she had an indefinable air of dishevelment. Also she detected shadows beneath her eyes, the pupils of which were curiously contracted. Automatically, as a result of habit, she unlocked her jewel-case and took out a tiny phial containing minute cachets. She shook several out on to the palm of her hand, and then paused, staring at her reflection in the mirror.

For fully half a minute she hesitated, then:

"I shall never close my eyes all night if I don't!" she whispered, as if in reply to a spoken protest, "and I should be a wreck in the morning."

Thus, in the very apogee of her resolve to reform, did she drive one more rivet into the manacles which held her captive to Kazmah and Company.

Upon a little spirit-stove stood a covered vessel containing milk, which was placed there nightly by Rita's maid. She lighted the burner and warmed the milk. Then, swallowing three of the cachets from the phial, she drank the milk. Each cachet contained three decigrams of malourea, the insidious drug notorious under its trade name of Veronal.

She slept deeply, and was not awakened until ten o'clock. Her breakfast consisted of a cup of strong coffee; but when Monte Irvin arrived at eleven Rita exhibited no sign of nerve exhaustion. She looked bright and charming, and Irvin's heart leapt hotly in his breast at sight of her.

Following some desultory and unnatural conversation:

"May I speak quite frankly to you?" he said, drawing his chair nearer to the settee upon which Rita was seated.

She glanced at him swiftly. "Of course," she replied. "Is it—about my late hours?"

He shook his head, smiling rather sadly.

"That is only one phase of your rather feverish life, little girl," he said. "I don't mean that I want to lecture you or reproach you. I only want to ask you if you are satisfied?"

"Satisfied?" echoed Rita, twirling a tassel that hung from a cushion beside her.

"Yes. You have achieved success in your profession." He strove in vain to banish bitterness from his voice. "You are a 'star,' and your photograph is to be seen frequently in the smartest illustrated papers. You are clever and beautiful and have hosts of admirers. But— are you satisfied?"

She stared absently at the silk tassel, twirling it about her white fingers more and more rapidly. Then:

"No," she answered softly.

Monte Irvin hesitated for a moment ere bending forward and grasping her hands.

"I am glad you are not satisfied," he whispered. "I always knew you had a soul for something higher—better."

She avoided his ardent gaze, but he moved to the settee beside her and looked into the bewitching face.

"Would it be a great sacrifice to give it all up?" he whispered in a yet lower tone.

Rita shook her head, persistently staring at the tassel.

"For me?"

She gave him a swift, half-frightened glance, pressing her hands against his breast and leaning, back.

"Oh, you don't know me—you don't know me!" she said, the good that was in her touched to life by the man's sincerity. "I—don't deserve it."

"Rita!" he murmured. "I won't hear you say that!"

"You know nothing about my friends—about my life—"

"I know that I want you for my wife, so that I can protect you from those 'friends.'" He took her in his arms, and she surrendered her lips to him.

"My sweet little girl," he whispered. "I cannot believe it—yet."

But the die was cast, and when Rita went to the theatre to dress for the afternoon performance she was pledged to sever her connection with the stage on the termination of her contract. She had luncheon with Monte Irvin, and had listened almost dazedly to his plans for the future. His wealth was even greater than her mother had estimated it to be, and Rita's most cherished dreams were dwarfed by the prospects which Monte Irvin opened up before her. It almost seemed as though he knew and shared her dearest ambitions. She was to winter beneath real Southern palms and to possess a cruising yacht, not one of boards and canvas like that which figured in The Maid of the Masque.

Real Southern palms, she mused guiltily, not those conjured up by opium. That he was solicitous for her health the nature of his schemes revealed. They were to visit Switzerland, and proceed thence to a villa which he owned in Italy. Christmas they would spend in Cairo, explore the Nile to Assouan in a private dahabiyeh, and return home via the Riviera in time to greet the English spring. Rita's delicate, swiftly changing color, her almost ethereal figure, her intense nervous energy he ascribed to a delicate constitution.

She wondered if she would ever dare to tell him the truth; if she ought to tell him.

Pyne came to her dressing-room just before the performance began. He had telephoned at an early hour in the morning, and had learned from her maid that Rita had come home safely and was asleep. Rita had expected him; but the influence of Monte Irvin, from whom she had parted at the stage-door, had prevailed until she actually heard Sir Lucien's voice in the corridor. She had resolutely refrained from looking at the little jewelled casket, engraved "From Lucy to Rita," which lay in her make-up box upon the table. But the imminence of an ordeal which she dreaded intensely weakened her resolution. She swiftly dipped a little nail-file into the white powder which the box contained, and when Pyne came in she turned to him composedly.

"I am so sorry if I gave you a scare last night, Lucy," she said. "But I woke up feeling sick, and I had to go out into the fresh air."

"I was certainly alarmed," drawled Pyne, whose swarthy face looked more than usually worn in the hard light created by the competition between the dressing-room lamps and the grey wintry daylight which crept through the windows. "Do you feel quite fit again?"

"Quite, thanks." Rita glanced at a ring which she had not possessed three hours before. "Oh, Lucy—I don't know how to tell you—"

She turned in her chair, looking up wistfully at Pyne, who was standing behind her. His jaw hardened, and his glance sought the white hand upon which the costly gems glittered. He coughed nervously.

"Perhaps"—his drawling manner of speech temporarily deserted him; he spoke jerkily—"perhaps—I can guess."

She watched him in a pathetic way, and there was a threat of tears in her beautiful eyes; for whatever his earlier intentions may have been, Sir Lucien had proved a staunch friend and, according to his own peculiar code, an honorable lover.

"Is it—Irvin?" he asked jerkily.

Rita nodded, and a tear glistened upon her darkened lashes.

Sir Lucien cleared his throat again, then coolly extended his hand, once more master of his emotions.

"Congratulations, Rita," he said. "The better man wins. I hope you will be very happy."

He turned and walked quietly out of the dressing-room.

XVI. LIMEHOUSE

It was on the following Tuesday evening that Mrs Sin came to the theatre, accompanied by Mollie Gretna. Rita instructed that she should be shown up to the dressing-room. The personality of this singular woman interested her keenly. Mrs Sin was well known in certain Bohemian quarters, but was always spoken of as one speaks of a pet vice. Not to know Mrs Sin was to be outside the magic circle which embraced the exclusively smart people who practiced the latest absurdities.

The so-called artistic temperament is compounded of great strength and great weakness; its virtues are whiter than those of ordinary people and its vices blacker. For such a personality Mrs Sin embodied the idea of secret pleasure. Her bold good looks repelled Rita, but the knowledge in her dark eyes was alluring.

"I arrange for you for Saturday night," she said. "Cy Kilfane is coming with Mollie, and you bring—"

"Oh," replied Rita hesitatingly, "I am sorry you have gone to so much trouble."

"No trouble, my dear," Mrs Sin assured her. "Just a little matter of business, and you can pay the bill when it suits you."

"I am frightfully excited!" cried Mollie Gretna. "It is so nice of you to have asked me to join your party. Of course Cy goes practically every week, but I have always wanted another girl to go with. Oh, I shall be in a perfectly delicious panic when I find myself all among funny Chinamen and things! I think there is something so magnificently wicked-looking about a pigtail—and the very name of Limehouse thrills me to the soul!"

That fixity of purpose which had enabled Rita to avoid the cunning snares set for her feet and to snatch triumph from the very cauldron of shame without burning her fingers availed her not at all in dealing with Mrs Sin. The image of Monte receded before this appeal to the secret pleasure-loving woman, of insatiable curiosity, primitive and unmoral, who dwells, according to a modern cynic philosopher, within every daughter of Eve touched by the fire of genius.

She accepted the arrangement for Saturday, and before her visitors had left the dressing-room her mind was busy with plausible deceits to cover the sojourn in Chinatown. Something of Mollie Gretna's foolish enthusiasm had communicated itself to Rita.

Later in the evening Sir Lucien called, and on hearing of the scheme grew silent. Rita glancing at his reflection in the mirror, detected a black and angry look upon his face. She turned to him.

"Why, Lucy," she said, "don't you want me to go?"

He smiled in his sardonic fashion.

"Your wishes are mine, Rita," he replied.

She was watching him closely.

"But you don't seem keen," she persisted. "Are you angry with me?"

"Angry?"

"We are still friends, aren't we?"

"Of course. Do you doubt my friendship?"

Rita's maid came in to assist her in changing for the third act, and Pyne went out of the room. But, in spite of his assurances, Rita could not forget that fierce, almost savage expression which had appeared upon his face when she had told him of Mrs Sin's visit.

Later she taxed him on the point, but he suffered her inquiry with imperturbable sangfroid, and she found herself no wiser respecting the cause of his annoyance. Painful twinges of conscience came during the ensuing days, when she found herself in her fiance's company, but she never once seriously contemplated dropping the acquaintance of Mrs Sin.

She thought, vaguely, as she had many times thought before, of cutting adrift from the entire clique, but there was no return of that sincere emotional desire to reform which she had experienced on the day that Monte Irvin had taken her hand, in blind trust, and had asked her to be his wife. Had she analyzed, or been capable of analyzing, her intentions with regard to the future, she would have learned that daily they inclined more and more towards compromise. The drug habit was sapping will and weakening morale, insidiously, imperceptibly. She was caught in a current of that "sacred river" seen in an opium-trance by Coleridge, and which ran —

"Through caverns measureless to man Down to a sunless sea."

Pyne's big car was at the stage-door on the fateful Saturday night, for Rita had brought her dressing-case to the theatre, and having called for Kilfane and Mollie Gretna they were to proceed direct to Limehouse.

Rita, as she entered the car, noticed that Juan Mareno, Sir Lucien's man, and not the chauffeur with whom she was acquainted, sat at the wheel. As they drove off:

"Why is Mareno driving tonight, Lucy?" she asked.

Sir Lucien glanced aside at her.

"He is in my confidence," he replied. "Fraser is not."

"Oh, I see. You don't want Fraser to know about the Limehouse journey?"

"Naturally I don't. He would talk to all the men at the garage, and from South Audley Street the tit-bit of scandal would percolate through every stratum of society."

Rita was silent for a few moments, then:

"Were you thinking about Monte?" she asked diffidently.

Pyne laughed.

"He would scarcely approve, would he?"

"No," replied Rita. "Was that why you were angry when I told you I was going?"

"This 'anger,' to which you constantly revert, had no existence outside your own imagination, Rita. But" he hesitated—"you will have to consider your position, dear, now that you are the future Mrs Monte." Rita felt her cheeks flush, and she did not reply immediately.

"I don't understand you, Lucy," she declared at last. "How odd you are."

"Am I? Well, never mind. We will talk about my eccentricity later. Here is Cyrus."

Kilfane was standing in the entrance to the stage door of the theatre at which he was playing. As the car drew up he lifted two leather grips on to the step, and Mareno, descending, took charge of them.

"Come along, Mollie," said Kilfane, looking back.

Miss Gretna, very excited, ran out and got into the car beside Rita. Pyne lowered two of the collapsible seats for Kilfane and himself, and the party set out for Limehouse.

"Oh!" cried the fair-haired Mollie, grasping Rita's hand, "my heart began palpitating with excitement the moment I woke up this morning! How calm you are, dear."

"I am only calm outside," laughed Rita.

The joie de vivre and apparently unimpaired vitality, of this woman, for whom (if half that which rumor whispered were true) vice had no secrets, astonished Rita. Her physical resources were unusual, no doubt, because the demand made upon them by her mental activities was slight.

As the car sped along the Strand, where theatre-goers might still be seen making for tube, omnibus, and tramcar, and entered Fleet Street, where the car and taxicab traffic was less, a mutual silence fell upon the party. Two at least of the travellers were watching the lighted windows of the great newspaper offices with a vague sense of foreboding, and thinking how, bound upon a secret purpose, they were passing along the avenue of publicity. It is well that man lacks prescience. Neither Rita nor Sir Lucien could divine that a day was shortly to come when the hidden presses which

throbbed about them that night should be busy with the story of the murder of one and disappearance of the other.

Around St. Paul's Churchyard whirled the car, its engine running strongly and almost noiselessly. The great bell of St. Paul's boomed out the half-hour.

"Oh!" cried Mollie Gretna, "how that made me jump! What a beautifully gloomy sound!"

Kilfane murmured some inaudible reply, but neither Pyne nor Rita spoke.

Cornhill and Leadenhall Street, along which presently their route lay, offered a prospect of lamp-lighted emptiness, but at Aldgate they found themselves amid East End throngs which afforded a marked contrast to those crowding theatreland; and from thence through Whitechapel and the seemingly endless Commercial Road it was a different world into which they had penetrated.

Rita hitherto had never seen the East End on a Saturday night, and the spectacle afforded by these busy marts, lighted by naphtha flames, in whose smoky glare Jews and Jewesses, Poles, Swedes, Easterns, dagoes, and halfcastes moved feverishly, was a fascinating one. She thought how utterly alien they were, the men and women of a world unknown to that society upon whose borders she dwelled; she wondered how they lived, where they lived, why they lived. The wet pavements were crowded with nondescript humanity, the night was filled with the unmusical voices of Hebrew hucksters, and the air laden with the smoky odor of their lamps. Tramcars and motorbuses were packed unwholesomely with these children of shadowland drawn together from the seven seas by the magnet of London.

She glanced at Pyne, but he was seemingly lost in abstraction, and Kilfane appeared to be asleep. Mollie Gretna was staring eagerly out on the opposite side of the car at a group of three dago sailors, whom Mareno had nearly run down, but she turned at that moment and caught Rita's glance.

"Don't you simply love it!" she cried. "Some of those men were really handsome, dear. If they would only wash I am sure I could adore them!"

"Even such charms as yours can be bought at too high a price," drawled Sir Lucien. "They would gladly do murder for you, but never wash."

Crossing Limehouse Canal, the car swung to the right into West India Dock Road. The uproar of the commercial thoroughfare was left far behind.

Dark, narrow streets and sinister-looking alleys lay right and left of them, and into one of the narrowest and least inviting of all Mareno turned the car.

In the dimly-lighted doorway of a corner house the figure of a Chinaman showed as a motionless silhouette.

"Oh!" sighed Mollie Gretna rapturously, "a Chinaman! I begin to feel deliciously sinful!"

The car came to a standstill.

"We get out here and walk," said Sir Lucien. "It would not be wise to drive further. Mareno will deliver our baggage by hand presently."

"But we shall all be murdered," cried Mollie, "murdered in cold blood! I am dreadfully frightened!"

"Something of the kind is quite likely," drawled Sir Lucien, "if you draw attention to our presence in the neighborhood so deliberately. Walk ahead, Kilfane, with Mollie. Rita and I will follow at a discreet distance. Leave the door ajar."

Temporarily subdued by Pyne's icy manner, Miss Gretna became silent, and went on ahead with Cyrus Kilfane, who had preserved an almost unbroken silence throughout the journey. Rita and Sir Lucien followed slowly.

"What a creepy neighborhood," whispered Rita. "Look! Someone is standing in that doorway over there, watching us."

"Take no notice," he replied. "A cat could not pass along this street unobserved by the Chinese, but they will not interfere with us provided we do not interfere with them."

Kilfane had turned to the right into a narrow court, at the entrance to which stood an iron pillar. As he and his companion passed under the lamp in a rusty bracket which projected from the wall, they vanished into a place of shadows. There was a ceaseless chorus of distant machinery, and above it rose the grinding and rattling solo of a steam winch. Once a siren hooted apparently quite near them, and looking upward at a tangled, indeterminable mass which overhung the street at this point, Rita suddenly recognized it for a ship's bow-sprit.

"Why," she said, "we are right on the bank of the river!"

"Not quite," answered Pyne. "We are skirting a dock basin. We are nearly at our destination."

Passing in turn under the lamp, they entered the narrow court, and from a doorway immediately on the left a faint light shone out upon the wet pavement. Pyne pushed the door fully open and held it for Rita to enter. As she did so:

"Hello! hello!" croaked a harsh voice. "Number one p'lice chop, lo! Sin Sin Wa!"

The uncanny cracked voice proceeded to give an excellent imitation of a police whistle, and concluded with that of the clicking of castanets.

"Shut the door, Lucy," came the murmurous tones of Kilfane from the gloom of the stuffy little room, in the centre of which stood a stove wherefrom had proceeded the dim light shining out upon the pavement. "Light up, Sin Sin."

"Sin Sin Wa! Sin Sin Wa!" shrieked the voice, and again came the rattling of imaginary castanets. "Smartest leg in Buenos Ayres—Buenos Ayres—p'lice chop—p'lice chop, lo!"

"Oh," whispered Mollie Gretna, in the darkness, "I believe I am going to scream!"

Pyne closed the door, and a dimly discernible figure on the opposite side of the room stooped and opened a little cupboard in which was a lighted ship's lantern. The lantern being lifted out and set upon a rough table near the stove, it became possible to view the apartment and its occupants.

It was a small, low-ceiled place, having two doors, one opening upon the street and the other upon a narrow, uncarpeted passage. The window was boarded up. The ceiling had once been whitewashed and a few limp, dark fragments of paper still adhering to the walls proved that some forgotten decorator had exercised his art upon them in the past. A piece of well-worn matting lay upon the floor, and there were two chairs, a table, and a number of empty tea-chests in the room.

Upon one of the tea-chests placed beside the cupboard which had contained the lantern a Chinaman was seated. His skin was of so light a yellow color as to approximate to dirty white, and his face was pock-marked from neck to crown. He wore long, snake-like moustaches, which hung down below his chin. They grew from the extreme outer edges of his upper lip, the centre of which, usually the most hirsute, was hairless as the lip of an infant. He possessed the longest and thickest pigtail which could possibly grow upon a human scalp, and his left eye was permanently

closed, so that a smile which adorned his extraordinary countenance seemed to lack the sympathy of his surviving eye, which, oblique, beady, held no mirth in its glittering depths.

The garments of the one-eyed Chinaman, who sat complacently smiling at the visitors, consisted of a loose blouse, blue trousers tucked into grey socks, and a pair of those native, thick-soled slippers which suggest to a Western critic the acme of discomfort. A raven, black as a bird of ebony, perched upon the Chinaman's shoulder, head a-tilt, surveying the newcomers with a beady, glittering left eye which strangely resembled the beady, glittering right eye of the Chinaman. For, singular, uncanny circumstance, this was a one-eyed raven which sat upon the shoulder of his one-eyed master!

Mollie Gretna uttered a stifled cry. "Oh!" she whispered. "I knew I was going to scream!"

The eye of Sin Sin Wa turned momentarily in her direction, but otherwise he did not stir a muscle.

"Are you ready for us, Sin?" asked Sir Lucien.

"All ready. Lola hate gotchee topside loom ready," replied the Chinaman in a soft, crooning voice.

"Go ahead, Kilfane," directed Sir Lucien.

He glanced at Rita, who was standing very near him, surveying the evil little room and its owner with ill-concealed disgust.

"This is merely the foyer, Rita," he said, smiling slightly. "The state apartments are upstairs and in the adjoining house."

"Oh," she murmured—and no more.

Kilfane and Mollie Gretna were passing through the inner doorway, and Mollie turned.

"Isn't it loathsomely delightful?" she cried.

"Smartest leg in Buenos Ayres!" shrieked the raven. "Sin Sin, Sin Sin!"

Uttering a frightened exclamation, Mollie disappeared along the passage. Sir Lucien indicated to Rita that she was to follow; and he, passing through last of the party, closed the door behind him.

Sin Sin Wa never moved, and the raven, settling down upon the Chinaman's shoulder, closed his serviceable eye.

XVII. THE BLACK SMOKE

Up an uncarpeted stair Cyrus Kilfane led the party, and into a kind of lumber-room lighted by a tin oil lamp and filled to overflowing with heterogeneous and unsavory rubbish. Here were garments, male and female, no less than five dilapidated bowler hats, more tea-chests, broken lamps, tattered fragments of cocoanut-matting, steel bed-laths and straw mattresses, ruins of chairs—the whole diffusing an indescribably unpleasant odor.

Opening a cupboard door, Kilfane revealed a number of pendent, ragged garments, and two more bowler hats. Holding the garments aside, he banged upon the back of the cupboard—three blows, a pause, and then two blows.

Following a brief interval, during which even Mollie Gretna was held silent by the strangeness of the proceedings,

"Who is it?" inquired a muffled voice.

"Cy and the crowd," answered Kilfane.

Thereupon ensued a grating noise, and hats and garments swung suddenly backward, revealing a doorway in which Mrs Sin stood framed. She wore a Japanese kimona of embroidered green silk and a pair of green and gold brocaded slippers which possessed higher heels than Rita remembered to have seen even Mrs Sin mounted upon before. Her ankles were bare, and it was impossible to determine in what manner she was clad beneath the kimona. Undoubtedly she had a certain dark beauty, of a bold, abandoned type.

"Come right in," she directed. "Mind your head, Lucy."

The quartette filed through into a carpeted corridor, and Mrs Sin reclosed the false back of the cupboard, which, viewed from the other side, proved to be a door fitted into a recess in the corridor of the adjoining house. This recess ceased to exist when a second and heavier door was closed upon the first.

"You know," murmured Kilfane, "old Sin Sin has his uses, Lola. Those doors are perfectly made."

"Pooh!" scoffed the woman, with a flash of her dark eyes; "he is half a ship's carpenter and half an ape!"

She moved along the passage, her arm linked in that of Sir Lucien. The others followed, and:

"Is she truly married to that dreadful Chinaman?" whispered Mollie Gretna.

"Yes, I believe so," murmured Kilfane. "She is known as Mrs Sin Sin Wa."

"Oh!" Mollie's eyes opened widely. "I almost envy her! I have read that Chinamen tie their wives to beams in the roof and lash them with leather thongs until they swoon. I could die for a man who lashed me with leather thongs. Englishmen are so ridiculously gentle to women."

Opening a door on the left of the corridor, Mrs Sin displayed a room screened off into three sections. One shaded lamp high up near the ceiling served to light all the cubicles, which were heated by small charcoal stoves. These cubicles were identical in shape and appointment, each being draped with quaint Chinese tapestry and containing rugs, a silken divan, an armchair, and a low, Eastern table.

"Choose for yourself," said Mrs Sin, turning to Rita and Mollie Gretna. "Nobody else come tonight. You two in this room, eh? Next door each other for company."

She withdrew, leaving the two girls together. Mollie clasped her hands ecstatically.

"Oh, my dear!" she said. "What do you think of it all?"

"Well," confessed Rita, looking about her, "personally I feel rather nervous."

"My dear!" cried Mollie. "I am simply quivering with delicious terror!"

Rita became silent again, looking about her, and listening. The harsh voice of the Cuban-Jewess could be heard from a neighboring room, but otherwise a perfect stillness reigned in the house of Sin Sin Wa. She remembered that Mrs Sin had said, "It is quiet—so quiet."

"The idea of undressing and reclining on these divans in real oriental fashion," declared Mollie, giggling, "makes me feel that I am an odalisque already. I have dreamed that I was an odalisque, dear—after smoking, you know. It was heavenly. At least, I don't know that 'heavenly' is quite the right word."

And now that evil spirit of abandonment came to Rita—communicated to her, possibly, by her companion. Dread, together with a certain sense of

moral reluctance, departed, and she began to enjoy the adventure at last. It was as though something in the faintly perfumed atmosphere of the place had entered into her blood, driving out reserve and stifling conscience.

When Sir Lucien reappeared she ran to him excitedly, her charming face flushed and her eyes sparkling.

"Oh, Lucy," she cried, "how long will our things be? I'm keen to smoke!"

His jaw hardened, and when he spoke it was with a drawl more marked than usual.

"Mareno will be here almost immediately," he answered.

The tone constituted a rebuff, and Rita's coquetry deserted her, leaving her mortified and piqued. She stared at Pyne, biting her lip.

"You don't like me tonight," she declared. "If I look ugly, it's your fault; you told me to wear this horrid old costume!"

He laughed in a forced, unnatural way.

"You are quite well aware that you could never look otherwise than maddeningly beautiful," he said harshly. "Do you want me to recall the fact to you again that you are shortly to be Monte Irvin's wife—or should you prefer me to remind you that you have declined to be mine?"

Turning slowly, he walked away, but:

"Oh, Lucy!" whispered Rita.

He paused, looking back.

"I know now why you didn't want me to come," she said. "I—I'm sorry."

The hard look left Sir Lucien's face immediately and was replaced by a curious, indefinable expression, an expression which rarely appeared there.

"You only know half the reason," he replied softly.

At that moment Mrs Sin came in, followed by Mareno carrying two dressing-cases. Mollie Gretna had run off to Kilfane, and could be heard talking loudly in another room; but, called by Mrs Sin, she now returned, wide-eyed with excitement.

Mrs Sin cast a lightning glance at Sir Lucien, and then addressed Rita.

"Which of these three rooms you choose?" she asked, revealing her teeth in one of those rapid smiles which were mirthless as the eternal smile of Sin Sin Wa.

"Oh," said Rita hurriedly, "I don't know. Which do you want, Mollie?"

"I love this end one!" cried Mollie. "It has cushions which simply reek of oriental voluptuousness and cruelty. It reminds me of a delicious book I

have been reading called Musk, Hashish, and Blood."

"Hashish!" said Mrs Sin, and laughed harshly. "One night you shall eat the hashish, and then—"

She snapped her fingers, glancing from Rita to Pyne.

"Oh, really? Is that a promise?" asked Mollie eagerly.

"No, no!" answered Mrs Sin. "It is a threat!"

Something in the tone of her voice as she uttered the last four words in mock dramatic fashion caused Mollie and Rita to stare at one another questioningly. That suddenly altered tone had awakened an elusive memory, but neither of them could succeed in identifying it.

Mareno, a lean, swarthy fellow, his foreign cast of countenance accentuated by close-cut side-whiskers, deposited Miss Gretna's case in the cubicle which she had selected and, Rita pointing to that adjoining it, he disposed the second case beside the divan and departed silently. As the sound of a closing door reached them:

"You notice how quiet it is?" asked Mrs Sin.

"Yes," replied Rita. "It is extraordinarily quiet."

"This an empty house—'To let,'" explained Mrs Sin. "We watch it stay so. Sin the landlord, see? Windows all boarded up and everything padded. No sound outside, no sound inside. Sin call it the 'House of a Hundred Raptures,' after the one he have in Buenos Ayres."

The voice of Cyrus Kilfane came, querulous, from a neighboring room.

"Lola, my dear, I am almost ready."

"Ho!" Mrs Sin uttered a deep-toned laugh. "He is a glutton for chandu! I am coming, Cy."

She turned and went out. Sir Lucien paused for a moment, permitting her to pass, and:

"Good night, Rita," he said in a low voice. "Happy dreams!"

He moved away.

"Lucy!" called Rita softly.

"Yes?"

"Is it—is it really safe here?"

Pyne glanced over his shoulder towards the retreating figure of Mrs Sin, then:

"I shall be awake," he replied. "I would rather you had not come, but since you are here you must go through with it." He glanced again along the

narrow passage created by the presence of the partitions, and spoke in a voice lower yet. "You have never really trusted me, Rita. You were wise. But you can trust me now. Good night, dear."

He walked out of the room and along the carpeted corridor to a little apartment at the back of the house, furnished comfortably but in execrably bad taste. A cheerful fire was burning in the grate, the flue of which had been ingeniously diverted by Sin Sin Wa so that the smoke issued from a chimney of the adjoining premises. On the mantelshelf, which was garishly draped, were a number of photographs of Mrs Sin in Spanish dancing costume.

Pyne seated himself in an armchair and lighted a cigarette. Except for the ticking of a clock the room was silent as a padded cell. Upon a little Moorish table beside a deep, low settee lay a complete opium- smoking outfit.

Lolling back in the chair and crossing his legs, Sir Lucien became lost in abstraction, and he was thus seated when, some ten minutes later, Mrs Sin came in.

"Ah!" she said, her harsh voice softened to a whisper. "I wondered. So you wait to smoke with me?" Pyne slowly turned his head, staring at her as she stood in the doorway, one hand resting on her hip and her shapely figure boldly outlined by the kimono.

"No," he replied. "I don't want to smoke. Are they all provided for?"

Mrs Sin shook her head.

"Not Cy," she said. "Two pipes are nothing to him. He will need two more—perhaps three. But you are not going to smoke?"

"Not tonight, Lola."

She frowned, and was about to speak, when:

"Lola, my dear," came a distant, querulous murmur. "Give me another pipe."

Sin tossed her head, turned, and went out again. Sir Lucien lighted another cigarette. When finally the woman came back, Cyrus Kilfane had presumably attained the opium-smoker's paradise, for Lola closed the door and seated herself upon the arm of Sir Lucien's chair. She bent down, resting her dusky cheek against his.

"You smoke with me?" she whispered coaxingly.

"No, Lola, not tonight," he said, patting her jewel-laden hand and looking aside into the dark eyes which were watching him intently.

Mrs Sin became silent for a few moments.

"Something has changed in you," she said at last. "You are different—lately."

"Indeed!" drawled Sir Lucien. "Possibly you are right. Others have said the same thing."

"You have lots of money now. Your investments have been good. You want to become respectable, eh?"

Pyne smiled sardonically.

"Respectability is a question of appearance," he replied. "The change to which you refer would seem to go deeper."

"Very likely," murmured Mrs Sin. "I know why you don't smoke. You have promised your pretty little friend that you will stay awake and see that nobody tries to cut her sweet white throat."

Sir Lucien listened imperturbably.

"She is certainly nervous," he admitted coolly. "I may add that I am sorry I brought her here."

"Oh," said Mrs Sin, her voice rising half a note. "Then why do you bring her to the House?"

"She made the arrangement herself, and I took the easier path. I am considering your interests as much as my own, Lola. She is about to marry Monte Irvin, and if his suspicions were aroused he is quite capable of digging down to the 'Hundred Raptures.'"

"You brought her to Kazmah's."

"She was not at that time engaged to Irvin."

"Ah, I see. And now everybody says you are changed. Yes, she is a charming friend."

Pyne looked up into the half-veiled dark eyes.

"She never has been and never can be any more to me, Lola," he said.

At those words, designed to placate, the fire which smouldered in Lola's breast burst into sudden flame. She leapt to her feet, confronting Sir Lucien.

"I know! I know!" she cried harshly. "Do you think I am blind? If she had been like any of the others, do you suppose it would have mattered to me? But you respect her—you respect her!"

Eyes blazing and hands clenched, she stood before him, a woman mad with jealousy, not of a successful rival but of a respected one. She quivered with passion, and Pyne, perceiving his mistake too late, only preserved his wonted composure by dint of a great effort. He grasped Lola and drew her down on to the arm of the chair by sheer force, for she resisted savagely. His ready wit had been at work, and:

"What a little spitfire you are," he said, firmly grasping her arms, which felt rigid to the touch. "Surely you can understand? Rita amused me, at first. Then, when I found she was going to marry Monte Irvin I didn't bother about her any more. In fact, because I like and admire Irvin, I tried to keep her away from the dope. We don't want trouble with a man of that type, who has all sorts of influence. Besides, Monte Irvin is a good fellow."

Gradually, as he spoke, the rigid arms relaxed and the lithe body ceased to quiver. Finally, Lola sank back against his shoulder, sighing.

"I don't believe you," she whispered. "You are telling me lies. But you have always told me lies; one more does not matter, I suppose. How strong you are. You have hurt my wrists. You will smoke with me now?"

For a moment Pyne hesitated, then:

"Very well," he said. "Go and lie down. I will roast the chandu."

XVIII. THE DREAM OF SIN SIN WA

For a habitual opium-smoker to abstain when the fumes of chandu actually reach his nostrils is a feat of will-power difficult adequately to appraise. An ordinary tobacco smoker cannot remain for long among those who are enjoying the fragrant weed without catching the infection and beginning to smoke also. Twice to redouble the lure of my lady Nicotine would be but loosely to estimate the seductiveness of the Spirit of the Poppy; yet Sir Lucien Pyne smoked one pipe with Mrs Sin, and perceiving her to be already in a state of dreamy abstraction, loaded a second, but in his own case with a fragment of cigarette stump which smouldered in a tray upon the table. His was that rare type of character whose possessor remains master of his vices.

Following the fourth pipe—Pyne, after the second, had ceased to trouble to repeat his feat of legerdemain, "The sleep" claimed Mrs Sin. Her languorous eyes closed, and her face assumed that rapt expression of Buddha-like beatitude which Rita had observed at Kilfane's flat. According to some scientific works on the subject, sleep is not invariably induced in the case of Europeans by the use of chandu. Loosely, this is true. But this type of European never becomes an habitue; the habitue always sleeps. That dream-world to which opium alone holds the key becomes the real world "for the delights of which the smoker gladly resigns all mundane interests." The exiled Chinaman returns again to the sampan of his boyhood, floating joyously on the waters of some willow-lined canal; the Malay hears once more the mystic whispering in the mangrove swamps, or scents the fragrance of nutmeg and cinnamon in the far-off golden Chersonese. Mrs Sin doubtless lived anew the triumphs of earlier days in Buenos Ayres, when she had been La Belle Lola, the greatly beloved, and before she had met and married Sin Sin Wa. Gives much, but claims all, and he who would open the poppy-gates must close the door of ambition and bid farewell to manhood.

Sir Lucien stood looking at the woman, and although one pipe had affected him but slightly, his imagination momentarily ran riot and a pageant of his life swept before him, so that his jaw grew hard and grim and he clenched his hands convulsively. An unbroken stillness prevailed in the opium-house of Sin Sin Wa.

Recovering from his fit of abstraction, Pyne, casting a final keen glance at the sleeper, walked out of the room. He looked along the carpeted corridor in the direction of the cubicles, paused, and then opened the heavy door masking the recess behind the cupboard. Next opening the false back of the cupboard, he passed through to the lumber-room beyond, and partly closed the second door.

He descended the stair and went along the passage; but ere he reached the door of the room on the ground floor:

"Hello! hello! Sin Sin! Sin Sin Wa!" croaked the raven. "Number one p'lice chop, lo!" The note of a police whistle followed, rendered with uncanny fidelity.

Pyne entered the room. It presented the same aspect as when he had left it. The ship's lantern stood upon the table, and Sin Sin Wa sat upon the tea-

chest, the great black bird perched on his shoulder. The fire in the stove had burned lower, and its downcast glow revealed less mercilessly the dirty condition of the floor. Otherwise no one, nothing, seemed to have been disturbed. Pyne leaned against the doorpost, taking out and lighting a cigarette. The eye of Sin Sin Wa glanced sideways at him.

"Well, Sin Sin," said Sir Lucien, dropping a match and extinguishing it under his foot, "you see I am not smoking tonight."

"No smokee," murmured the Chinaman. "Velly good stuff."

"Yes, the stuff is all right, Sin."

"Number one proper," crooned Sin Sin Wa, and relapsed into smiling silence.

"Number one p'lice," croaked the raven sleepily. "Smartest—" He even attempted the castanets imitation, but was overcome by drowsiness.

For a while Sir Lucien stood watching the singular pair and smiling in his ironical fashion. The motive which had prompted him to leave the neighboring house and to seek the companionship of Sin Sin Wa was so obscure and belonged so peculiarly to the superdelicacies of chivalry, that already he was laughing at himself. But, nevertheless, in this house and not in its secret annex of a Hundred Raptures he designed to spend the night. Presently:

"Hon'lable p'lice patrol come 'long plenty soon," murmured Sin Sin Wa.

"Indeed?" said Sir Lucien, glancing at his wristwatch. "The door is open above."

Sin Sin Wa raised one yellow forefinger, without moving either hand from the knee upon which it rested, and shook it slightly to and fro.

"Allee lightee," he murmured. "No bhobbery. Allee peaceful fellers."

"Will they want to come in?"

"Wantchee dlink," replied Sin Sin Wa.

"Oh, I see. If I go out into the passage it will be all right?"

"Allee lightee."

Even as he softly crooned the words came a heavy squelch of rubbers upon the wet pavement outside, followed by a rapping on the door. Sin Sin Wa glanced aside at Sir Lucien, and the latter immediately withdrew, partly closing the door. The Chinaman shuffled across and admitted two constables. The raven, remaining perched upon his shoulder, shrieked,

"Smartest leg in Buenos Ayres," and, fully awakened, rattled invisible castanets.

The police strode into the stuffy little room without ceremony, a pair of burly fellows, fresh-complexioned, and genial as men are wont to be who have reached a welcome resting-place on a damp and cheerless night. They stood by the stove, warming their hands; and one of them stooped, took up the little poker, and stirred the embers to a brighter glow.

"Been havin' a pipe, Sin?" he asked, winking at his companion. "I can smell something like opium!"

"No smokee opium," murmured Sin Sin Wa complacently. "Smokee Woodbine."

"Ho, ho!" laughed the other constable. "I don't think."

"You likee tly one piecee pipee one time?" inquired the Chinaman. "Gotchee fliend makee smokee."

The man who had poked the fire slapped his companion on the back.

"Now's your chance, Jim!" he cried. "You always said you'd like to have a cut at it."

"H'm!" muttered the other. "A 'double' o' that fifteen over-proof Jamaica of yours, Sin, would hit me in a tender spot tonight."

"Lum?" murmured Sin Sin blandly. "No hate got."

He resumed his seat on the tea-chest, and the raven muttered sleepily, "Sin Sin—Sin."

"H'm!" repeated the constable.

He raised the skirt of his heavy top-coat, and from his trouser-pocket drew out a leather purse. The eye of Sin Sin Wa remained fixed upon a distant corner of the room. From the purse the constable took a shilling, ringing it loudly upon the table.

"Double rum, miss, please!" he said, facetiously. "There's no treason allowed nowadays, so my pal's—"

"I stood yours last night Jim, anyway!" cried the other, grinning. "Go on, stump up!"

Jim rang a second shilling on the table.

"Two double rums!" he called.

Sin Sin Wa reached a long arm into the little cupboard beside him and withdrew a bottle and a glass. Leaning forward he placed bottle and glass on the table, and adroitly swept the coins into his yellow palm.

"Number one p'lice chop," croaked the raven.

"You're right, old bird!" said Jim, pouring out a stiff peg of the spirit and disposing of it at a draught. "We should freeze to death on this blasted riverside beat if it wasn't for Sin Sin."

He measured out a second portion for his companion, and the latter drank the raw spirit off as though it had been ale, replaced the glass on the table, and having adjusted his belt and lantern in that characteristic way which belongs exclusively to members of the Metropolitan Police Force, turned and departed.

"Good night, Sin," he said, opening the door.

"So-long," murmured the Chinaman.

"Good night, old bird," cried Jim, following his colleague.

"So-long."

The door closed, and Sin Sin Wa, shuffling across, rebolted it. As Sir Lucien came out from his hiding-place Sin Sin Wa returned to his seat on the tea-chest, first putting the glass, unwashed, and the rum bottle back in the cupboard.

To the ordinary observer the Chinaman presents an inscrutable mystery. His seemingly unemotional character and his racial inability to express his thoughts intelligibly in any European tongue stamp him as a creature apart, and one whom many are prone erroneously to classify very low in the human scale and not far above the ape. Sir Lucien usually spoke to Sin Sin Wa in English, and the other replied in that weird jargon known as "pidgin." But the silly Sin Wa who murmured gibberish and the Sin Sin Wa who could converse upon many and curious subjects in his own language were two different beings—as Sir Lucien was aware. Now, as the one-eyed Chinaman resumed his seat and the one- eyed raven sank into slumber, Pyne suddenly spoke in Chinese, a tongue which he understood as it is understood by few Englishmen; that strange, sibilant speech which is alien from all Western conceptions of oral intercourse as the Chinese institutions and ideals are alien from those of the rest of the civilized world.

"So you make a profit on your rum, Sin Sin Wa," he said ironically, "at the same time that you keep in the good graces of the police?"

Sin Sin Wa's expression underwent a subtle change at the sound of his native language. He moved his hands and became slightly animated.

"A great people of the West, most honorable sir," he replied in the pure mandarin dialect, "claim credit for having said that 'business is business.' Yet he who thus expressed himself was a Chinaman."

"You surprise me."

"The wise man must often find occasion for surprise most honorable sir."

Sir Lucien lighted a cigarette.

"I sometimes wonder, Sin Sin Wa," he said slowly, "what your aim in life can be. Your father was neither a ship's carpenter nor a shopkeeper. This I know. Your age I do not know and cannot guess, but you are no longer young. You covet wealth. For what purpose, Sin Sin Wa?"

Standing behind the Chinaman, Sir Lucien's dark face, since he made no effort to hide his feelings, revealed the fact that he attached to this seemingly abstract discussion a greater importance than his tone of voice might have led one to suppose. Sin Sin Wa remained silent for some time, then:

"Most honorable sir," he replied, "when I have smoked the opium, before my eyes—for in dreams I have two—a certain picture arises. It is that of a farm in the province of Ho-Nan. Beyond the farm stretch paddy-fields as far as one can see. Men and women and boys and girls move about the farm, happy in their labors, and far, far away dwell the mountain gods, who send the great Yellow River sweeping down through the valleys where the poppy is in bloom. It is to possess that farm, most honorable sir, and those paddy-fields that I covet wealth."

"And in spite of the opium which you consume, you have never lost sight of this ideal?"

"Never."

"But—your wife?"

Sin Sin Wa performed a curious shrugging movement, peculiarly racial.

"A man may not always have the same wife," he replied cryptically. "The honorable wife who now attends to my requirements, laboring unselfishly in my miserable house and scorning the love of other men as she has always done—and as an honorable and upright woman is expected to do—may one day be gathered to her ancestors. A man never knows. Or she may leave me. I am not a good husband. It may be that some little maiden of Ho-Nan, mild-eyed like the musk-deer and modest and tender, will consent to minister to my old age. Who knows?"

Sir Lucien blew a thick cloud of tobacco smoke into the room, and:

"She will never love you, Sin Sin Wa," he said, almost sadly. "She will come to your house only to cheat you."

Sin Sin Wa repeated the eloquent shrug.

"We have a saying in Ho-Nan, most honorable sir," he answered, "and it is this: 'He who has tasted the poppy-cup has nothing to ask of love.' She will cook for me, this little one, and stroke my brow when I am weary, and light my pipe. My eye will rest upon her with pleasure. It is all I ask."

There came a soft rapping on the outer door—three raps, a pause, and then two raps. The raven opened his beady eye.

"Sin Sin Wa," he croaked, "number one p'lice chop, lo!"

Sin Sin Wa glanced aside at Sir Lucien.

"The traffic. A consignment of opium," he said. "Sam Tuk calls."

Sir Lucien consulted his watch, and:

"I should like to go with you, Sin Sin Wa," he said. "Would it be safe to leave the house—with the upper door unlocked?"

Sin Sin Wa glanced at him again.

"All are sleeping, most honorable sir?"

"All."

"I will lock the room above and the outer door. It is safe."

He raised a yellow hand, and the raven stepped sedately from his shoulder on to his wrist.

"Come, Tling-a-Ling," crooned Sin Sin Wa, "you go to bed, my little black friend, and one day you, too, shall see the paddy-fields of Ho-Nan."

Opening the useful cupboard, he stooped, and in hopped the raven. Sin Sin Wa closed the cupboard, and stepped out into the passage.

"I will bring you a coat and a cap and scarf," he said. "Your magnificent apparel would be out of place among the low pigs who wait in my other disgusting cellar to rob me. Forgive my improper absence for one moment, most honorable sir."

XIX. THE TRAFFIC

Sir Lucien came out into the alley wearing a greasy cloth cap pulled down over his eyes and an old overall, the collar turned up about a red woollen muffler which enveloped the lower part of his face. The odor of the outfit was disgusting, but this man's double life had brought him so frequently in contact with all forms of uncleanness, including that of the Far East, compared with which the dirt of the West is hygienic, that he suffered it without complaint.

A Chinese "boy" of indeterminable age, wearing a slop-shop suit and a cap, was waiting outside the door, and when Sin Sin Wa appeared, carefully locking up, he muttered something rapidly in his own sibilant language.

Sin Sin Wa made no reply. To his indoor attire he had added a pea-jacket and a bowler hat; and the oddly assorted trio set off westward, following the bank of the Thames in the direction of Limehouse Basin. The narrow, ill-lighted streets were quite deserted, but from the river and the riverside arose that ceaseless jangle of industry which belongs to the great port of London. On the Surrey shore whistles shrieked, and endless moving chains sent up their monstrous clangor into the night. Human voices sometimes rose above the din of machinery.

In silence the three pursued their way, crossing inlets and circling around basins dimly divined, turning to the right into a lane flanked by high, eyeless walls, and again to the left, finally to emerge nearly opposite a dilapidated gateway giving access to a small wharf, on the rickety gates bills were posted announcing, "This Wharf to Let." The annexed building appeared to be a mere shell. To the right again they turned, and once more to the left, halting before a two-story brick house which had apparently been converted into a barber's shop. In one of the grimy windows were some loose packets of cigarettes, a soapmaker's advertisement, and a card:

SAM TUK
BARBER

Opening the door with a key which he carried, the boy admitted Sir Lucien and Sin Sin Wa to the dimly-lighted interior of a room the pretensions of which to be regarded as a shaving saloon were supported by the presence of two chairs, a filthy towel, and a broken mug. Sin Sin Wa

shuffled across to another door, and, followed by Sir Lucien, descended a stone stair to a little cellar apparently intended for storing coal. A tin lamp stood upon the bottom step.

Removing the lamp from the step, Sin Sin Wa set it on the cellar floor, which was black with coal dust, then closed and bolted the door. A heap of nondescript litter lay piled in a corner of the cellar. This Sin Sin Wa disturbed sufficiently to reveal a movable slab in the roughly paved floor. It was so ingeniously concealed by coal dust that one who had sought it unaided must have experienced great difficulty in detecting it. Furthermore, it could only be raised in the following manner:

A piece of strong iron wire, which lay among the other litter, was inserted in a narrow slot, apparently a crack in the stone. About an inch of the end of the wire being bent outward to form a right angle, when the seemingly useless piece of scrap-iron had been thrust through the slab and turned, it formed a handle by means of which the trap could be raised.

Again Sin Sin Wa took up the lamp, placing it at the brink of the opening revealed. A pair of wooden steps rested below, and Sir Lucien, who evidently was no stranger to the establishment, descended awkwardly, since there was barely room for a big man to pass. He found himself in the mouth of a low passage, unpaved and shored up with rough timbers in the manner of a mine-working. Sin Sin Wa followed with the lamp, drawing the slab down into its place behind him.

Stooping forward and bending his knees, Sir Lucien made his way along the passage, the Chinaman following. It was of considerable length, and terminated before a strong door bearing a massive lock. Sin Sin Wa reached over the stooping figure of Sir Lucien and unfastened the lock. The two emerged in a kind of dug-out. Part of it had evidently been in existence before the ingenious Sin Sin Wa had exercised his skill upon it, and was of solid brickwork and stone-paved; palpably a storage vault. But it had been altered to suit the Chinaman's purpose, and one end—that in which the passage came out—was timbered. It contained a long counter and many shelves; also a large oil-stove and a number of pots, pans, and queer-looking jars. On the counter stood a ship's lantern. The shelves were laden with packages and bottles. Behind the counter sat a venerable and perfectly bald Chinaman. The only trace of hair upon his countenance grew on the shrunken upper lip —mere wisps of white down. His skin was shrivelled

like that of a preserved fig, and he wore big horn-rimmed spectacles. He never once exhibited the slightest evidence of life, and his head and face, and the horn-rimmed spectacles, might quite easily have passed for those of an unwrapped mummy. This was Sam Tuk.

Bending over a box upon which rested a canvas-bound package was a burly seaman engaged in unknotting the twine with which the canvas was kept in place. As Sin Sin Wa and Sir Lucien came in he looked up, revealing a red-bearded, ugly face, very puffy under the eyes.

"Wotcher, Sin Sin!" he said gruffly. "Who's your long pal?"

"Friend," murmured Sin Sin Wa complacently. "You gotchee pukka stuff thisee time, George?"

"I allus brings the pukka stuff!" roared the seaman, ceasing to fumble with the knots and glaring at Sin Sin Wa. "Wotcher mean—pukka stuff?"

"Gotchee no use for bran," murmured Sin Sin Wa. "Gotchee no use for tin-tack. Gotchee no use for glue."

"Bran!" roared the man, his glance and pose very menacing. "Tin-tacks and glue! Who the flamin' 'ell ever tried to sell you glue?"

"Me only wantchee lemindee you," said Sin Sin Wa. "No pidgin."

"George" glared for a moment, breathing heavily; then he stooped and resumed his task, Sin Sin Wa and Sir Lucien watching him in silence. A sound of lapping water was faintly audible.

Opening the canvas wrappings, the man began to take out and place upon the counter a number of reddish balls of "leaf" opium, varying in weight from about eight ounces to a pound or more.

"H'm!" murmured Sin Sin Wa. "Smyrna stuff."

From a pocket of his pea-jacket he drew a long bodkin, and taking up one of the largest balls he thrust the bodkin in and then withdrew it, the steel stained a coffee color. Sin Sin Wa smelled and tasted the substance adhering to the bodkin, weighed the ball reflectively in his yellow palm, and then set it aside. He took up a second, whereupon:

"'Alf a mo', guvnor!" cried the seaman furiously. "D'you think I'm going to wait 'ere while you prods about in all the blasted lot? It's damn near high tide—I shan't get out. 'Alf time! Savvy? Shove it on the scales!"

Sin Sin Wa shook his head.

"Too muchee slick. Too muchee bhobbery," he murmured. "Sin Sin Wa gotchee sabby what him catchee buy or no pidgin."

"What's the game?" inquired George menacingly. "Don't you know a cake o' Smyrna when you smells it?"

"No sabby lead chop till ploddem withee dipper," explained the Chinaman, imperturbably.

"Lead!" shouted the man. "There ain't no bloody lead in 'em!"

"H'm," murmured Sin Sin Wa smilingly. "So fashion, eh? All velly proper."

He calmly inserted the bodkin in the second cake; seemed to meet with some obstruction, and laid the ball down upon the counter. From beneath his jacket he took out a clasp-knife attached to a steel chain. Undeterred by a savage roar from the purveyor, he cut the sticky mass in half, and digging his long nails into one of the halves, brought out two lead shots. He directed a glance of his beady eye upon the man.

"Bloody liar," he murmured sweetly. "Lobber."

"Who's a robber?" shouted George, his face flushing darkly, and apparently not resenting the earlier innuendo; "Who's a robber?"

"One sarcee Smyrna feller packee stuff so fashion," murmured Sin Sin Wa. "Thief-feller lobbee poor sailorman."

George jerked his peaked cap from his head, revealing a tangle of unkempt red hair. He scratched his skull with savage vigor.

"Blimey!" he said pathetically. "'Ere's a go! I been done brown, guv'nor."

"Lough luck," murmured Sin Sin Wa, and resumed his examination of the cakes of opium.

The man watched him now in silence, only broken by exclamations of "Blimey" and "Flaming hell" when more shot was discovered. The tests concluded:

"Gotchee some more?" asked Sin Sin Wa.

From the canvas wrapping George took out and tossed on the counter a square packet wrapped in grease-paper.

"H'm," murmured Sin Sin Wa, "Patna. Where you catchee?"

"Off of a lascar," growled the man.

The cake of Indian opium was submitted to the same careful scrutiny as that which the balls of Turkish had already undergone, but the Patna opium proved to be unadulterated. Reaching over the counter Sin Sin Wa produced a pair of scales, and, watched keenly by George, weighed the leaf and then the cake.

"Ten-six Smyrna; one 'leben Patna," muttered Sin Sin Wa. "You catchee eighty jimmies."

"Eh?" roared George. "Eighty quid! Eighty quid! Flamin' blind o' Riley! D'you think I'm up the pole? Eighty quid? You're barmy!"

"Eighty-ten," murmured Sin Sin Wa. "Eighty jimmies opium; ten bob lead."

"I give more'n that for it!" cried the seaman. "An' I damn near hit a police boat comin' in, too!"

Sir Lucien spoke a few words rapidly in Chinese. Sin Sin Wa performed his curious oriental shrug, and taking a fat leather wallet from his hip-pocket, counted out the sum of eighty-five pounds upon the counter.

"You catchee eighty-five," he murmured. "Too muchee price."

The man grabbed the money and pocketed it without a word of acknowledgment. He turned and strode along the room, his heavy, iron-clamped boots ringing on the paved floor.

"Fetch a grim, Sin Sin," he cried. "I'll never get out if I don't jump to it."

Sin Sin Wa took the lantern from the counter and followed. Opening a door at the further end of the place, he set the lantern at the head of three descending wooden steps discovered. With the opening of the door the sound of lapping water had grown perceptibly louder. George clattered down the steps, which led to a second but much stouter door. Sin Sin Wa followed, nearly closing the first door, so that only a faint streak of light crept down to them.

The second door was opened, and the clangor of the Surrey shore suddenly proclaimed itself. Cold, damp air touched them, and the faint light of the lantern above cast their shadows over unctuous gliding water, which lapped the step upon which they stood. Slimy shapes uprose dim and ghostly from its darkly moving surface.

A boat was swinging from a ring beside the door, and into it George tumbled. He unhitched the lashings, and strongly thrust the boat out upon the water. Coming to the first of the dim shapes, he grasped it and thereby propelled the skiff to another beyond. These indistinct shapes were the piles supporting the structure of a wharf.

"Good night, guv'nor!" he cried hoarsely

"So-long," muttered Sin Sin Wa.

He waited until the boat was swallowed in the deeper shadows, then reclosed the water-gate and ascended to the room where Sir Lucien awaited. Such was the receiving office of Sin Sin Wa. While the wharf remained untenanted it was not likely to be discovered by the authorities, for even at low tide the river-door was invisible from passing craft. Prospective lessees who had taken the trouble to inquire about the rental had learned that it was so high as to be prohibitive.

Sin Sin Wa paid fair prices and paid cash. This was no more than a commercial necessity. For those who have opium, cocaine, veronal, or heroin to sell can always find a ready market in London and elsewhere. But one sufficiently curious and clever enough to have solved the riddle of the vacant wharf would have discovered that the mysterious owner who showed himself so loath to accept reasonable offers for the property could well afford to be thus independent. Those who control "the traffic" control El Dorado—a city of gold which, unlike the fabled Manoa, actually exists and yields its riches to the unscrupulous adventurer.

Smiling his mirthless, eternal smile, Sin Sin Wa placed the newly purchased stock upon a shelf immediately behind Sam Tuk; and Sam Tuk exhibited the first evidence of animation which had escaped him throughout the progress of the "deal." He slowly nodded his hairless head.

XX. KAZMAH'S METHODS

Rita Dresden married Monte Irvin in the spring and bade farewell to the stage. The goal long held in view was attained at last. But another farewell which at one time she had contemplated eagerly no longer appeared desirable or even possible. To cocamania had been added a tolerance for opium, and at the last party given by Cyrus Kilfane she had learned that she could smoke nearly as much opium as the American habitue.

The altered attitude of Sir Lucien surprised and annoyed her. He, who had first introduced her to the spirit of the coca leaf and to the goddess of the poppy, seemed suddenly to have determined to convince her of the folly of these communions. He only succeeded in losing her confidence. She

twice visited the "House of a Hundred Raptures" with Mollie Gretna, and once with Mollie and Kilfane, unknown to Sir Lucien.

Urgent affairs of some kind necessitated his leaving England a few weeks before the date fixed for Rita's wedding, and as Kilfane had already returned to America, Rita recognized with a certain dismay that she would be left to her own resources—handicapped by the presence of a watchful husband. This subtle change in her view of Monte Irvin she was incapable of appreciating, for Rita was no psychologist. But the effect of the drug habit was pointedly illustrated by the fact that in a period of little more than six months, from regarding Monte Irvin as a rock of refuge—a chance of salvation—she had come to regard him in the light of an obstacle to her indulgence. Not that her respect had diminished. She really loved at last, and so well that the idea of discovery by this man whose wholesomeness was the trait of character which most potently attracted her, was too appalling to be contemplated. The chance of discovery would be enhanced, she recognized, by the absence of her friends and accomplices.

Of course she was acquainted with many other devotees. In fact, she met so many of them that she had grown reconciled to her habits, believing them to be common to all "smart" people—a part of the Bohemian life. The truth of the matter was that she had become a prominent member of a coterie closely knit and associated by a bond of mutual vice—a kind of masonry whereof Kazmah of Bond Street was Grand Master and Mrs Sin Grand Mistress.

The relations existing between Kazmah and his clients were of a most peculiar nature, too, and must have piqued the curiosity of anyone but a drug-slave. Having seen him once, in his oracular cave, Rita had been accepted as one of the initiated. Thereafter she had had no occasion to interview the strange, immobile Egyptian, nor had she experienced any desire to do so. The method of obtaining drugs was a simple one. She had merely to present herself at the establishment in Bond Street and to purchase either a flask of perfume or a box of sweetmeats. There were several varieties of perfume, and each corresponded to a particular drug. The sweetmeats corresponded to morphine. Rashid, the attendant, knew all Kazmah's clients, and with the box or flask he gave them a quantity of the required drug. This scheme was precautionary. For if a visitor should

chance to be challenged on leaving the place, there was the legitimate purchase to show in evidence of the purpose of the visit.

No conversation was necessary, merely the selection of a scent and the exchange of a sum of money. Rashid retired to wrap up the purchase, and with it a second and smaller package was slipped into the customer's hand. That the prices charged were excessive—nay, ridiculous—did not concern Rita, for, in common with the rest of her kind, she was careless of expenditure.

Opium, alone, Kazmah did not sell. He sold morphine, tincture of opium, and other preparations; but those who sought the solace of the pipe were compelled to deal with Mrs Sin. She would arrange parties, or would prepare the "Hundred Raptures" in Limehouse for visitors; but, except in the form of opiated cigarettes, she could rarely be induced to part with any of the precious gum. Thus she cleverly kept a firm hold upon the devotees of the poppy.

Drug-takers form a kind of brotherhood, and outside the charmed circle they are secretive as members of the Mafia, the Camorra, or the Catouse-Menegant.

In this secrecy, which, indeed, is a recognized symptom of drug mania, lay Kazmah's security. Rita experienced no desire to peer behind the veil which, literally and metaphorically, he had placed between himself and the world. At first she had been vaguely curious, and had questioned Sir Lucien and others, but nobody seemed to know the real identity of Kazmah, and nobody seemed to care provided that he continued to supply drugs. They all led secret, veiled lives, these slaves of the laboratory, and that Kazmah should do likewise did not surprise them. He had excellent reasons.

During this early stage of faint curiosity she had suggested to Sir Lucien that for Kazmah to conduct a dream-reading business seemed to be to add to the likelihood of police interference.

The baronet had smiled sardonically.

"It is an additional safeguard," he had assured her. "It corresponds to the method of a notorious Paris assassin who was very generally regarded by the police as a cunning pickpocket. Kazmah's business of 'dreamreading' does not actually come within the Act. He is clever enough for that. Remember, he does not profess to tell fortunes. It also enables him to balk idle curiosity."

At the time of her marriage Rita was hopelessly in the toils, and had been really panic-stricken at the prospect—once so golden—of a protracted sojourn abroad. The war, which rendered travel impossible, she regarded rather in the light of a heaven-sent boon. Irvin, though personally favoring a quiet ceremony, recognized that Rita cherished a desire to quit theatreland in a chariot of fire, and accordingly the wedding was on a scale of magnificence which outshone that of any other celebrated during the season. Even the lugubrious Mr Esden, who gave his daughter away, was seen to smile twice. Mrs Esden moved in a rarified atmosphere of gratified ambition and parental pride, which no doubt closely resembled that which the angels breathe.

It was during the early days of her married life, and while Sir Lucien was still abroad, that Rita began to experience difficulty in obtaining the drugs which she required. She had lost touch to a certain extent with her former associates; but she had retained her maid, Nina, and the girl regularly went to Kazmah's and returned with the little flasks of perfume. When an accredited representative was sent upon such a mission, Kazmah dispatched the drugs disguised in a scent flask; but on each successive occasion that Nina went to him the prices increased, and finally became so exorbitant that even Rita grew astonished and dismayed.

She mentioned the matter to another habitue, a lady of title addicted to the use of the hypodermic syringe, and learned that she (Rita) was being charged nearly twice as much as her friend.

"I should bring the man to his senses, dear," said her ladyship. "I know a doctor who will be only too glad to supply you. When I say a doctor, he is no longer recognized by the B.M.A., but he's none the less clever and kind for all that."

To the clever and kind medical man Rita repaired on the following day, bearing a written introduction from her friend. The discredited physician supplied her for a short time, charging only moderate fees. Then, suddenly, this second source of supply was closed. The man declared that he was being watched by the police, and that he dared not continue to supply her with cocaine and veronal. His shifty eyes gave the lie to his words, but he was firm in his resolution, whatever may have led him to it, and Rita was driven back to Kazmah. His charges had become more exorbitant than ever,

but her need was imperative. Nevertheless, she endeavored to find another drug dealer, and after a time was again successful.

At a certain supper club she was introduced to a suave little man, quite palpably an uninterned alien, who smilingly offered to provide her with any drug to be found in the British Pharmacopeia, at most moderate charges. With this little German-Jew villain she made a pact, reflecting that, provided that his wares were of good quality, she had triumphed over Kazmah.

The craving for chandu seized her sometimes and refused to be exorcised by morphia, laudanum, or any other form of opium; but she had not dared to spend a night at the "House of a Hundred Raptures" since her marriage. Her new German friend volunteered to supply the necessary gum, outfit, and to provide an apartment where she might safely indulge in smoking. She declined—at first. But finally, on Mollie Gretna's return from France, where she had been acting as a nurse, Rita and Mollie accepted the suave alien's invitation to spend an evening in his private opium divan.

Many thousands of careers were wrecked by the war, and to the war and the consequent absence of her husband Rita undoubtedly owed her relapse into opium-smoking. That she would have continued secretly to employ cocaine, veronal, and possibly morphine was probable enough; but the constant society of Monte Irvin must have made it extremely difficult for her to indulge the craving for chandu. She began to regret the gaiety of her old life. Loneliness and monotony plunged her into a state of suicidal depression, and she grasped eagerly at every promise of excitement.

It was at about this time that she met Margaret Halley, and between the two, so contrary in disposition, a close friendship arose. The girl doctor ere long discovered Rita's secret, of course, and the discovery was hastened by an event which occurred shortly after they had become acquainted.

The suave alien gentleman disappeared.

That was the entire story in five words—or all of the story that Rita ever learned. His apartments were labelled "To Let," and the night clubs knew him no more. Rita for a time was deprived of drugs, and the nervous collapse which resulted revealed to Margaret Halley's trained perceptions the truth respecting her friend.

Kazmah's terms proved to be more outrageous than ever, but Rita found herself again compelled to resort to the Egyptian. She went personally to

the rooms in old Bond Street and arranged with Rashid to see Kazmah on the following day, Friday, for Kazmah only received visitors by appointment. As it chanced, Sir Lucien Pyne returned to England on Thursday night and called upon Rita at Prince's Gate. She welcomed him as a friend in need, unfolding the pitiful story, to the truth of which her nervous condition bore eloquent testimony.

Sir Lucien began to pace up and down the charming little room in which Rita had received him. She watched him, haggard-eyed. Presently:

"Leave Kazmah to me," he said. "If you visit him he will merely shield himself behind the mystical business, or assure you that he is making no profit on his sales. Kilfane had similar trouble with him."

"Then you will see him?" asked Rita.

"I will make a point of interviewing him in the morning. Meanwhile, if you will send Nina around to Albemarle Street in about an hour I will see what can be done."

"Oh, Lucy," whispered Rita, "what a pal you are."

Sir Lucien smiled in his cold fashion.

"I try to be," he said enigmatically; "but I don't always succeed." He turned to her. "Have you ever thought of giving up this doping?" he asked. "Have you ever realized that with increasing tolerance the quantities must increase as well, and that a day is sure to come when—"

Rita repressed a nervous shudder.

"You are trying to frighten me," she replied. "You have tried before; I don't know why. But it's no good, Lucy. You know I cannot give it up."

"You can try."

"I don't want to try!" she cried irritably. "It will be time enough when Monte is back again, and we can really 'live.' This wretched existence, with everything restricted and rationed, and all one's friends in Flanders or Mesopotamia or somewhere, drives me mad! I tell you I should die, Lucy, if I tried to do without it now."

The hollow presence of reform contemplated in a hazy future did not deceive Sir Lucien. He suppressed a sigh, and changed the topic of conversation.

XXI. THE CIGARETTES FROM BUENOS AYRES

Sir Lucien's intervention proved successful. Kazmah's charges became more modest, and Rita no longer found it necessary to deprive herself of hats and dresses in order to obtain drugs. But, nevertheless, these were not the halcyon days of old. She was now surrounded by spies. It was necessary to resort to all kinds of subterfuge in order to cover her expenditures at the establishment in old Bond Street. Her husband never questioned her outlay, but on the other hand it was expedient to be armed against the possibility of his doing so, and Rita's debts were accumulating formidably.

Then there was Margaret Halley to consider. Rita had never hitherto given her confidence to anyone who was not addicted to the same practices as herself, and she frequently experienced embarrassment beneath the grave scrutiny of Margaret's watchful eyes. In another this attitude of gentle disapproval would have been irritating, but Rita loved and admired Margaret, and suffered accordingly.

As for Sir Lucien, she had ceased to understand him. An impalpable barrier seemed to have arisen between them. The inner man had became inaccessible. Her mind was not subtle enough to grasp the real explanation of this change in her old lover. Being based upon wrong premises, her inferences were necessarily wide of the truth, and she believed that Sir Lucien was jealous of Margaret's cousin, Quentin Gray.

Gray met Rita at Margaret Halley's flat shortly after he had returned home from service in the East, and he immediately conceived a violent infatuation for this pretty friend of his cousin's. In this respect his conduct was in no way peculiar. Few men were proof against the seductive Mrs Monte Irvin, not because she designedly encouraged admiration, but because she was one of those fortunately rare characters who inspire it without conscious effort. Her appeal to men was sweetly feminine and quite lacking in that self-assertive and masculine "take me or leave me" attitude which characterizes some of the beauties of today. There was nothing abstract about her delicate loveliness, yet her charm was not wholly physical. Many women disliked her.

At dance, theatre, and concert Quentin Gray played the doting cavalier; and Rita, who was used to at least one such adoring attendant, accepted his homage without demur. Monte Irvin returned to civil life, but Rita showed

no disposition to dispense with her new admirer. Both Gray and Sir Lucien had become frequent visitors at Prince's Gate, and Irvin, who understood his wife's character up to a point, made them his friends.

Shortly after Monte Irvin's return Sir Lucien taxed Rita again with her increasing subjection to drugs. She was in a particularly gay humor, as the supplies from Kazmah had been regular, and she laughingly fenced with him when he reminded her of her declared intention to reform when her husband should return.

"You are really as bad as Margaret," she declared. "There is nothing the matter with me. You talk of 'curing' me as though I were ill. Physician, heal thyself."

The sardonic smile momentarily showed upon Pyne's face, and:

"I know when and where to pull up, Rita," he said. "A woman never knows this. If I were deprived of opium tomorrow I could get along without it."

"I have given up opium," replied Rita. "It's too much trouble, and the last time Mollie and I went—"

She paused, glancing quickly at Sir Lucien.

"Go on," he said grimly. "I know you have been to Sin Sin Wa's. What happened the last time?"

"Well," continued Rita hurriedly, "Monte seemed to be vaguely suspicious. Besides, Mrs Sin charged me most preposterously. I really cannot afford it, Lucy."

"I am glad you cannot. But what I was about to say was this: Suppose you were to be deprived, not of 'chard', but of cocaine and veronal, do you know what would happen to you?"

"Oh!" whispered Rita, "why will you persist in trying to frighten me! I am not going to be deprived of them."

"I persist, dear, because I want you to try, gradually, to depend less upon drugs, so that if the worst should happen you would have a chance."

Rita stood up and faced him, biting her lip.

"Lucy," she said, "do you mean that Kazmah—"

"I mean that anything might happen, Rita. After all, we do possess a police service in London, and one day there might be an accident. Kazmah has certain influence, but it may be withdrawn. Rita, won't you try?"

She was watching him closely, and now the pupils of her beautiful eyes became dilated.

"You know something," she said slowly, "which you are keeping from me."

He laughed and turned aside.

"I know that I am compelled to leave England again, Rita, for a time; and I should be a happier man if I knew that you were not so utterly dependent upon Kazmah."

"Oh, Lucy, are you going away again?"

"I must. But I shall not be absent long, I hope."

Rita sank down upon the settee from which she had risen, and was silent for some time; then:

"I will try, Lucy," she promised. "I will go to Margaret Halley, as she is always asking me to do."

"Good girl," said Pyne quietly. "It is just a question of making the effort, Rita. You will succeed, with Margaret's help."

A short time later Sir Lucien left England, but throughout the last week that he remained in London Rita spent a great part of every day in his company. She had latterly begun to experience an odd kind of remorse for her treatment of the inscrutably reserved baronet. His earlier intentions she had not forgotten, but she had long ago forgiven them, and now she often felt sorry for this man whom she had deliberately used as a stepping-stone to fortune.

Gray was quite unable to conceal his jealousy. He seemed to think that he had a proprietary right to Mrs Monte Irvin's society, and during the week preceding Sir Lucien's departure Gray came perilously near to making himself ridiculous on more than one occasion.

One night, on leaving a theatre, Rita suggested to Pyne that they should proceed to a supper club for an hour. "It will be like old times," she said.

"But your husband is expecting you," protested Sir Lucien.

"Let's ring him up and ask him to join us. He won't, but he cannot very well object then."

As a result they presently found themselves descending a broad carpeted stairway. From the rooms below arose the strains of an American melody. Dancing was in progress, or, rather, one of those orgiastic ceremonies which

passed for dancing during this pagan period. Just by the foot of the stairs they paused and surveyed the scene.

"Why," said Rita, "there is Quentin—glaring insanely, silly boy."

"Do you see whom he is with?" asked Sir Lucien.

"Mollie Gretna."

"But I mean the woman sitting down."

Rita stood on tiptoe, trying to obtain a view, and suddenly:

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "Mrs Sin!"

The dance at that moment concluding, they crossed the floor and joined the party. Mrs Sin greeted them with one of her rapid, mirthless smiles. She was wearing a gown noticeable, but not for quantity, even in that semi-draped assembly. Mollie Gretna giggled rapturously. But Gray's swiftly changing color betrayed a mood which he tried in vain to conceal by his manner. Having exchanged a few words with the new arrivals, he evidently realized that he could not trust himself to remain longer, and:

"Now I must be off," he said awkwardly. "I have an appointment—important business. Good night, everybody."

He turned away and hurried from the room. Rita flushed slightly and exchanged a glance with Sir Lucien. Mrs Sin, who had been watching the three intently, did not fail to perceive this glance. Mollie Gretna characteristically said a silly thing.

"Oh!" she cried. "I wonder whatever is the matter with him! He looks as though he had gone mad!"

"It is perhaps his heart," said Mrs Sin harshly, and she raised her bold dark eyes to Sir Lucien's face.

"Oh, please don't talk about hearts," cried Rita, willfully misunderstanding. "Monte has a weak heart, and it frightens me."

"So?" murmured Mrs Sin. "Poor fellow."

"I think a weak heart is most romantic," declared Mollie Gretna.

But Gray's behavior had cast a shadow upon the party which even Mollie's empty light-hearted chatter was powerless to dispel, and when, shortly after midnight, Sir Lucien drove Rita home to Prince's Gate, they were very silent throughout the journey. Just before the car reached the house:

"Where does Mrs Sin live?" asked Rita, although it was not of Mrs Sin that she had been thinking.

"In Limehouse, I believe," replied Sir Lucien; "at The House. But I fancy she has rooms somewhere in town also."

He stayed only a few minutes at Prince's Gate, and as the car returned along Piccadilly, Sir Lucien, glancing upward towards the windows of a tall block of chambers facing the Green Park, observed a light in one of them. Acting upon a sudden impulse, he raised the speaking-tube.

"Pull up, Fraser," he directed.

The chauffeur stopped the car and Sir Lucien alighted, glancing at the clock inside as he did so, and smiling at his own quixotic behavior. He entered an imposing doorway and rang one of the bells. There was an interval of two minutes or so, when the door opened and a man looked out.

"Is that you, Willis?" asked Pyne.

"Oh, I beg pardon, Sir Lucien. I didn't know you in the dark."

"Has Mr Gray retired yet?"

"Not yet. Will you please follow me, Sir Lucien. The stairway lights are off."

A few moments later Sir Lucien was shown into the apartment of Gray's which oddly combined the atmosphere of a gymnasium with that of a study. Gray, wearing a dressing-gown and having a pipe in his mouth, was standing up to receive his visitor, his face rather pale and the expression of his lips at variance with that in his eyes. But:

"Hello, Pyne," he said quietly. "Anything wrong—or have you just looked in for a smoke?"

Sir Lucien smiled a trifle sadly.

"I wanted a chat, Gray," he replied. "I'm leaving town tomorrow, or I should not have intruded at such an unearthly hour."

"No intrusion," muttered Gray; "try the armchair, no, the big one. It's more comfortable." He raised his voice: "Willis, bring some fluid!"

Sir Lucien sat down, and from the pocket of his dinner jacket took out a plain brown packet of cigarettes and selected one.

"Here," said Gray, "have a cigar!"

"No, thanks," replied Pyne. "I rarely smoke anything but these."

"Never seen that kind of packet before," declared Gray. "What brand are they?"

"No particular brand. They are imported from Buenos Ayres, I believe."

Willis having brought in a tray of refreshments and departed again, Sir Lucien came at once to the point.

"I really called, Gray," he said, "to clear up any misunderstanding there may be in regard to Rita Irvin."

Quentin Gray looked up suddenly when he heard Rita's name, and:

"What misunderstanding?" he asked.

"Regarding the nature of my friendship with her," answered Sir Lucien coolly. "Now, I am going to speak quite bluntly, Gray, because I like Rita and I respect her. I also like and respect Monte Irvin; and I don't want you, or anybody else, to think that Rita and I are, or ever have been, anything more than pals. I have known her long enough to have learned that she sails straight, and has always sailed straight. Now—listen, Gray, please. You embarrassed me tonight, old chap, and you embarrassed Rita. It was unnecessary." He paused, and then added slowly: "She is as sacred to me, Gray, as she is to you—and we are both friends of Monte Irvin."

For a moment Quentin Gray's fiery temper flickered up, as his heightened color showed, but the coolness of the older and cleverer man prevailed. Gray laughed, stood up, and held out his hand.

"You're right, Pyne!" he said. "But she's damn pretty!" He uttered a loud sigh. "If only she were not married!"

Sir Lucien gripped the outstretched hand, but his answering smile had much pathos in it.

"If only she were not, Gray," he echoed.

He took his departure shortly afterwards, absently leaving a brown packet of cigarettes upon the table. It was an accident. Yet there were few, when the truth respecting Sir Lucien Pyne became known, who did not believe it to have been a deliberate act, designed to lure Quentin Gray into the path of the poppy.

XXII. THE STRANGLE-HOLD

Less than a month later Rita was in a state of desperation again. Kazmah's prices had soared above anything that he had hitherto extorted. Her bank account, as usual, was greatly overdrawn, and creditors of all

kinds were beginning to press for payment. Then, crowning catastrophe, Monte Irvin, for the first time during their married life, began to take an interest in Rita's reckless expenditure. By a combination of adverse circumstances, she, the wife of one of the wealthiest aldermen of the City of London, awakened to the fact that literally she had no money.

She pawned as much of her jewellery as she could safely dispose of, and temporarily silenced the more threatening tradespeople; but Kazmah declined to give credit, and cheques had never been acceptable at the establishment in old Bond Street.

Rita feverishly renewed her old quest, seeking in all directions for some less extortionate purveyor. But none was to be found. The selfishness and secretiveness of the drug slave made it difficult for her to learn on what terms others obtained Kazmah's precious goods; but although his prices undoubtedly varied, she was convinced that no one of all his clients was so cruelly victimized as she.

Mollie Gretna endeavored to obtain an extra supply to help Rita, but Kazmah evidently saw through the device, and the endeavor proved a failure.

She demanded to see Kazmah, but Rashid, the Egyptian, blandly assured her that "the Sheikh-el-Kazmah" was away. She cast discretion to the winds and wrote to him, protesting that it was utterly impossible for her to raise so much ready money as he demanded, and begging him to grant her a small supply or to accept the letter as a promissory note to be redeemed in three months. No answer was received, but when Rita again called at old Bond Street, Rashid proposed one of the few compromises which the frenzied woman found herself unwilling to accept.

"The Sheikh-el-Kazmah say, my lady, your friend Mr Gray never come to him. If you bring him it will be all right."

Rita found herself stricken dumb by this cool proposal. The degradation which awaits the drug slave had never been more succinctly expounded to her. She was to employ Gray's foolish devotion for the commercial advantage of Kazmah. Of course Gray might any day become one of the three wealthiest peers in the realm. She divined the meaning of Kazmah's hitherto incomprehensible harshness (or believed that she did); she saw what was expected of her. "My God!" she whispered. "I have not come to that yet."

Rashid she knew to be incorruptible or powerless, and she turned away, trembling, and left the place, whose faint perfume of frankincense had latterly become hateful to her.

She was at this time bordering upon a state of collapse. Insomnia, which latterly had defied dangerously increased doses of veronal, was telling upon nerve and brain. Now, her head aching so that she often wondered how long she could retain sanity, she found herself deprived not only of cocaine, but also of malourea. Margaret Halley was her last hope, and to Margaret she hastened on the day before the tragedy which was destined to bring to light the sinister operations of the Kazmah group.

Although, perhaps mercifully, she was unaware of the fact, representatives of Spinker's Agency had been following her during the whole of the preceding fortnight. That Rita was in desperate trouble of some kind her husband had not failed to perceive, and her reticence had quite naturally led him to a certain conclusion. He had sought to win her confidence by every conceivable means and had failed. At last had come doubt—and the hateful interview with Spinker.

As Rita turned in at the doorway below Margaret's flat, then, Brisley was lighting a cigarette in the shelter of a porch nearly opposite, and Gunn was not far away.

Margaret immediately perceived that her friend's condition was alarming. But she realized that whatever the cause to which it might be due, it gave her the opportunity for which she had been waiting. She wrote a prescription containing one grain of cocaine, but declined firmly to issue others unless Rita authorized her, in writing, to undertake a cure of the drug habit.

Rita's disjointed statements pointed to a conspiracy of some kind on the part of those who had been supplying her with drugs, but Margaret knew from experience that to exhibit curiosity in regard to the matter would be merely to provoke evasions.

A hopeless day and a pain-racked, sleepless night found Kazmah's unhappy victim in the mood for any measure, however desperate, which should promise even temporary relief. Monte Irvin went out very early, and at about eleven o'clock Rita rang up Kazmah's, but only to be informed by Rashid, who replied, that Kazmah was still away. "This evening he tell me that he see your friend if he come, my lady." As if the Fates sought to test

her endurance to the utmost, Quentin Gray called shortly afterwards and invited her to dine with him and go to a theatre that evening.

For five age-long seconds Rita hesitated. If no plan offered itself by nightfall she knew that her last scruple would be conquered. "After all," whispered a voice within her brain, "Quentin is a man. Even if I took him to Kazmah's and he was in some way induced to try opium, or even cocaine, he would probably never become addicted to drug-taking. But I should have done my part—"

"Very well, Quentin," she heard herself saying aloud. "Will you call for me?"

But when he had gone Rita sat for more than half an hour, quite still, her hands clenched and her face a tragic mask. (Gunn, of Spinker's Agency, reported telephonically to Monte Irvin in the City that the Hon. Quentin Gray had called and had remained about twenty-five minutes; that he had proceeded to the Prince's Restaurant, and from there to Mudie's, where he had booked a box at the Gaiety Theatre.)

Towards the fall of dusk the more dreadful symptoms which attend upon a sudden cessation of the use of cocaine by a victim of cocainophagia began to assert themselves again. Rita searched wildly in the lining of her jewel-case to discover if even a milligram of the drug had by chance fallen there from the little gold box. But the quest was in vain.

As a final resort she determined to go to Margaret Halley again.

She hurried to Dover Street, and her last hope was shattered. Margaret was out, and Janet had no idea when she was likely to return. Rita had much ado to prevent herself from bursting into tears. She scribbled a few lines, without quite knowing what she was writing, sealed the paper in an envelope, and left it on Margaret's table.

Of returning to Prince's Gate and dressing for the evening she had only a hazy impression. The hammer-beats in her head were depriving her of reasoning power, and she felt cold, numbed, although a big fire blazed in her room. Then as she sat before her mirror, drearily wondering if her face really looked as drawn and haggard as the image in the glass, or if definite delusions were beginning, Nina came in and spoke to her. Some moments elapsed before Rita could grasp the meaning of the girl's words.

"Sir Lucien Pyne has rung up, Madam, and wishes to speak to you."

Sir Lucien! Sir Lucien had come back? Rita experienced a swift return of feverish energy. Half dressed as she was, and without pausing to take a wrap, she ran out to the telephone.

Never had a man's voice sounded so sweet as that of Sir Lucien when he spoke across the wires. He was at Albemarle Street, and Rita, wasting no time in explanations, begged him to await her there. In another ten minutes she had completed her toilette and had sent Nina to 'phone for a cab. (One of the minor details of his wife's behavior which latterly had aroused Irvin's distrust was her frequent employment of public vehicles in preference to either of the cars.)

Quentin Gray she had quite forgotten, until, as she was about to leave:

"Is there any message for Mr Gray, Madam?" inquired Nina naively.

"Oh!" cried Rita. "Of course! Quick! Give me some paper and a pencil."

She wrote a hasty note, merely asking Gray to proceed to the restaurant, where she promised to join him, left it in charge of the maid, and hurried off to Albemarle Street.

Mareno, the silent, yellow-faced servant who had driven the car on the night of Rita's first visit to Limehouse, admitted her. He showed her immediately into the lofty study, where Sir Lucien awaited.

"Oh, Lucy—Lucy!" she cried, almost before the door had closed behind Mareno. "I am desperate—desperate!"

Sir Lucien placed a chair for her. His face looked very drawn and grim. But Rita was in too highly strung a condition to observe this fact, or indeed to observe anything.

"Tell me," he said gently.

And in a torrent of disconnected, barely coherent language, the tortured woman told him of Kazmah's attempt to force her to lure Quentin Gray into the drug coterie. Sir Lucien stood behind her chair, and the icy reserve which habitually rendered his face an impenetrable mask deserted him as the story of Rita's treatment at the hands of the Egyptian of Bond Street was unfolded in all its sordid hideousness. Rita's soft, musical voice, for which of old she had been famous, shook and wavered; her pose, her twitching gestures, all told of a nervous agony bordering on prostration or worse. Finally:

"He dare not refuse you!" she cried. "Ring him up and insist upon him seeing me tonight!"

"I will see him, Rita."

She turned to him, wild-eyed.

"You shall not! You shall not!" she said. "I am going to speak to that man face to face, and if he is human he must listen to me. Oh! I have realized the hold he has upon me, Lucy! I know what it means, this disappearance of all the others who used to sell what Kazmah sells. If I am to suffer, he shall not escape! I swear it. Either he listens to me tonight or I go straight to the police!"

"Be calm, little girl," whispered Sir Lucien, and he laid his hand upon her shoulder.

But she leapt up, her pupils suddenly dilating and her delicate nostrils twitching in a manner which unmistakably pointed to the impossibility of thwarting her if sanity were to be retained.

"Ring him up, Lucy," she repeated in a low voice. "He is there. Now that I have someone behind me I see my way at last!"

"There may, nevertheless, be a better way," said Sir Lucien; but he added quickly: "Very well, dear, I will do as you wish. I have a little cocaine, which I will give you."

He went out to the telephone, carefully closing the study door.

That he had counted upon the influence of the drug to reduce Rita to a more reasonable frame of mind was undoubtedly the fact, for presently as they proceeded on foot towards old Bond Street he reverted to something like his old ironical manner. But Rita's determination was curiously fixed. Unmoved by every kind of appeal, she proceeded to the appointment which Sir Lucien had made—ignorant of that which Fate held in store for her—and Sir Lucien, also humanly blind, walked on to meet his death.

PART THIRD

THE MAN FROM WHITEHALL

XXIII. CHIEF INSPECTOR KERRY RESIGNS

"Come in," said the Assistant Commissioner. The door opened and Chief Inspector Kerry entered. His face was as fresh-looking, his attire as spruce and his eyes were as bright, as though he had slept well, enjoyed his bath and partaken of an excellent breakfast. Whereas he had not been to bed during the preceding twenty-four hours, had breakfasted upon biscuits and coffee, and had spent the night and early morning in ceaseless toil. Nevertheless he had found time to visit a hairdressing saloon, for he prided himself upon the nicety of his personal appearance.

He laid his hat, cane and overall upon a chair, and from a pocket of his reefer jacket took out a big notebook.

"Good morning, sir," he said.

"Good morning, Chief Inspector," replied the Assistant Commissioner. "Pray be seated. No doubt"—he suppressed a weary sigh—"you have a long report to make. I observe that some of the papers have the news of Sir Lucien Pyne's death."

Chief Inspector Kerry smiled savagely.

"Twenty pressmen are sitting downstairs," he said "waiting for particulars. One of them got into my room." He opened his notebook. "He didn't stay long."

The Assistant Commissioner gazed wearily at his blotting-pad, striking imaginary chords upon the table-edge with his large widely extended fingers. He cleared his throat.

"Er—Chief Inspector," he said, "I fully recognize the difficulties which—you follow me? But the Press is the Press. Neither you nor I could hope to battle against such an institution even if we desired to do so. Where active resistance is useless, a little tact—you quite understand?"

"Quite, sir. Rely upon me," replied Kerry. "But I didn't mean to open my mouth until I had reported to you. Now, sir, here is a precis of evidence, nearly complete, written out clearly by Sergeant Coombes. You would probably prefer to read it?"

"Yes, yes, I will read it. But has Sergeant Coombes been on duty all night?"

"He has, sir, and so have I. Sergeant Coombes went home an hour ago."

"Ah," murmured the Assistant Commissioner

He took the notebook from Kerry, and resting his head upon his hand began to read. Kerry sat very upright in his chair, chewing slowly and watching the profile of the reader with his unwavering steel-blue eyes. The reading was twice punctuated by telephone messages, but the Assistant Commissioner apparently possessed the Napoleonic faculty of doing two things at once, for his gaze travelled uninterruptedly along the lines of the report throughout the time that he issued telephonic instructions.

When he had arrived at the final page of Coombes' neat, schoolboy writing, he did not look up for a minute or more, continuing to rest his head in the palm of his hand. Then:

"So far you have not succeeded in establishing the identity of the missing man, Kazmah?" he said.

"Not so far, sir," replied Kerry, enunciating the words with characteristic swift precision, each syllable distinct as the rap of a typewriter. "Inspector Whiteleaf, of Vine Street, has questioned all constables in the Piccadilly area, and we have seen members of the staffs of many shops and offices in the neighborhood, but no one is familiar with the appearance of the missing man."

"Ah—now, the Egyptian servant?"

Inspector Kerry moved his shoulders restlessly.

"Rashid is his name. Many of the people in the neighborhood knew him by sight, and at five o'clock this morning one of my assistants had the good luck to find out, from an Arab coffee-house keeper named Abdulla, where Rashid lived. He paid a visit to the place—it's off the West India Dock Road—half an hour later. But Rashid had gone. I regret to report that all traces of him have been lost."

"Ah—considering this circumstance side by side with the facts that no scrap of evidence has come to light in the Kazmah premises and that the late Sir Lucien's private books and papers cannot be found, what do you deduce, Chief Inspector?"

"My report indicates what I deduce, sir! An accomplice of Kazmah's must have been in Sir Lucien's household! Kazmah and Mrs Irvin can only have left the premises by going up to the roof and across the leads to Sir Lucien's flat in Albemarle Street. I shall charge the man Juan Mareno."

"What has he to say?" murmured the Assistant Commissioner, absently turning over the pages of the notebook. "Ah, yes. 'Claims to be a citizen of

the United States but has produced no papers. Engaged by Sir Lucien Pyne in San Francisco. Professes to have no evidence to offer. Admitted Mrs Monte Irvin to Sir Lucien's flat on night of murder. Sir Lucien and Mrs Irvin went out together shortly afterwards, and Sir Lucien ordered him (Mareno) to go for the car to garage in South Audley Street and drive to club, where Sir Lucien proposed to dine. Mareno claims to have followed instructions. After waiting near club for an hour, learned from hall porter that Sir Lucien had not been there that evening. Drove car back to garage and returned to Albemarle Street shortly after eight o'clock.' H'm. Is this confirmed in any way?"

Kerry's teeth snapped together viciously.

"Up to a point it is, sir. The club porter remembers Mareno inquiring about Sir Lucien, and the people at the garage testify that he took out the car and returned it as stated."

"No one has come forward who actually saw him waiting outside the club?"

"No one. But unfortunately it was a dark, misty night, and cars waiting for club members stand in a narrow side turning. Mareno is a surly brute, and he might have waited an hour without speaking to a soul. Unless another chauffeur happened to notice and recognize the car nobody would be any wiser."

The Assistant Commissioner sighed, glancing up for the first time.

"You don't think he waited outside the club at all?" he said.

"I don't, sir!" rapped Kerry.

The Assistant Commissioner rested his head upon his hand again.

"It doesn't seem to be germane to your case, Chief Inspector, in any event. There is no question of an alibi. Sir Lucien's wrist-watch was broken at seven-fifteen—evidently at the time of his death; and this man Mareno does not claim to have left the flat until after that hour."

"I know it, sir," said Kerry. "He took out the car at half-past seven. What I want to know is where he went to!"

The Assistant Commissioner glanced rapidly into the speaker's fierce eyes.

"From what you have gathered respecting the appearance of Kazmah, does it seem possible that Mareno may be Kazmah?"

"It does not, sir. Kazmah has been described to me, at first hand and at second hand. All descriptions tally in one respect: Kazmah has remarkably large eyes. In Miss Halley's evidence you will note that she refers to them as 'larger than any human eyes I have ever seen.' Now, Mareno has eyes like a pig!"

"Then I take it you are charging him as accessory?"

"Exactly, sir. Somebody got Kazmah and Mrs Irvin away, and it can only have been Mareno. Sir Lucien had no other resident servant; he was a man who lived almost entirely at restaurants and clubs. Again, somebody cleaned up his papers, and it was somebody who knew where to look for them."

"Quite so—quite so," murmured the Assistant Commissioner. "Of course, we shall learn today something of his affairs from his banker. He must have banked somewhere. But surely, Chief Inspector, there is a safe or private bureau in his flat?"

"There is, sir," said Kerry grimly; "a safe. I had it opened at six o'clock this morning. It had been hastily cleaned out; not a doubt of it. I expect Sir Lucien carried the keys on his person. You will remember, sir, that his pockets had been emptied?"

"H'm," mused the Assistant Commissioner. "This Cubanis Cigarette Company, Chief Inspector?"

"Dummy goods!" rapped Kerry. "A blind. Just a back entrance to Kazmah's office. Premises were leased on behalf of an agent. This agent—a reputable man of business—paid the rent quarterly. I've seen him."

"And who was his client?" asked the Assistant Commissioner, displaying a faint trace of interest.

"A certain Mr Isaacs!"

"Who can be traced?"

"Who can't be traced!"

"His checks?"

Chief Inspector Kerry smiled, so that his large white teeth gleamed savagely.

"Mr Isaacs represented himself as a dealer in Covent Garden who was leasing the office for a lady friend, and who desired, for domestic reasons, to cover his tracks. As ready money in large amounts changes hands in the

market, Mr Isaacs paid ready money to the agent. Beyond doubt the real source of the ready money was Kazmah's."

"But his address?"

"A hotel in Covent Garden."

"Where he lives?"

"Where he is known to the booking-clerk, a girl who allowed him to have letters addressed there. A man of smoke, sir, acting on behalf of someone in the background."

"Ah! and these Bond Street premises have been occupied by Kazmah for the past eight years?"

"So I am told. I have yet to see representatives of the landlord. I may add that Sir Lucien Pyne had lived in Albemarle Street for about the same time."

Wearily raising his head:

"The point is certainly significant," said the Assistant Commissioner. "Now we come to the drug traffic, Chief Inspector. You have found no trace of drugs on the premises?"

"Not a grain, sir!"

"In the office of the cigarette firm?"

"No."

"By the way, was there no staff attached to the latter concern?"

Kerry chewed viciously.

"No business of any kind seems to have been done there," he replied. "An office-boy employed by the solicitor on the same floor as Kazmah has seen a man and also a woman, go up to the third floor on several occasions, and he seems to think they went to the Cubanis office. But he's not sure, and he can give no useful description of the parties, anyway. Nobody in the building has ever seen the door open before this morning."

The Assistant Commissioner sighed yet more wearily.

"Apart from the suspicions of Miss Margaret Halley, you have no sound basis for supposing that Kazmah dealt in prohibited drugs?" he inquired.

"The evidence of Miss Halley, the letter left for her by Mrs Irvin, and the fact that Mrs Irvin said, in the presence of Mr Quentin Gray, that she had 'a particular reason' for seeing Kazmah, point to it unmistakably, sir. Then, I have seen Mrs Irvin's maid. (Mr Monte Irvin is still too unwell to be interrogated.) The girl was very frightened, but she admitted outright that she had been in the habit of going regularly to Kazmah for certain

perfumes. She wouldn't admit that she knew the flasks contained cocaine or veronal, but she did admit that her mistress had been addicted to the drug habit for several years. It began when she was on the stage."

"Ah, yes," murmured the Assistant Commissioner; "she was Rita Dresden, was she not—'The Maid of the Masque' A very pretty and talented actress. A pity—a great pity. So the girl, characteristically, is trying to save herself?"

"She is," said Kerry grimly. "But it cuts no ice. There is another point. After this report was made out, a message reached me from Miss Halley, as a result of which I visited Mr Quentin Gray early this morning."

"Dear, dear," sighed the Assistant Commissioner, "your intense zeal and activity are admirable, Chief Inspector, but appalling. And what did you learn?"

From an inside pocket Chief Inspector Kerry took out a plain brown paper packet containing several cigarettes and laid the packet on the table.

"I got these, sir," he said grimly. "They were left at Mr Gray's some weeks ago by the late Sir Lucien. They are doped."

The Assistant Commissioner, his head resting upon his hand, gazed abstractedly at the packet. "If only you could trace the source of supply," he murmured.

"That brings me to my last point, sir. From Mrs Irvin's maid I learned that her mistress was acquainted with a certain Mrs Sin."

"Mrs Sin? Incredible name."

"She's a woman reputed to be married to a Chinaman. Inspector Whiteleaf, of Vine Street, knows her by sight as one of the night-club birds —a sort of mysterious fungus, sir, flowering in the dark and fattening on gilded fools. Unless I'm greatly mistaken, Mrs Sin is the link between the doped cigarettes and the missing Kazmah."

"Does anyone know where she lives?"

"Lots of 'em know!" snapped Kerry. "But it's making them speak."

"To whom do you more particularly refer, Chief Inspector?"

"To the moneyed asses and the brainless women belonging to a certain West End set, sir," said Kerry savagely. "They go in for every monstrosity from Buenos Ayres, Port Said and Pekin. They get up dances that would make a wooden horse blush. They eat hashish and they smoke opium. They

inject morphine, and they would have their hair dyed blue if they heard it was 'being done.'"

"Ah," sighed the Assistant Commissioner, "a very delicate and complex case, Chief Inspector. The agony of mind which Mr Irvin must be suffering is too horrible for one to contemplate. An admirable man, too; honorable and generous. I can conceive no theory to account for the disappearance of Mrs Irvin other than that she was a party to the murder."

"No, sir," said Kerry guardedly. "But we have the dope clue to work on. That the Chinese receive stuff in the East End and that it's sold in the West End every constable in the force is well aware. Leman Street is getting busy, and every shady case in the Piccadilly area will be beaten up within the next twenty-four hours, too. It's purely departmental, sir, from now onwards, and merely a question of time. Therefore I don't doubt the issue."

Kerry paused, cleared his throat, and produced a foolscap envelope which he laid upon the table before the Assistant Commissioner.

"With very deep regret, sir," he said, "after a long and agreeable association with the Criminal Investigation Department, I have to tender you this."

The Assistant Commissioner took up the envelope and stared at it vaguely.

"Ah, yes, Chief Inspector," he murmured. "Perhaps I fail entirely to follow you; I am somewhat over-worked, as you know. What does this envelope contain?"

"My resignation, sir," replied Kerry.

XXIV. TO INTRODUCE 719

Some moments of silence followed. Sounds of traffic from the Embankment penetrated dimly to the room of the Assistant Commissioner; ringing of tram bells and that vague sustained noise which is created by the whirring of countless wheels along hard pavements. Finally:

"You have selected a curious moment to retire, Chief Inspector," said the Assistant Commissioner. "Your prospects were never better. No doubt you have considered the question of your pension?"

"I know what I'm giving up, sir," replied Kerry.

The Assistant Commissioner slowly revolved in his chair and gazed sadly at the speaker. Chief Inspector Kerry met his glance with that fearless, unflinching stare which lent him so formidable an appearance.

"You might care to favor me with some explanation which I can lay before the Chief Commissioner?"

Kerry snapped his white teeth together viciously.

"May I take it, sir, that you accept my resignation?"

"Certainly not. I will place it before the responsible authority. I can do no more."

"Without disrespect, sir, I want to speak to you as man to man. As a private citizen I could do it. As your subordinate I can't."

The Assistant Commissioner sighed, stroking his neatly brushed hair with one large hand.

"Equally without disrespect, Chief Inspector," he murmured, "it is news for me to learn that you have ever refrained from speaking your mind either in my presence or in the presence of any man."

Kerry smiled, unable wholly to conceal a sense of gratified vanity.

"Well, sir," he said, "you have my resignation before you, and I'm prepared to abide by the consequences. What I want to say is this: I'm a man that has worked hard all his life to earn the respect and the trust of his employers. I am supposed to be Chief Inspector of this department, and as Chief Inspector I'll kow-tow to nothing on two legs once I've been put in charge of a case. I work right in the sunshine. There's no grafting about me. I draw my salary every week, and any man that says I earn sixpence in the dark is at liberty to walk right in here and deposit his funeral expenses. If I'm supposed to be under a cloud—there's my reply. But I demand a public inquiry."

At ever increasing speed, succinctly, viciously he rapped out the words. His red face grew more red, and his steel-blue eyes more fierce. The Assistant Commissioner exhibited bewilderment. As the high tones ceased:

"Really, Chief Inspector," he said, "you pain and surprise me. I do not profess to be ignorant of the cause of your—annoyance. But perhaps if I acquaint you with the facts of my own position in the matter you will be open to reconsider your decision."

Kerry cleared his throat loudly.

"I won't work in the dark, sir," he declared truculently. "I'd rather be a pavement artist and my own master than Chief Inspector with an unknown spy following me about."

"Quite so—quite so." The Assistant Commissioner was wonderfully patient. "Very well, Chief Inspector. It cannot enhance my personal dignity to admit the fact, but I'm nearly as much in the dark as yourself."

"What's that, sir?" Kerry sat bolt upright, staring at the speaker.

"At a late hour last night the Secretary of State communicated in person with the Chief Commissioner—at the latter's town residence. He instructed him to offer every facility to a newly appointed agent of the Home office who was empowered to conduct an official inquiry into the drug traffic. As a result Vine Street was advised that the Home office investigator would proceed at once to Kazmah's premises, and from thence wherever available clues might lead him. For some reason which has not yet been explained to me, this investigator chooses to preserve a strict anonymity."

Traces of irritation became perceptible in the weary voice. Kerry staring, in silence, the Assistant Commissioner continued:

"I have been advised that this nameless agent is in a position to establish his bona fides at any time, as he bears a number of these cards. You see, Chief Inspector, I am frank with you."

From a table drawer the Assistant Commissioner took a visiting-card, which he handed to Kerry. The latter stared at it as one stares at a rare specimen. It was the card of Lord Wrexborough, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department, and in the cramped caligraphy of his lordship it bore a brief note, initialled, thus:

Lord Wrexborough

Great Cumberland Place, V. 1

"To introduce 719. W."

Some moments of silence followed; then:

"Seven-one-nine," said Kerry in a high, strained voice. "Why seven-one-nine? And why all this hocus-pocus? Am I to understand, sir, that not only myself but all the Criminal Investigation Department is under a cloud?"

The Assistant Commissioner stroked his hair.

"You are to understand, Chief Inspector, that for the first time throughout my period of office I find myself out of touch with the Chief Commissioner. It is not departmental for me to say so, but I believe the Chief

Commissioner finds himself similarly out of touch with the Secretary of State. Apparently very powerful influences are at work, and the line of conduct taken up by the Home office suggests to my mind that collusion between the receivers and distributors of drugs and the police is suspected by someone. That being so, possibly out of a sense of fairness to all officially concerned, the committee which I understand has been appointed to inquire into the traffic has decided to treat us all alike, from myself down to the rawest constable. It's highly irritating and preposterous, of course, but I cannot disguise from you or from myself that we are on trial, Chief Inspector!"

Kerry stood up and slowly moved his square shoulders in the manner of an athlete about to attempt a feat of weight-lifting. From the Assistant Commissioner's table he took the envelope which contained his resignation, and tore it into several portions. These he deposited in a waste-paper basket.

"That's that!" he said. "I am very deeply indebted to you, sir. I know now what to tell the Press."

The Assistant Commissioner glanced up.

"Not a word about 719," he said, "of course, you understand this?"

"If we don't exist as far as 719 is concerned, sir," said Kerry in his most snappy tones, "719 means nothing to me!"

"Quite so—quite so. Of course, I may be wrong in the motives which I ascribe to this Whitehall agent, but misunderstanding is certain to arise out of a system of such deliberate mystification, which can only be compared to that employed by the Russian police under the Tsars."

Half an hour later Chief Inspector Kerry came out of New Scotland Yard, and, walking down on to the Embankment, boarded a Norwood tramcar. The weather remained damp and gloomy, but upon the red face of Chief Inspector Kerry, as he mounted to the upper deck of the car, rested an expression which might have been described as one of cheery truculence. Where other passengers, coat collars upturned, gazed gloomily from the windows at the yellow murk overhanging the river, Kerry looked briskly about him, smiling pleasurably.

He was homeward bound, and when he presently alighted and went swinging along Spenser Road towards his house, he was still smiling. He regarded the case as having developed into a competition between himself and the man appointed by Whitehall. And it was just such a position,

disconcerting to one of less aggressive temperament, which stimulated Chief Inspector Kerry and put him in high good humor.

Mrs Kerry, arrayed in a serviceable rain-coat, and wearing a plain felt hat, was standing by the dining-room door as Kerry entered. She had a basket on her arm. "I was waiting for ye, Dan," she said simply.

He kissed her affectionately, put his arm about her waist, and the two entered the cosy little room. By no ordinary human means was it possible that Mary Kerry should have known that her husband would come home at that time, but he was so used to her prescience in this respect that he offered no comment. She "kenned" his approach always, and at times when his life had been in danger—and these were not of infrequent occurrence—Mary Kerry, if sleeping, had awakened, trembling, though the scene of peril were a hundred miles away, and if awake had blanched and known a deadly sudden fear.

"Ye'll be goin' to bed?" she asked.

"For three hours, Mary. Don't fail to rouse me if I oversleep."

"Is it clear to ye yet?"

"Nearly clear. The dark thing you saw behind it all, Mary, was dope! Kazmah's is a secret drug-syndicate. They've appointed a Home office agent, and he's working independently of us, but . . ."

His teeth came together with a snap.

"Oh, Dan," said his wife, "it's a race? Drugs? A Home office agent? Dan, they think the Force is in it?"

"They do!" rapped Kerry. "I'm for Leman Street in three hours. If there's double-dealing behind it, then the mugs are in the East End, and it's folly, not knavery, I'm looking for. It's a race, Mary, and the credit of the Service is at stake! No, my dear, I'll have a snack when I wake. You're going shopping?"

"I am, Dan. I'd ha' started, but I wanted to see ye when ye came hame. If ye've only three hours go straight up the now. I'll ha' something hot a' ready when ye waken."

Ten minutes later Kerry was in bed, his short clay pipe between his teeth, and The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius in his hand. Such was his customary sleeping-draught, and it had never been known to fail. Half a pipe of Irish twist and three pages of the sad imperial author invariably plunged Chief Inspector Kerry into healthy slumber.

XXV. NIGHT-LIFE OF SOHO

It was close upon midnight when Detective-Sergeant Coombes appeared in a certain narrow West End thoroughfare, which was lined with taxicabs and private cars. He wore a dark overcoat and a tweed cap, and although his chin was buried in the genial folds of a woollen comforter, and his cap was pulled down over his eyes, his sly smile could easily be detected even in the dim light afforded by the car lamps. He seemed to have business of a mysterious nature among the cabmen; for with each of them in turn he conducted a brief conversation, passing unobtrusively from cab to cab, and making certain entries in a notebook. Finally he disappeared. No one actually saw him go, and no one had actually seen him arrive. At one moment, however, he was there; in the next he was gone.

Five minutes later Chief Inspector Kerry entered the street. His dark overcoat and white silk muffler concealed a spruce dress suit, a fact betrayed by black, braided trousers, unusually tight-fitting, and boots which almost glittered. He carried the silver-headed malacca cane, and had retained his narrow-brimmed howler at its customary jaunty angle.

Passing the lines of waiting vehicles, he walked into the entrance of a popular night-club which faced the narrow street. On a lounge immediately inside the doorway a heated young man was sitting fanning his dancing partner and gazing into her weakly pretty face in vacuous adoration.

Kerry paused for a moment, staring at the pair. The man returned his stare, looking him up and down in a manner meant to be contemptuous. Kerry's fierce, intolerant gaze became transferred to the face and then the figure of the woman. He tilted his hat further forward and turned aside. The woman's glance followed him, to the marked disgust of her companion.

"Oh," she whispered, "what a delightfully savage man! He looks positively uncivilized. I have no doubt he drags women about by their hair. I do hope he's a member!"

Mollie Gretna spoke loudly enough for Kerry to hear her, but unmoved by her admiration he stepped up to the reception office. He was in high good humor. He had spent the afternoon agreeably, interviewing certain

officials charged with policing the East End of London, and had succeeded, to quote his own language, "in getting a gale up." Despite the coldness of the weather, he had left two inspectors and a speechlessly indignant superintendent bathed in perspiration.

"Are you a member, sir?" inquired the girl behind the desk.

Kerry smiled genially. A newsboy thrust open the swing-door, yelling: "Bond Street murder! A fresh development. Late speshul!"

"Oh!" cried Mollie Gretna to her companion, "get me a paper. Be quick! I am so excited!"

Kerry took up a pen, and in large bold hand-writing inscribed the following across two pages of the visitors' book:

"Chief Inspector Kerry. Criminal Investigation Department."

He laid a card on the open book, and, thrusting his cane under his arm, walked to the head of the stairs.

"Cloak-room on the right, sir," said an attendant.

Kerry paused, glancing over his shoulder and chewing audibly. Then he settled his hat more firmly upon his red head and descended the stairs. The attendant went to inspect the visitors' book, but Mollie Gretna was at the desk before him, and:

"Oh, Bill!" she cried to her annoyed cavalier, "it's Inspector Kerry— who is in charge of poor Lucy's murder! Oh, Bill! this is lovely! Something is going to happen! Do come down!"

Followed by the obedient but reluctant "Bill," Mollie ran downstairs, and almost into the arms of a tall dark girl, who, carrying a purple opera cloak, was coming up.

"You're not going yet, Dickey?" said Mollie, throwing her arm around the other's waist.

"Ssh!" whispered "Dickey." "Inspector Kerry is here! You don't want to be called as a witness at nasty inquests and things, do you?"

"Good heavens, my dear, no! But why should I be?"

"Why should any of us? But don't you see they are looking for the people who used to go to Kazmah's? It's in the paper tonight. We shall all be served with subpoenas. I'm off!"

Escaping from Mollie's embrace, the tall girl ran up the stairs, kissing her hand to Bill as she passed. Mollie hesitated, looking all about the crowded room for Chief Inspector Kerry. Presently she saw him, standing nearly

opposite the stairway, his intolerant blue eyes turning right and left, so that the fierce glance seemed to miss nothing and no one in the room. Hands thrust in his overcoat pockets and his cane held under his arm, he inspected the place and its occupants as a very aggressive country cousin might inspect the monkey-house at the Zoo. To Mollie's intense disappointment he persistently avoided looking in her direction.

Although a popular dance was on the point of commencing, several visitors had suddenly determined to leave. Kerry pretended to be ignorant of the sensation which his appearance had created, passing slowly along the room and submitting group after group to deliberate scrutiny; but as news flies through an Eastern bazaar the name of the celebrated detective, whose association with London's latest crime was mentioned by every evening paper in the kingdom, sped now on magic wings, so that there was a muted charivari out of which, in every key from bass to soprano, arose ever and anon the words "Chief Inspector Kerry."

"It's perfectly ridiculous but characteristically English," drawled one young man, standing beside Mollie Gretna, "to send out a bally red-headed policeman in preposterous glad-rags to look for a clever criminal. Kerry is well known to all the crooks, and nobody could mistake him. Damn silly—damn silly!"

As "damn silly" Kerry's open scrutiny of the members and visitors must have appeared to others, but it was a deliberate policy very popular with the Chief Inspector, and termed by him "beating." Possessed of an undisguisable personality, Kerry had found a way of employing his natural physical peculiarities to his professional advantage. Where other investigators worked in the dark, secretly, Red Kerry sought the limelight—at the right time. That every hour lost in getting on the track of the mysterious Kazmah was a point gained by the equally mysterious man from Whitehall he felt assured, and although the elaborate but hidden mechanism of New Scotland Yard was at work seeking out the patrons of the Bond Street drug-shop, Kerry was indisposed to await the result.

He had been in the night club only about ten minutes, but during those ten minutes fully a dozen people had more or less hurriedly departed. Because of the arrangements already made by Sergeant Coombes, the addresses of many of these departing visitors would be in Kerry's possession ere the night was much older. And why should they have fled,

incontinent, if not for the reason that they feared to become involved in the Kazmah affair? All the cabmen had been warned, and those fugitives who had private cars would be followed.

It was a curious scene which Kerry surveyed, a scene to have interested philosopher and politician alike. For here were representatives of every stratum of society, although some of those standing for the lower strata were suitably disguised. The peerage was well represented, so was Judah; there were women entitled to wear coronets dancing with men entitled to wear the broad arrow, and men whose forefathers had signed Magna Charta dancing with chorus girls from the revues and musical comedies.

Waiting until the dance was fully in progress, Inspector Kerry walked slowly around the room in the direction of the stair. Parties seated at tables were treated each to an intolerant stare, alcoves were inspected, and more than one waiter meeting the gaze of the steely eyes, felt a prickling of conscience and recalled past peccadilloes.

Bill had claimed Mollie Gretna for the dance, but:

"No, Bill," she had replied, watching Kerry as if enthralled; "I don't want to dance. I am watching Chief Inspector Kerry."

"That's evident," complained the young man. "Perhaps you would like to spend the rest of the night in Bow Street?"

"Oh," whispered Mollie, "I should love it! I have never been arrested, but if ever I am I hope it will be by Chief Inspector Kerry. I am positive he would haul me away in handcuffs!"

When Kerry came to the foot of the stairs, Mollie quite deliberately got in his way, murmured an apology, and gave him a sidelong gaze through lowered lashes, which was more eloquent than any thesis. He smiled with fierce geniality, looked her up and down, and proceeded to mount the stairs, with never a backward glance.

His genius for criminal investigation possessed definite limitations. He could not perhaps have been expected in tactics so completely opposed to those which he had anticipated to recognize the presence of a valuable witness. Student of human nature though undoubtedly he was, he had not solved the mystery of that outstanding exception which seems to be involved in every rule.

Thus, a fellow with a low forehead and a weakly receding chin, Kerry classified as a dullard, a witling, unaware that if the brow were but low

enough and the chin virtually absent altogether he might stand in the presence of a second Daniel. Physiognomy is a subtle science, and the exceptions to its rules are often of a sensational character. In the same way Kerry looked for evasion, and, where possible, flight, on the part of one possessing a guilty conscience. Mollie Gretna was a phenomenal exception to a rule otherwise sound. And even one familiar with criminal psychology might be forgiven for failing to detect guilt in a woman anxious to make the acquaintance of a prominent member of the Criminal Investigation Department.

Pausing for a moment in the entrance of the club, and chewing reflectively, Kerry swung open the door and walked out into the street. He had one more cover to "beat," and he set off briskly, plunging into the mazes of Soho crossing Wardour Street into old Compton Street, and proceeding thence in the direction of Shaftesbury Avenue. Turning to the right on entering the narrow thoroughfare for which he was bound, he stopped and whistled softly. He stood in the entrance to a court; and from further up the court came an answering whistle.

Kerry came out of the court again, and proceeded some twenty paces along the street to a restaurant. The windows showed no light, but the door remained open, and Kerry entered without hesitation, crossed a darkened room and found himself in a passage where a man was seated in a little apartment like that of a stage-door keeper. He stood up, on hearing Kerry's tread, peering out at the newcomer.

"The restaurant is closed, sir."

"Tell me a better one," rapped Kerry. "I want to go upstairs."

"Your card, sir."

Kerry revealed his teeth in a savage smile and tossed his card on to the desk before the concierge. He passed on, mounting the stairs at the end of the passage. Dimly a bell rang; and on the first landing Kerry met a heavily built foreign gentleman, who bowed.

"My dear Chief Inspector," he said gutturally, "what is this, please? I trust nothing is wrong, eh?"

"Nothing," replied Kerry. "I just want to look round."

"A few friends," explained the suave alien, rubbing his hands together and still bowing, "remain playing dominoes with me."

"Very good," rapped Kerry. "Well, if you think we have given them time to hide the 'wheel' we'll go in. Oh, don't explain. I'm not worrying about sticklebacks tonight. I'm out for salmon."

He opened a door on the left of the landing and entered a large room which offered evidence of having been hastily evacuated by a considerable company. A red and white figured cloth of a type much used in Continental cafes had been spread upon a long table, and three foreigners, two men and an elderly woman, were bending over a row of dominoes set upon one corner of the table. Apparently the men were playing and the woman was watching. But there was a dense cloud of cigar smoke in the room, and mingled with its pungency were sweeter scents. A number of empty champagne bottles stood upon a sideboard and an elegant silk theatre-bag lay on a chair.

"H'm," said Kerry, glaring fiercely from the bottles to the players, who covertly were watching him. "How you two smarts can tell a domino from a door-knocker after cracking a dozen magnums gets me guessing."

He took up the scented bag and gravely handed it to the old woman.

"You have mislaid your bag, madam," he said. "But, fortunately, I noticed it as I came in."

He turned the glance of his fierce eyes upon the man who had met him on the landing, and who had followed him into the room.

"Third floor, von Hindenburg," he rapped. "Don't argue. Lead the way."

For one dangerous moment the man's brow lowered and his heavy face grew blackly menacing. He exchanged a swift look with his friends seated at the disguised roulette table. Kerry's jaw muscles protruded enormously.

"Give me another answer like that," he said in a tone of cold ferocity, "and I'll kick you from here to Paradise."

"No offense—no offense," muttered the man, quailing before the savagery of the formidable Chief Inspector. "You come this way, please. Some ladies call upon me this evening, and I do not want to frighten them."

"No," said Kerry, "you wouldn't, naturally." He stood aside as a door at the further end of the room was opened. "After you, my friend. I said 'lead the way.'"

They mounted to the third floor of the restaurant. The room which they had just quitted was used as an auxiliary dining and supper-room before midnight, as Kerry knew. After midnight the centre table was unmasked,

and from thence onward to dawn, sometimes, was surrounded by roulette players. The third floor he had never visited, but he had a shrewd idea that it was not entirely reserved for the private use of the proprietor.

A babel of voices died away as the two men walked into a room rather smaller than that below and furnished with little tables, cafe fashion. At one end was a grand piano and a platform before which a velvet curtain was draped. Some twenty people, men and women, were in the place, standing looking towards the entrance. Most of the men and all the women but one were in evening dress; but despite this common armor of respectability, they did not all belong to respectable society.

Two of the women Kerry recognized as bearers of titles, and one was familiar to him as a screen-beauty. The others were unclassifiable, but all were fashionably dressed with the exception of a masculine- looking lady who had apparently come straight off a golf course, and who later was proved to be a well-known advocate of woman's rights. The men all belonged to familiar types. Some of them were Jews.

Kerry, his feet widely apart and his hands thrust in his overcoat pockets, stood staring at face after face and chewing slowly. The proprietor glanced apologetically at his patrons and shrugged. Silence fell upon the company. Then:

"I am a police officer," said Kerry sharply. "You will file out past me, and I want a card from each of you. Those who have no cards will write name and address here."

He drew a long envelope and a pencil from a pocket of his dinner jacket. Laying the envelope and pencil on one of the little tables:

"Quick march!" he snapped. "You, sir!" shooting out his forefinger in the direction of a tall, fair young man, "step out!"

Glancing helplessly about him, the young man obeyed, and approaching Kerry:

"I say, officer," he whispered nervously, "can't you manage to keep my name out of it? I mean to say, my people will kick up the deuce. Anything up to a tenner. . . ."

The whisper faded away. Kerry's expression had grown positively ferocious.

"Put your card on the table," he said tersely, "and get out while my hands stay in my pockets!"

Hurriedly the noble youth (he was the elder son of an earl) complied, and departed. Then, one by one, the rest of the company filed past the Chief Inspector. He challenged no one until a Jew smilingly laid a card on the table bearing the legend: "Mr John Jones, Lincoln's Inn Fields."

"Hi!" rapped Kerry, grasping the man's arm. "One moment, Mr 'Jones'! The card I want is in the other case. D'you take me for a mug? That 'Jones' trick was tried on Noah by the blue-faced baboon!"

His perception of character was wonderful. At some of the cards he did not even glance; and upon the women he wasted no time at all. He took it for granted that they would all give false names, but since each of them would be followed it did not matter. When at last the room was emptied, he turned to the scowling proprietor, and:

"That's that!" he said. "I've had no instructions about your establishment, my friend, and as I've seen nothing improper going on I'm making no charge, at the moment. I don't want to know what sort of show takes place on your platform, and I don't want to know anything about you that I don't know already. You're a Swiss subject and a dark horse."

He gathered up the cards from the table, glancing at them carelessly. He did not expect to gain much from his possession of these names and addresses. It was among the women that he counted upon finding patrons of Kazmah and Company. But as he was about to drop the cards into his overcoat pocket, one of them, which bore a written note, attracted his attention.

At this card he stared like a man amazed; his face grew more and more red, and:

"Hell!" he said—"Hell! which of 'em was it?"

The card contained the following:—

Lord Wrexborough
Great Cumberland Place, V. 1
"To introduce 719. W."

XXVI. THE MOODS OF MOLLIE

Early the following morning Margaret Halley called upon Mollie Gretna.

Mollie's personality did not attract Margaret. The two had nothing in common, but Margaret was well aware of the nature of the tie which had bound Rita Irvin to this empty and decadent representative of English aristocracy. Mollie Gretna was entitled to append the words "The Honorable" to her name, but not only did she refrain from doing so but she even preferred to be known as "Gretna"—the style of one of the family estates.

This pseudonym she had adopted shortly after her divorce, when she had attempted to take up a stage career. But although the experience had proved disastrous, she had retained the nom de guerre, and during the past four years had several times appeared at war charity garden- parties as a classical dancer—to the great delight of the guests and greater disgust of her family. Her maternal uncle, head of her house, said to be the most blase member of the British peerage and known as "the noble tortoise," was generally considered to have pronounced the final verdict upon his golden-haired niece when he declared "she is almost amusing."

Mollie received her visitor with extravagant expressions of welcome.

"My dear Miss Halley," she cried, "how perfectly sweet of you to come to see me! of course, I can guess what you have called about. Look! I have every paper published this morning in London! Every one! Oh! poor, darling little Rita! What can have become of her!"

Tears glistened upon her carefully made-up lashes, and so deep did her grief seem to be that one would never have suspected that she had spent the greater part of the night playing bridge at a "mixed" club in Dover Street, and from thence had proceeded to a military "breakfast-dance."

"It is indeed a ghastly tragedy," said Margaret. "It seems incredible that she cannot be traced."

"Absolutely incredible!" declared Mollie, opening a large box of cigarettes. "Will you have one, dear?"

"No, thanks. By the way, they are not from Buenos Ayres, I suppose?"

Mollie, cigarette in hand, stared, round-eyed, and:

"Oh, my dear Miss Halley!" she cried, "what an idea! Such a funny thing to suggest."

Margaret smiled coolly.

"Poor Sir Lucien used to smoke cigarettes of that kind," she explained, "and I thought perhaps you smoked them, too."

Mollie shook her head and lighted the cigarette.

"He gave me one once, and it made me feel quite sick," she declared.

Margaret glanced at the speaker, and knew immediately that Mollie had determined to deny all knowledge of the drug coterie. Because there is no problem of psychology harder than that offered by a perverted mind, Margaret was misled in ascribing this secrecy to a desire to avoid becoming involved in a scandal. Therefore:

"Do you quite realize, Miss Gretna," she said quietly, "that every hour wasted now in tracing Rita may mean, must mean, an hour of agony for her?"

"Oh, don't! please don't!" cried Mollie, clasping her hands. "I cannot bear to think of it."

"God knows in whose hands she is. Then there is poor Mr Irvin. He is utterly prostrated. One shudders to contemplate his torture as the hours and the days go by and no news comes of Rita."

"Oh, my dear! you are making me cry!" exclaimed Mollie. "If only I could do something to help. . . ."

Margaret was studying her closely, and now for the first time she detected sincere emotion in Mollie's voice—and unforced tears in her eyes. Hope was reborn.

"Perhaps you can," she continued, speaking gently. "You knew all Rita's friends and all Sir Lucien's. You must have met the woman called Mrs Sin?"

"Mrs Sin," whispered Mollie, staring in a frightened way so that the pupils of her eyes slowly enlarged. "What about Mrs Sin?"

"Well, you see, they seem to think that through Mrs Sin they will be able to trace Kazmah; and wherever Kazmah is one would expect to find poor Rita."

Mollie lowered her head for a moment, then glanced quickly at the speaker, and quickly away again.

"Please let me explain just what I mean," continued Margaret. "It seems to be impossible to find anybody in London who will admit having known Mrs Sin or Kazmah. They are all afraid of being involved in the case, of course. Now, if you can help, don't hesitate for that reason. A special commission has been appointed by Lord Wrexborough to deal with the

case, and their agent is working quite independently of the police. Anything which you care to tell him will be treated as strictly confidential; but think what it may mean to Rita."

Mollie clasped her hands about her right knee and rocked to and fro in her chair.

"No one knows who Kazmah is," she said.

"But a number of people seem to know Mrs Sin. I am sure you must have met her?"

"If I say that I know her, shall I be called as a witness?"

"Certainly not. I can assure you of that."

Mollie continued to rock to and fro.

"But if I were to tell the police I should have to go to court, I suppose?"

"I suppose so," replied Margaret. "I am afraid I am dreadfully ignorant of such matters. It might depend upon whether you spoke to a high official or to a subordinate one; an ordinary policeman for instance. But the Home office agent has nothing whatever to do with Scotland Yard."

Mollie stood up in order to reach an ash-tray, and:

"I really don't think I have anything to say, Miss Halley," she declared. "I have certainly met Mrs Sin, but I know nothing whatever about her, except that I believe she is a Jewess."

Margaret sighed, looking up wistfully into Mollie's face. "Are you quite sure?" she pleaded. "Oh, Miss Gretna, if you know anything— anything— don't hide it now. It may mean so much."

"Oh, I quite understand that," cried Mollie. "My heart simply aches and aches when I think of poor, sweet little Rita. But—really I don't think I can be of the least tiny bit of use."

Their glances met, and Margaret read hostility in the shallow eyes. Mollie, who had been wavering, now for some reason had become confirmed in her original determination to remain silent. Margaret stood up.

"It is no good, then," she said. "We must hope that Rita will be traced by the police. Good-bye, Miss Gretna. I am so sorry you cannot help."

"And so am I!" declared Mollie. "It is perfectly sweet of you to take such an interest, and I feel a positive worm. But what can I do?"

As Margaret was stepping into her little runabout car, which awaited her at the door, a theory presented itself to account for Mollie's sudden hostility. It had developed, apparently, as a result of Margaret's reference to the Home

office inquiry. Of course! Mollie would naturally be antagonistic to a commission appointed to suppress the drug traffic.

Convinced that this was the correct explanation, Margaret drove away, reflecting bitterly that she had been guilty of a strategical error which it was now too late to rectify.

In common with others, Kerry among them, who had come in contact with that perverted intelligence, she misjudged Mollie's motives. In the first place, the latter had no wish to avoid publicity, and in the second place—although she sometimes wondered vaguely what she should do when her stock of drugs became exhausted—Mollie was prompted by no particular animosity toward the Home office inquiry. She had merely perceived a suitable opportunity to make the acquaintance of the fierce red Chief Inspector, and at the same time to secure notoriety for herself.

Ere Margaret's car had progressed a hundred yards from the door, Mollie was at the telephone.

"City 400, please," she said.

An interval elapsed, then:

"Is that the Commissioner's office, New Scotland Yard?" she asked.

A voice replied that it was.

"Could you put me through to Chief Inspector Kerry?"

"What name?" inquired the voice.

Mollie hesitated for three seconds, and then gave her family name.

"Very well, madam," said the voice respectfully. "Please hold on, and I will enquire if the Chief Inspector is here."

Mollie's heart was beating rapidly with pleasurable excitement, and she was as confused as a maiden at her first rendezvous. Then:

"Hello," said the voice.

"Yes?"

"I am sorry, madam. But Chief Inspector Kerry is off duty."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Mollie, "what a pity. Can you tell me where I could find him?"

"I am afraid not, madam. It is against the rules to give private addresses of members of any department."

"Oh, very well." She sighed again. "Thank you."

She replaced the receiver and stood biting her finger thoughtfully. She was making a mental inventory of her many admirers and wondering which

of them could help her. Suddenly she came to a decision on the point. Taking up the receiver:

"Victoria 8440, please," she said.

Still biting one finger she waited, until:

"Foreign office," announced a voice.

"Please put me through to Mr Archie Boden-Shaw," she said.

Ere long that official's secretary was inquiring her name, and a moment later:

"Is that you, Archie?" said Mollie. "Yes! Mollie speaking. No, please listen, Archie! You can get to know everything at the Foreign office, and I want you to find out for me the private address of Chief Inspector Kerry, who is in charge of the Bond Street murder case. Don't be silly! I've asked Scotland Yard, but they won't tell me. You can find out. . . . It doesn't matter why I want to know. . . . Just ring me up and tell me. I must know in half an hour. Yes, I shall be seeing you tonight. Good-bye. . . ."

Less than half an hour later, the obedient Archie rang up, and Mollie, all excitement, wrote the following address in a dainty scented notebook which she carried in her handbag.

CHIEF INSPECTOR KERRY,
67 Spenser Road, Brixton.

XXVII. CROWN EVIDENCE

The appearance of the violet-enamelled motor brougham upholstered in cream, and driven by a chauffeur in a violet and cream livery, created some slight sensation in Spenser Road, S.E. Mollie Gretna's conspicuous car was familiar enough to residents in the West End of London, but to lower middle-class suburbia it came as something of a shock. More than one window curtain moved suspiciously, suggesting a hidden but watchful presence, when the glittering vehicle stopped before the gate of number 67; and the lady at number 68 seized an evidently rare opportunity to come out and polish her letter-box.

She was rewarded by an unobstructed view of the smartest woman in London (thus spake society paragraphers) and of the most expensive set of furs in Europe, also of a perfectly gowned slim figure. Of Mollie's disdainful face, with its slightly uptilted nose, she had no more than a glimpse.

A neat maid, evidently Scotch, admitted the dazzling visitor to number 67; and Spenser Road waited and wondered. It was something to do with the Bond Street murder! Small girls appeared from doorways suddenly opened and darted off to advise less-watchful neighbors.

Kerry, who had been at work until close upon dawn in the mysterious underworld of Soho was sleeping, but Mrs Kerry received Mollie in a formal little drawing-room, which, unlike the cosy, homely dining- room, possessed that frigid atmosphere which belongs to uninhabited apartments. In a rather handsome cabinet were a number of trophies associated with the detective's successful cases. The cabinet itself was a present from a Regent Street firm for whom Kerry had recovered valuable property.

Mary Kerry, dressed in a plain blouse and skirt, exhibited no trace of nervousness in the presence of her aristocratic and fashionable caller. Indeed, Mollie afterwards declared that "she was quite a ladylike person. But rather tin tabernacley, my dear."

"Did ye wish to see Chief Inspector Kerry parteecularly?" asked Mary, watching her visitor with calm, observant eyes.

"Oh, most particularly!" cried Mollie, in a flutter of excitement. "Of course I don't know what you must think of me for calling at such a preposterous hour, but there are some things that simply can't wait."

"Aye," murmured Mrs Kerry. "'Twill be yon Bond Street affair?"

"Oh, yes, it is, Mrs Kerry. Doesn't the very name of Bond Street turn your blood cold? I am simply shivering with fear!"

"As the wife of a Chief Inspector I am maybe more used to tragedies than yoursel', madam. But it surely is a sair grim business. My husband is resting now. He was hard at work a' the night. Nae doubt ye'll be wishin' tee see him privately?"

"Oh, if you please. I am so sorry to disturb him. I can imagine that he must be literally exhausted after spending a whole night among dreadful people."

Mary Kerry stood up.

"If ye'll excuse me for a moment I'll awaken him," she said. "Our household is sma'."

"Oh, of course! I quite understand, Mrs Kerry! So sorry. But so good of you."

"Might I offer ye a glass o' sherry an' a biscuit?"

"I simply couldn't dream of troubling you! Please don't suggest such a thing. I feel covered with guilt already. Many thanks nevertheless."

Mary Kerry withdrew, leaving Mollie alone. As soon as the door closed Mollie stood up and began to inspect the trophies in the cabinet. She was far too restless and excited to remain sitting down. She looked at the presentation clock on the mantelpiece and puzzled over the signatures engraved upon a large silver dish which commemorated the joy displayed by the Criminal Investigation Department upon the occasion of Kerry's promotion to the post of Chief Inspector.

The door opened and Kerry came in. He had arisen and completed his toilet in several seconds less than five minutes. But his spotlessly neat attire would have survived inspection by the most lynx-eyed martinet in the Brigade of Guards. As he smiled at his visitor with fierce geniality, Mollie blushed like a young girl.

Chief Inspector Kerry was a much bigger man than she had believed him to be. The impression left upon her memory by his brief appearance at the night club had been that of a small, dapper figure. Now, as he stood in the little drawing-room, she saw that he was not much if anything below the average height of Englishmen, and that he possessed wonderfully broad shoulders. In fact, Kerry was deceptive. His compact neatness and the smallness of his feet and hands, together with those swift, lithe movements which commonly belong to men of light physique, curiously combined to deceive the beholder, but masked eleven stones (*note: 1 stone = 14 pounds) of bone and muscle.

"Very good of you to offer information, miss," he said. "I'm willing to admit that I can do with it."

He opened a bureau and took out a writing-block and a fountain pen. Then he turned and stared hard at Mollie. She quickly lowered her eyes.

"Excuse me," said Kerry, "but didn't I see you somewhere last night?"

"Yes," she said. "I was sitting just inside the door at—"

"Right! I remember," interrupted Kerry. He continued to stare. "Before you say any more, miss, I have to remind you that I am a police officer, and that you may be called upon to swear to the truth of any information you may give me."

"Oh, of course! I know."

"You know? Very well, then; we can get on. Who gave you my address?"

At the question, so abruptly asked, Mollie felt herself blushing again. It was delightful to know that she could still blush. "Oh— I . . . that is, I asked Scotland Yard "

She bestowed a swift, half-veiled glance at her interrogator, but he offered her no help, and:

"They wouldn't tell me," she continued. "So—I had to find out. You see, I heard you were trying to get information which I thought perhaps I could give."

"So you went to the trouble to find my private address rather than to the nearest police station," said Kerry. "Might I ask you from whom you heard that I wanted this information?"

"Well—it's in the papers, isn't it?"

"It is certainly. But it occurred to me that someone. . . connected might have told you as well."

"Actually, someone did: Miss Margaret Halley."

"Good!" rapped Kerry. "Now we're coming to it. She told you to come to me?"

"Oh, no!" cried Mollie—"she didn't. She told me to tell her so that she could tell the Home office."

"Eh?" said Kerry, "eh?" He bent forward, staring fiercely. "Please tell me exactly what Miss Halley wanted to know."

The intensity of his gaze Mollie found very perturbing, but:

"She wanted me to tell her where Mrs Sin lived," she replied.

Kerry experienced a quickening of the pulse. In the failure of the C.I.D. to trace the abode of the notorious Mrs Sin he had suspected double-dealing. He counted it unbelievable that a figure so conspicuous in certain circles could evade official quest even for forty-eight hours. K Division's explanation, too, that there were no less than eighty Chinamen resident in and about Limehouse whose names either began or ended with Sin, he looked upon as a paltry evasion. That very morning he had awakened from

a species of nightmare wherein 719 had affected the arrest of Kazmah and Mrs Sin and had rescued Mrs Irvin from the clutches of the former. Now—here was hope. 719 would seem to be as hopelessly in the dark as everybody else.

"You refused?" he rapped.

"Of course I did, Inspector," said Mollie, with a timid, tender glance. "I thought you were the proper person to tell."

"Then you know?" asked Kerry, unable to conceal his eagerness.

"Yes," sighed Mollie. "Unfortunately—I know. Oh Inspector, how can I explain it to you?"

"Don't trouble, miss. Just give me the address and I'll ask no questions!"

His keenness was thrilling, infectious. As a result of the night's "beating" he had a list of some twenty names whose owners might have been patrons of Kazmah and some of whom might know Mrs Sin. But he had learned from bitter experience how difficult it was to induce such people to give useful evidence. There was practically no means of forcing them to speak if they chose, from selfish motives, to be silent. They could be forced to appear in court, but anything elicited in public was worse than useless. Furthermore, Kerry could not afford to wait. Mollie replied excitedly:

"Oh, Inspector, I know you will think me simply an appalling person when I tell you; but I have been to Mrs Sin's house—'The House of a Hundred Raptures' she calls it—"

"Yes, yes! But—the address?"

"However can I tell you the address, Inspector? I could drive you there, but I haven't the very haziest idea of the name of the horrible street! One drives along dreadful roads where there are stalls and Jews for quite an interminable time, and then over a sort of canal, and then round to the right all among ships and horrid Chinamen. Then, there is a doorway in a little court, and Mrs Sin's husband sits inside a smelly room with a positively ferocious raven who shrieks about legs and policemen! Oh! Can I ever forget it!"

"One moment, miss, one moment," said Kerry, keeping an iron control upon himself. "What is the name of Mrs Sin's husband?"

"Oh, let me think! I can always remember it by recalling the croak of the raven." She raised one hand to her brow, posing reflectively, and began to murmur:

"Sin Sin Ah . . . Sin Sin Jar . . . Sin Sin—Oh! I have it! Sin Sin Wa!"

"Good!" rapped Kerry, and made a note on the block. "Sin Sin Wa, and he has a pet raven, you say, who talks?"

"Who positively talks like some horrid old woman!" cried Mollie. "He has only one eye."

"The raven?"

"The raven, yes—and also the Chinaman."

"What!"

"Oh! it's a nightmare to behold them together!" declared Mollie, clasping her hands and bending forward.

She was gaining courage, and now looked almost boldly into the fierce eyes of the Chief Inspector.

"Describe the house," he said succinctly. "Take your time and use your own words."

Thereupon Mollie launched into a description of Sin Sin Wa's opium-house. Kerry, his eyes fixed upon her face, listened silently. Then:

"These little rooms are really next door?" he asked.

"I suppose so, Inspector. We always went through the back of a cupboard!"

"Can you give me names of others who used this place?"

"Well"—Mollie hesitated—"poor Rita, of course and Sir Lucien. Then, Cyrus Kilfane used to go."

"Kilfane? The American actor?"

"Yes."

"H'm. He's back in America, Sir Lucien is dead, and Mrs Irvin is missing. Nobody else?"

Mollie shook her head.

"Who first took you there?"

"Cyrus Kilfane."

"Not Sir Lucien?"

"Oh, no. But both of them had been before."

"What was Kazmah's connection with Mrs Sin and her husband?"

"I have no idea, Inspector. Kazmah used to supply cocaine and veronal and trional and heroin, but those who wanted to smoke opium he sent to Mrs Sin."

"What! he gave them her address?"

"No, no! He gave her their address."

"I see. She called?"

"Yes. Oh, Inspector"—Mollie bent farther forward—"I can see in your eyes that you think I am fabulously wicked! Shall I be arrested?"

Kerry coughed drily and stood up.

"Probably not, miss. But you may be required to give evidence."

"Oh, actually?" cried Mollie, also standing up and approaching nearer.

"Yes. Shall you object?"

Mollie looked into his eyes.

"Not if I can be of the slightest assistance to you, Inspector."

A theory to explain why this social butterfly had sought him out as a recipient of her compromising confidences presented itself to Kerry's mind. He was a modest man, having neither time nor inclination for gallantries, and this was the first occasion throughout his professional career upon which he had obtained valuable evidence on the strength of his personal attractions. He doubted the accuracy of his deduction. But, Mollie at that moment lowering her lashes and then rapidly raising them again, Kerry was compelled to accept his own astonishing theory.

"And she is the daughter of a peer!" he reflected. "No wonder it has been hard to get evidence."

He glanced rapidly in the direction of the door. There were several details which were by no means clear, but he decided to act upon the information already given and to get rid of his visitor without delay. Where some of the most dangerous criminals in Europe and America had failed, Mollie Gretna had succeeded in making Red Kerry nervous.

"I am much indebted to you, miss," he said, and opened the door.

"Oh, it has been delightful to confess to you, Inspector!" declared Mollie. "I will give you my card, and I shall expect you to come to me for any further information you may want. If I have to be brought to court, you will tell me, won't you?"

"Rely upon me, miss," replied Kerry shortly.

He escorted Mollie to her brougham, observed by no less than six discreetly hidden neighbors. And as the brougham was driven off she waved her hand to him! Kerry felt a hot flush spreading over his red countenance, for the veiled onlookers had not escaped his attention. As he re-entered the house:

"Yon's a bad woman," said his wife, emerging from the dining-room.

"I believe you may be right, Mary," replied Kerry confusedly.

"I kenned it when fairst I set een upon her painted face. I kenned it the now when she lookit sideways at ye. If yon's a grand lady, she's a woman o' puir repute. The Lord gi'e us grace."

XXVIII. THE GILDED JOSS

London was fog-bound. The threat of the past week had been no empty one. Towards the hour of each wintry sunset had come the yellow racks, hastening dusk and driving folks more speedily homeward to their firesides. The dull reports of fog-signals had become a part of the metropolitan bombilation, but hitherto the choking mist had not secured a strangle-hold.

Now, however, it had triumphed, casting its thick net over the city as if eager to stifle the pulsing life of the new Babylon. In the neighborhood of the Docks its density was extraordinary, and the purlieus of Limehouse became mere mysterious gullies of smoke impossible to navigate unless one were very familiar with their intricacies and dangers.

Chief Inspector Kerry, wearing a cardigan under his oilskins, tapped the pavement with the point of his malacca like a blind man. No glimmer of light could he perceive. He could not even see his companion.

"Hell!" he snapped irritably, as his foot touched a brick wall, "where the devil are you, constable?"

"Here beside you, sir," answered P.C. Bryce, of K Division, his guide.

"Which side?"

"Here, sir."

The constable grasped Kerry's arm.

"But we've walked slap into a damn brick wall!"

"Keep the wall on your left, sir, and it's all clear ahead."

"Clear be damned!" said Kerry. "Are we nearly there?"

"About a dozen paces and we shall see the lamp—if it's been lighted."

"And if not we shall stroll into the river, I suppose?"

"No danger of that. Even if the lamp's out, we shall strike the iron pillar."

"I don't doubt it," said Kerry grimly.

They proceeded at a slow pace. Dull reports and a vague clangor were audible. These sounds were so deadened by the clammy mist that they might have proceeded from some gnome's workshop deep in the bowels of the earth. The blows of a pile-driver at work on the Surrey shore suggested to Kerry's mind the phantom crew of Hendrick Hudson at their game of ninepins in the Katskill Mountains. Suddenly:

"Is that you, Bryce?" he asked.

"I'm here, sir," replied the voice of the constable from beside him.

"H'm, then there's someone else about." He raised his voice. "Hi, there! have you lost your way?"

Kerry stood still, listening. But no one answered to his call.

"I'll swear there was someone just behind us, Bryce!"

"There was, sir. I saw someone, too. A Chinese resident, probably. Here we are!"

A sound of banging became audible, and on advancing another two paces, Kerry found himself beside Bryce before a low closed door.

"Hello! hello!" croaked a dim voice. "Number one p'lice chop, lo! Sin Sin Wa!"

The flat note of a police whistle followed.

"Sin Sin is at home," declared Bryce. "That's the raven."

"Does he take the thing about with him, then?"

"I don't think so. But he puts it in a cupboard when he goes out, and it never talks unless it can see a light."

Bolts were unfastened and the door was opened. Out through the moving curtain of fog shone the red glow from a stove. A grotesque silhouette appeared outlined upon the dim redness.

"You wantchee me?" crooned Sin Sin Wa.

"I do!" rapped Kerry. "I've called to look for opium."

He stepped past the Chinaman into the dimly lighted room. As he did so, the cause of an apparent deformity which had characterized the outline of Sin Sin Wa became apparent. From his left shoulder the raven partly arose, moving his big wings, and:

"Smartest leg!" it shrieked in Kerry's ear and rattled imaginary castanets.

The Chief Inspector started, involuntarily.

"Damn the thing!" he muttered. "Come in, Bryce, and shut the door. What's this?"

On a tea-chest set beside the glowing stove, the little door of which was open, stood a highly polished squat wooden image, gilded and colored red and green. It was that of a leering Chinaman, possibly designed to represent Buddha, and its jade eyes seemed to blink knowingly in the dancing rays from the stove.

"Sin Sin Wa's Joss," murmured the proprietor, as Bryce closed the outer door. "Me shinee him up; makee Joss glad. Number one piecee Joss."

Kerry turned and stared into the pock-marked smiling face. Seen in that dim light it was not unlike the carved face of the image, save that the latter possessed two open eyes and the Chinaman but one. The details of the room were indiscernible, lost in yellowish shadow, but the eye of the raven and the eye of Sin Sin Wa glittered like strange jewels.

"H'm," said Kerry. "Sorry to interrupt your devotions. Light us."

"Allee velly proper," crooned Sin Sin Wa.

He took up the Joss tenderly and bore it across the room. Opening a little cupboard set low down near the floor he discovered a lighted lantern. This he took out and set upon the dirty table. Then he placed the image on a shelf in the cupboard and turned smilingly to his visitors.

"Number one p'lice!" shrieked the raven.

"Here!" snapped Kerry. "Put that damn thing to bed!"

"Velly good," murmured Sin Sin Wa complacently.

He raised his hand to his shoulder and the raven stepped sedately from shoulder to wrist. Sin Sin Wa stooped.

"Come, Tling-a-Ling," he said softly. "You catchee sleepee."

The raven stepped down from his wrist and walked into the cupboard.

"So fashion, lo!" said Sin Sin Wa, closing the door.

He seated himself upon a tea-chest beside the useful cupboard, resting his hands upon his knees and smiling.

Kerry, chewing steadily, had watched the proceedings in silence, but now:

"Constable Bryce," he said crisply, "you recognize this man as Sin Sin Wa, the occupier of the house?"

"Yes, sir," replied Bryce.

He was not wholly at ease, and persistently avoided the Chinaman's oblique, beady eye.

"In the ordinary course of your duty you frequently pass along this street?"

"It's the limit of the Limehouse beat, sir. Poplar patrols on the other side."

"So that at this point, or hereabout, you would sometimes meet the constable on the next beat?"

"Well, sir," Bryce hesitated, clearing his throat, "this street isn't properly in his district."

"I didn't say it was!" snapped Kerry, glaring fiercely at the embarrassed constable. "I said you would sometimes meet him here."

"Yes, sometimes."

"Sometimes. Right. Did you ever come in here?"

The constable ventured a swift glance at the savage red face, and:

"Yes, sir, now and then," he confessed. "Just for a warm on a cold night, maybe."

"Allee velly welcome," murmured Sin Sin Wa.

Kerry never for a moment removed his fixed gaze from the face of Bryce.

"Now, my lad," he said, "I'm going to ask you another question. I'm not saying a word about the warm on a cold night. We're all human. But—did you ever see or hear or smell anything suspicious in this house?"

"Never," affirmed the constable earnestly.

"Did anything ever take place that suggested to your mind that Sin Sin Wa might be concealing something—upstairs, for instance?"

"Never a thing, sir. There's never been a complaint about him."

"Allee velly proper," crooned Sin Sin Wa.

Kerry stared intently for some moments at Bryce; then, turning suddenly to Sin Sin Wa:

"I want to see your wife," he said. "Fetch her."

Sin Sin Wa gently patted his knees.

"She velly bad woman," he declared. "She no hate topside pidgin."

"Don't talk!" shouted Kerry. "Fetch her!"

Sin Sin Wa turned his hands palms upward.

"Me no hate gotchee wifee," he murmured.

Kerry took one pace forward.

"Fetch her," he said; "or—" He drew a pair of handcuffs from the pocket of his oilskin.

"Velly bad luck," murmured Sin Sin Wa. "Catchee trouble for wifee no got."

He extended his wrists, meeting the angry glare of the Chief Inspector with a smile of resignation. Kerry bit savagely at his chewing-gum, glancing aside at Bryce.

"Did you ever see his wife?" he snapped.

"No, sir. I didn't know he had one."

"No habgotchee," murmured Sin Sin Wa, "velly bad woman."

"For the last time," said Kerry, stooping and thrusting his face forward so that his nose was only some six inches from that of Sin Sin Wa, "where's Mrs Sin?"

"Catchee lun off," replied the Chinaman blandly. "Velly bad woman. Tlief woman. Catchee stealee alla my dollars!"

"Eh!"

Kerry stood upright, moving his shoulders and rattling the handcuffs.

"Comee here when Sin Sin Wa hate gone for catchee shavee, liftee alla my dollars, and-pff! chee-lo!"

He raised his hand and blew imaginary fluff into space. Kerry stared down at him with an expression in which animal ferocity and helplessness were oddly blended. Then:

"Bryce," he said, "stay here. I'm going to search the house."

"Very good, sir."

Kerry turned again to the Chinaman.

"Is there anyone upstairs?" he demanded.

"Nobody hate. Sin Sin Wa alla samee lonesome. Catchee shinum him joss."

Kerry dropped the handcuffs back into the pocket of his overall and took out an electric torch. With never another glance at Sin Sin Wa he went out into the passage and began to mount the stairs, presently finding himself in a room filled with all sorts of unsavory rubbish and containing a large cupboard. He uttered an exclamation of triumph.

Crossing the littered floor, and picking his way amid broken cane chairs, tea-chests, discarded garments and bedlaths, he threw open the cupboard door. Before him hung a row of ragged clothes and a number of bowler hats. Directing the ray of the torch upon the unsavory collection, he

snatched coats and hats from the hooks upon which they depended and hurled them impatiently upon the floor.

When the cupboard was empty he stepped into it and began to bang upon the back. The savagery of his expression grew more marked than usual, and as he chewed his maxillary muscles protruded extraordinarily.

"If ever I sounded a brick wall," he muttered, "I'm doing it now."

Tap where he would—and he tapped with his knuckles and with the bone ferrule of his cane—there was nothing in the resulting sound to suggest that that part of the wall behind the cupboard was less solid than any other part.

He examined the room rapidly, then passed into another one adjoining it, which was evidently used as a bedroom. The latter faced towards the court and did not come in contact with the wall of the neighboring house. In both rooms the windows were fastened, and judging from the state of the fasteners were never opened. In that containing the cupboard outside shutters were also closed. Despite this sealing-up of the apartments, traces of fog hung in the air. Kerry descended the stairs.

Snapping off the light of his torch, he stood, feet wide apart, staring at Sin Sin Wa. The latter, smiling imperturbably, yellow hands resting upon knees, sat quite still on the tea-chest. Constable Bryce was seated on a corner of the table, looking curiously awkward in his tweed overcoat and bowler hat, which garments quite failed to disguise the policeman. He stood up as Kerry entered. Then:

"There used to be a door between this house and the next," said Kerry succinctly. "My information is exact and given by someone who has often used that door."

"Bloody liar," murmured Sin Sin Wa.

"What!" shouted Kerry. "What did you say, you yellow-faced mongrel!"

He clenched his fists and strode towards the Chinaman.

"Sarcee feller catchee pullee leg," explained the unmoved Sin Sin Wa. "Velly bad man tellee lie for makee bhoberry—getchee poor Chinaman in tlouble."

In the fog-bound silence Kerry could very distinctly be heard chewing. He turned suddenly to Bryce.

"Go back and fetch two men," he directed. "I should never find my way."

"Very good, sir."

Bryce stepped to the door, unable to hide the relief which he experienced, and opened it. The fog was so dense that it looked like a yellow curtain hung in the opening.

"Phew!" said Bryce. "I may be some little time, sir."

"Quite likely. But don't stop to pick daisies."

The constable went out, closing the door. Kerry laid his cane on the table, then stooped and tossed a cud of chewing-gum into the stove. From his waistcoat pocket he drew out a fresh piece and placed it between his teeth. Drawing a tea-chest closer to the stove, he seated himself and stared intently into the glowing heart of the fire.

Sin Sin Wa extended his arm and opened the little cupboard.

"Number one p'lice," croaked the raven drowsily.

"You catchee sleepee, Tling-a-Ling," said Sin Sin Wa.

He took out the green-eyed joss, set it tenderly upon a corner of the table, and closed the cupboard door. With a piece of chamois leather, which he sometimes dipped into a little square tin, he began to polish the hideous figure.

XXIX. DOUBTS AND FEARS

Monte Irvin raised his head and stared dully at Margaret Halley. It was very quiet in the library of the big old-fashioned house at Prince's Gate. A faint crackling sound which proceeded from the fire was clearly audible. Margaret's grey eyes were anxiously watching the man whose pose as he sat in the deep, saddle-back chair so curiously suggested collapse.

"Drugs," he whispered. "Drugs."

Few of his City associates would have recognized the voice; all would have been shocked to see the change which had taken place in the man.

"You really understand why I have told you, Mr Irvin, don't you?" said Margaret almost pleadingly. "Dr. Burton thought you should not be told, but then Dr. Burton did not know you were going to ask me point blank. And I thought it better that you should know the truth, bad as it is, rather than—"

"Rather than suspect—worse things," whispered Irvin. "Of course, you were right, Miss Halley. I am very, very grateful to you for telling me. I

realize what courage it must have called for. Believe me, I shall always remember—"

He broke off, staring across the room at his wife's portrait. Then:

"If only I had known," he added.

Irvin exhibited greater composure than Margaret had ventured to anticipate. She was confirmed in her opinion that he should be told the truth.

"I would have told you long ago," she said, "if I had thought that any good could result from my doing so. Frankly, I had hoped to cure Rita of the habit, and I believe I might have succeeded in time."

"There has been no mention of drugs in connection with the case," said Monte Irvin, speaking monotonously. "In the Press, I mean."

"Hitherto there has not," she replied. "But there is a hint of it in one of this evening's papers, and I determined to give you the exact facts so far as they are known to me before some garbled account came to your ears."

"Thank you," he said, "thank you. I had felt for a long time that I was getting out of touch with Rita, that she had other confidants. Have you any idea who they were, Miss Halley?"

He raised his eyes, looking at her pathetically. Margaret hesitated, then:

"Well," she replied, "I am afraid Nina knew."

"Her maid?"

"I think she must have known."

He sighed.

"The police have interrogated her," he said. "Probably she is being watched."

"Oh, I don't think she knows anything about the drug syndicate," declared Margaret. "She merely acted as confidential messenger. Poor Sir Lucien Pyne, I am sure, was addicted to drugs."

"Do you think"—Irvin spoke in a very low voice—"do you think he led her into the habit?"

Margaret bit her lip, staring down at the red carpet.

"I would hate to slander a man who can never defend himself," she replied finally. "But—I have sometimes thought he did."

Silence fell. Both were contemplating a theory which neither dared to express in words.

"You see," continued Margaret, "it is evident that this man Kazmah was patronized by people so highly placed that it is hopeless to look for information from them. Again, such people have influence. I don't suggest that they are using it to protect Kazmah, but I have no doubt they are doing so to protect themselves."

Monte Irvin raised his eyes to her face. A weary, sad look had come into them.

"You mean that it may be to somebody's interest to hush up the matter as much as possible?"

Margaret nodded her head.

"The prevalence of the drug habit in society—especially in London society—is a secret which has remained hidden so long from the general public," she replied, "that one cannot help looking for bribery and corruption. The stage is made the scapegoat whenever the voice of scandal breathes the word 'dope,' but we rarely hear the names of the worst offenders even whispered. I have thought for a long time that the authorities must know the names of the receivers and distributors of cocaine, veronal, opium, and the other drugs, huge quantities of which find their way regularly to the West End of London. Pharmacists sometimes experience the greatest difficulty in obtaining the drugs which they legitimately require, and the prices have increased extraordinarily. Cocaine, for instance, has gone up from five and sixpence an ounce to eighty-seven shillings, and heroin from three and sixpence to over forty shillings, while opium that was once about twenty shillings a pound is now eight times the price."

Monte Irvin listened attentively.

"In the course of my Guildhall duties," he said slowly, "I have been brought in contact frequently with police officers of all ranks. If influential people are really at work protecting these villains who deal illicitly in drugs, I don't think, and I am not prepared to believe, that they have corrupted the police."

"Neither do I believe so, Mr Irvin!" said Margaret eagerly.

"But," Irvin pursued, exhibiting greater animation, "you inform me that a Home office commissioner has been appointed. What does this mean, if not that Lord Wrexborough distrusts the police?"

"Well, you see, the police seemed to be unable, or unwilling, to do anything in the matter. Of course, this may have been due to the fact that the

traffic was so skilfully handled that it defied their inquiries."

"Take, as an instance, Chief Inspector Kerry," continued Irvin. "He has exhibited the utmost delicacy and consideration in his dealings with me, but I'll swear that a whiter man never breathed."

"Oh, really, Mr Irvin, I don't think for a moment that men of that class are suspected of being concerned. Indeed, I don't believe any active collusion is suspected at all."

"Lord Wrexborough thinks that Scotland Yard hasn't got an officer clever enough for the dope people?"

"Quite possibly."

"I take it that he has put up a secret service man?"

"I believe—that is, I know he has."

Monte Irvin was watching Margaret's face, and despite the dull misery which deadened his usually quick perceptions, he detected a heightened color and a faint change of expression. He did not question her further upon the point, but:

"God knows I welcome all the help that offers," he said. "Lord Wrexborough is your uncle, Miss Halley; but do you think this secret commission business quite fair to Scotland Yard?"

Margaret stared for some moments at the carpet, then raised her grey eyes and looked earnestly at the speaker. She had learned in the brief time that had elapsed since this black sorrow had come upon him to understand what it was in the character of Monte Irvin which had attracted Rita. It afforded an illustration of that obscure law governing the magnetism which subsists between diverse natures. For not all the agony of mind which he suffered could hide or mar the cleanness and honesty of purpose which were Monte Irvin's outstanding qualities.

"No," Margaret replied, "honestly, I don't. And I feel rather guilty about it, too, because I have been urging uncle to take such a step for quite a long time. You see"—she glanced at Irvin wistfully—"I am brought in contact with so many victims of the drug habit. I believe the police are hampered; and these people who deal in drugs manage in some way to evade the law. The Home office agent will report to a committee appointed by Lord Wrexborough, and then, you see, if it is found necessary to do so, there will be special legislation."

Monte Irvin sighed wearily, and his glance strayed in the direction of the telephone on the side-table. He seemed to be constantly listening for something which he expected but dreaded to hear. Whenever the toy spaniel which lay curled up on the rug before the fire moved or looked towards the door, Irvin started and his expression changed.

"This suspense," he said jerkily, "this suspense is so hard to bear."

"Oh, Mr Irvin, your courage is wonderful," replied Margaret earnestly. "But he"—she hastily corrected herself—"everybody is convinced that Rita is safe. Under some strange misapprehension regarding this awful tragedy she has run away into hiding. Probably she has been induced to do so by those interested in preventing her from giving evidence."

Monte Irvin's eyes lighted up strangely. "Is that the opinion of the Home office agent?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Inspector Kerry shares it," declared Irvin. "Please God they are right."

"It is the only possible explanation," said Margaret. "Any hour now we may expect news of her."

"You don't think," pursued Monte Irvin, "that anybody—anybody—suspects Rita of being concerned in the death of Sir Lucien?"

He fixed a gaze of pathetic inquiry upon her face.

"Of course not!" she cried. "How ridiculous it would be."

"Yes," he murmured, "it would be ridiculous."

Margaret stood up.

"I am quite relieved now that I have done what I conceived to be my duty, Mr Irvin," she said. "And, bad as the truth may be, it is better than doubt, after all. You must look after yourself, you know. When Rita comes back we shall have a big task before us to wean her from her old habits." She met his glance frankly. "But we shall succeed."

"How you cheer me," whispered Monte Irvin emotionally. "You are the truest friend that Rita ever had, Miss Halley. You will keep in touch with me, will you not?"

"Of course. Next to yourself there is no one so sincerely interested as I am. I love Rita as I should have loved a sister if I had had one. Please don't stand up. Dr. Burton has told you to avoid all exertion for a week or more, I know."

Monte Irvin grasped her outstretched hand.

"Any news which reaches me," he said, "I will communicate immediately. Thank you. In times of trouble we learn to know our real friends."

XXX. THE FIGHT IN THE DARK

Towards eleven o'clock at night the fog began slightly to lift. As Kerry crossed the bridge over Limehouse Canal he could vaguely discern the dirty water below, and street lamps showed dimly, surrounded each by a halo of yellow mist. Fog signals were booming on the railway, and from the great docks in the neighborhood mechanical clashings and hammerings were audible.

Turning to the right, Kerry walked on for some distance, and then suddenly stepped into the entrance to a narrow cul-de-sac and stood quite still.

A conviction had been growing upon him during the past twelve hours that someone was persistently and cleverly dogging his footsteps. He had first detected the presence of this mysterious follower outside the house of Sin Sin Wa, but the density of the fog had made it impossible for him to obtain a glimpse of the man's face. He was convinced, too, that he had been followed back to Leman Street, and from there to New Scotland Yard. Now, again he became aware of this persistent presence, and hoped at last to confront the spy.

Below footsteps, the footsteps of someone proceeding with the utmost caution, came along the pavement. Kerry stood close to the wall of the court, one hand in a pocket of his overall, waiting and chewing.

Nearer came the footsteps—and nearer. A shadowy figure appeared only a yard or so away from the watchful Chief Inspector. Thereupon he acted.

With one surprising spring he hurled himself upon the unprepared man, grasped him by his coat collar, and shone the light of an electric torch fully into his face.

"Hell!" he snapped. "The smart from Spinker's!"

The ray of the torch lighted up the mean, pinched face of Brisley, blanched now by fright, gleamed upon the sharp, hooked nose and into the

cunning little brown eyes. Brisley licked his lips. In Kerry's muscular grip he bore quite a remarkable resemblance to a rat in the jaws of a terrier.

"Ho, ho!" continued the Chief Inspector, showing his teeth savagely. "So we let Scotland Yard make the pie, and then we steal all the plums, do we?"

He shook the frightened man until Brisley's broad-brimmed bowler was shaken off, revealing the receding brow and scanty neutral-colored hair.

"We let Scotland Yard work night and day, and then we present our rat-faced selves to Mr Monte Irvin and say we have 'found the lady' do we?" Another vigorous shake followed. "We track Chief Inspectors of the Criminal Investigation Department, do we? We do, eh? We are dirty, skulking mongrels, aren't we? We require to be kicked from Limehouse to Paradise, don't we?" He suddenly released Brisley. "So we shall be!" he shouted furiously.

Hot upon the promise came the deed.

Brisley sent up a howl of pain as Kerry's right brogue came into violent contact with his person. The assault almost lifted him off his feet, and hatless as he was he set off, running as a man runs whose life depends upon his speed. The sound of his pattering footsteps was echoed from wall to wall of the cul-de-sac until finally it was swallowed up in the fog.

Kerry stood listening for some moments, then, directing a furious kick upon the bowler which lay at his feet, he snapped off the light of the torch and pursued his way. The lesser mystery was solved, but the greater was before him.

He had made a careful study of the geography of the neighborhood, and although the fog was still dense enough to be confusing, he found his way without much difficulty to the street for which he was bound. Some fifteen paces along the narrow thoroughfare he came upon someone standing by a closed door set in a high brick wall. The street contained no dwelling houses, and except for the solitary figure by the door was deserted and silent. Kerry took out his torch and shone a white ring upon the smiling countenance of Detective-Sergeant Coombes.

"If that smile gets any worse," he said irritably, "they'll have to move your ears back. Anything to report?"

"Sin Sin Wa went to bed an hour ago."

"Any visitors?"

"No."

"Has he been out?"
"No."
"Got the ladder?"
"Yes."
"All quiet in the neighborhood?"
"All quiet."
"Good."

The street in which this conversation took place was one running roughly parallel with that in which the house of Sin Sin Wa was situated. A detailed search of the Chinaman's premises had failed to bring to light any scrap of evidence to show that opium had ever been smoked there. Of the door described by Mollie Gretna, and said to communicate with the adjoining establishment, not a trace could be found. But the fact that such a door had existed did not rest solely upon Mollie's testimony. From one of the "beat-ups" interviewed that day, Kerry had succeeded in extracting confirmatory evidence.

Inquiries conducted in the neighborhood of Poplar had brought to light the fact that four of the houses in this particular street, including that occupied by Sin Sin Wa and that adjoining it, belonged to a certain Mr Jacobs, said to reside abroad. Mr Jacob's rents were collected by an estate agent, and sent to an address in San Francisco. For some reason not evident to this man of business, Mr Jacobs demanded a rental for the house next to Sin Sin Wa's, which was out of all proportion to the value of the property. Hence it had remained vacant for a number of years. The windows were broken and boarded up, as was the door.

Kerry realized that the circumstance of the landlord of "The House of a Hundred Raptures" being named Jacobs, and the lessee of the Cubanis Cigarette Company's premises in old Bond Street being named Isaacs, might be no more than a coincidence. Nevertheless it was odd. He had determined to explore the place without unduly advertising his intentions.

Two modes of entrance presented themselves. There was a trap on the roof, but in order to reach it access would have to be obtained to one of the other houses in the row, which also possessed a roof-trap; or there were four windows overlooking a little back yard, two upstairs and two down.

By means of a short ladder which Coombes had brought for the purpose Kerry climbed on to the wall and dropped into the yard.

"The jemmy!" he said softly.

Coombes, also mounting, dropped the required implement. Kerry caught it deftly, and in a very few minutes had wrenched away the rough planking nailed over one of the lower windows, without making very much noise.

"Shall I come down?" inquired Coombes in muffled tones from the top of the wall.

"No," rapped Kerry. "Hide the ladder again. If I want help I'll whistle. Catch!"

He tossed the jemmy up to Coombes, and Coombes succeeded in catching it. Then Kerry raised the glass-less sash of the window and stepped into a little room, which he surveyed by the light of his electric torch. It was filthy and littered with rubbish, but showed no sign of having been occupied for a long time. The ceiling was nearly black, and so were the walls. He went out into a narrow passage similar to that in the house of Sin Sin Wa and leading to a stair.

Walking quietly, he began to ascend. Mollie Gretna's description of the opium-house had been most detailed and lurid, and he was prepared for some extravagant scene.

He found three bare, dirty rooms, having all the windows boarded up.

"Hell!" he said succinctly.

Resting his torch upon a dust-coated ledge of the room, which presumably was situated in the front of the house, he deposited a cud of chewing-gum in the empty grate and lovingly selected a fresh piece from the packet which he always carried. Once more chewing he returned to the narrow passage, which he knew must be that in which the secret doorway had opened.

It was uncarpeted and dirty, and the walls were covered with faded filthy paper, the original color and design of which were quite lost. There was not the slightest evidence that a door had ever existed in any part of the wall. Following a detailed examination Kerry returned his magnifying glass to the washleather bag and the bag to his waistcoat pocket.

"H'm," he said, thinking aloud, "Sin Sin Wa may have only one eye, but it's a good eye."

He raised his glance to the blackened ceiling of the passage, and saw that the trap giving access to the roof was situated immediately above him. He

directed the ray of the torch upon it. In the next moment he had snapped off the light and was creeping silently towards the door of the front room.

The trap had moved slightly!

Gaining the doorway, Kerry stood just inside the room and waited. He became conscious of a kind of joyous excitement, which claimed him at such moments; an eagerness and a lust of action. But he stood perfectly still, listening and waiting.

There came a faint creaking sound, and a new damp chilliness was added to the stale atmosphere of the passage. Someone had quietly raised the trap.

Cutting through the blackness like a scimitar shone a ray of light from above, widening as it descended and ending in a white patch on the floor. It was moved to and fro. Then it disappeared. Another vague creaking sound followed—that caused by a man's weight being imposed upon a wooden framework.

Finally came a thud on the bare boards of the floor.

Complete silence ensued. Kerry waited, muscles tense and brain alert. He even suspended the chewing operation. A dull, padding sound reached his ears.

From the quality of the thud which had told of the intruder's drop from the trap to the floor, Kerry had deduced that he wore rubber- soled shoes. Now, the sound which he could hear was that of the stranger's furtive footsteps. He was approaching the doorway in which Kerry was standing.

Just behind the open door Kerry waited. And unheralded by any further sound to tell of his approach, the intruder suddenly shone a ray of light right into the room. He was on the threshold; only the door concealed him from Kerry, and concealed Kerry from the new-comer.

The disc of light cast into the dirty room grew smaller. The man with the torch was entering. A hand which grasped a magazine pistol appeared beyond the edge of the door, and Kerry's period of inactivity came to an end. Leaning back he adroitly kicked the weapon from the hand of the man who held it!

There was a smothered cry of pain, and the pistol fell clattering on the floor. The light went out, too. As it vanished Kerry leapt from his hiding-place. Snapping on the light of his own pocket lamp, he ran out into the passage.

Crack! came the report of a pistol.

Kerry dropped flat on the floor. He had not counted on the intruder being armed with two pistols! His pocket lamp, still alight, fell beside him, and he lay in a curiously rigid attitude on his side, one knee drawn up and his arm thrown across his face.

Carefully avoiding the path of light cast by the fallen torch, the unseen stranger approached silently. Pistol in hand, he bent, nearer and nearer, striving to see the face of the prostrate man. Kerry lay deathly still. The other dropped on one knee and bent closely over him. . . .

Swiftly as a lash Kerry's arm was whipped around the man's neck, and helpless he pitched over on to his head! Uttering a dull groan, he lay heavy and still across Kerry's body.

"Flames!" muttered the Chief Inspector, extricating himself; "I didn't mean to break his neck."

He took up the electric torch, and shone it upon the face of the man on the floor. It was a dirty, unshaven face, unevenly tanned, as though the man had worn a beard until quite recently and had come from a hot climate. He was attired in a manner which suggested that he might be a ship's fireman save that he wore canvas shoes having rubber soles.

Kerry stood watching him for some moments. Then he groped behind him with one foot until he found the pistol, the second pistol which the man had dropped as he pitched on his skull. Kerry picked it up, and resting the electric torch upon the crown of his neat bowler hat— which lay upon the floor—he stooped, pistol in hand, and searched the pockets of the prostrate man, who had begun to breathe stertorously. In the breast pocket he found a leather wallet of good quality; and at this he stared, a curious expression coming into his fierce eyes. He opened it, and found Treasury notes, some official-looking papers, and a number of cards. Upon one of these cards be directed the light, and this is what he read:

Lord Wrexborough
Great Cumberland Place, V. 1
"To introduce 719. W."

"God's truth!" gasped Kerry. "It's the man from Whitehall!"

The stertorous breathing ceased, and a very dirty hand was thrust up to him.

"I'm glad you spoke, Chief Inspector Kerry," drawled a vaguely familiar voice. "I was just about to kick you in the back of the neck!"

Kerry dropped the wallet and grasped the proffered hand. "719" stood up, smiling grimly. Footsteps were clattering on the stairs. Coombes had heard the shot.

"Sir," said Kerry, "if ever you need a testimonial to your efficiency at this game, my address is Sixty-seven Spenser Road, Brixton. We've met before."

"We have, Chief Inspector," was the reply. "We met at Kazmah's, and later at a certain gambling den in Soho."

The pseudo fireman dragged a big cigar-case from his hip-pocket.

"I'm known as Seton Pasha. Can I offer you a cheroot?"

XXXI. THE STORY OF 719

In a top back room of the end house in the street which also boasted the residence of Sin Sin Wa, Seton Pasha and Chief Inspector Kerry sat one on either side of a dirty deal table. Seton smoked and Kerry chewed. A smoky oil-lamp burned upon the table, and two notebooks lay beside it.

"It is certainly odd," Seton was saying, "that you failed to break my neck. But I have made it a practice since taking up my residence here to wear a cap heavily padded. I apprehend sandbags and pieces of loaded tubing."

"The tube is not made," declared Kerry, "which can do the job. You're harder to kill than a Chinese-Jew."

"Your own escape is almost equally remarkable," added Seton. "I rarely miss at such short range. But you had nearly broken my wrist with that kick."

"I'm sorry," said Kerry. "You should always bang a door wide open suddenly before you enter into a suspected room. Anybody standing behind usually stops it with his head."

"I am indebted for the hint, Chief Inspector. We all have something to learn."

"Well, sir, we've laid our cards on the table, and you'll admit we've both got a lot to learn before we see daylight. I'll be obliged if you'll put me wise

to your game. I take it you began work on the very night of the murder?"

"I did. By a pure accident—the finding of an opiated cigarette in Mr Gray's rooms—I perceived that the business which had led to my recall from the East was involved in the Bond Street mystery. Frankly, Chief Inspector, I doubted at that time if it were possible for you and me to work together. I decided to work alone. A beard which I had worn in the East, for purposes of disguise, I shaved off; and because the skin was whiter where the hair had grown than elsewhere, I found it necessary after shaving to powder my face heavily. This accounts for the description given to you of a man with a pale face. Even now the coloring is irregular, as you may notice.

"Deciding to work anonymously, I went post haste to Lord Wrexhorough and made certain arrangements whereby I became known to the responsible authorities as 719. The explanation of these figures is a simple one. My name is Greville Seton. G is the seventh letter in the alphabet, and S the nineteenth; hence—'seven-nineteen.'

"The increase of the drug traffic and the failure of the police to cope with it had led to the institution of a Home office inquiry, you see. It was suspected that the traffic was in the hands of orientals, and in looking about for a confidential agent to make certain inquiries my name cropped up. I was at that time employed by the Foreign office, but Lord Wrexborough borrowed me." Seton smiled at his own expression. "Every facility was offered to me, as you know. And that my investigations led me to the same conclusion as your own, my presence as lessee of this room, in the person of John Smiles, seaman, sufficiently demonstrates."

"H'm," said Kerry, "and I take it your investigations have also led you to the conclusion that our hands are clean?"

Seton Pasha fixed his cool regard upon the speaker.

"Personally, I never doubted this, Chief Inspector," he declared. "I believed, and I still believe, that the people who traffic in drugs are clever enough to keep in the good books of the local police. It is a case of clever camouflage, rather than corruption."

"Ah," snapped Kerry. "I was waiting to hear you mention it. So long as we know. I'm not a man that stands for being pointed at. I've got a boy at a good public school, but if ever he said he was ashamed of his father, the day he said it would be a day he'd never forget!"

Seton Pasha smiled grimly and changed the topic.

"Let us see," he said, "if we are any nearer to the heart of the mystery of Kazmah. You were at the Regent Street bank today, I understand, at which the late Sir Lucien Pyne had an account?"

"I was," replied Kerry. "Next to his theatrical enterprises his chief source of income seems to have been a certain Jose Santos Company, of Buenos Ayres. We've traced Kazmah's account, too. But no one at the bank has ever seen him. The missing Rashid always paid in. Checks were signed 'Mohammed el-Kazmah,' in which name the account had been opened. From the amount standing to his credit there it's evident that the proceeds of the dope business went elsewhere."

"Where do you think they went?" asked Seton quietly, watching Kerry.

"Well," rapped Kerry, "I think the same as you. I've got two eyes and I can see out of both of them."

"And you think?"

"I think they went to the Jose Santos Company, of Buenos Ayres!"

"Right!" cried Seton. "I feel sure of it. We may never know how it was all arranged or who was concerned, but I am convinced that Mr Isaacs, lessee of the Cubanis Cigarette Company offices, Mr Jacobs (my landlord!), Mohammed el-Kazmah—whoever he may be—the untraceable Mrs Sin Sin Wa, and another, were all shareholders of the Jose Santos company."

"I'm with you. By 'another' you mean?"

"Sir Lucien! It's horrible, but I'm afraid it's true."

They became silent for a while. Kerry chewed and Seton smoked. Then:

"The significance of the fact that Sir Lucien's study window was no more than forty paces across the leads from a well-oiled window of the Cubanis Company will not have escaped you," said Seton. "I performed the journey just ahead of you, I believe. Then Sir Lucien had lived in Buenos Ayres; that was before he came into the title, and at a time, I am told, when he was not overburdened with wealth. His man, Mareno, is indisputably some kind of a South American, and he can give no satisfactory account of his movements on the night of the murder.

"That we have to deal with a powerful drug syndicate there can be no doubt. The late Sir Lucien may not have been a director, but I feel sure he was financially interested. Kazmah's was the distributing office, and the importer—"

"Was Sin Sin Wa!" cried Kerry, his eyes gleaming savagely. "He's as clever and cunning as all the rest of Chinatown put together. Somewhere not a hundred miles from this spot where we are now there's a store of stuff big enough to dope all Europe!"

"And there's something else," said Seton quietly, knocking a cone of grey ash from his cheroot on to the dirty floor. "Kazmah is hiding there in all probability, if he hasn't got clear away—and Mrs Monte Irvin is being held a prisoner!"

"If they haven't—"

"For Irvin's sake I hope not, Chief Inspector. There are two very curious points in the case—apart from the mystery which surrounds the man Kazmah: the fact that Mareno, palpably an accomplice, stayed to face the music, and the fact that Sin Sin Wa likewise has made no effort to escape. Do you see what it means? They are covering the big man—Kazmah. Once he and Mrs Irvin are out of the way, we can prove nothing against Mareno and Sin Sin Wa! And the most we could do for Mrs Sin would be to convict her of selling opium."

"To do even that we should have to take a witness to court," said Kerry gloomily; "and all the satisfaction we'd get would be to see her charged ten pounds!"

Silence fell between them again. It was that kind of sympathetic silence which is only possible where harmony exists; and, indeed, of all the things strange and bizarre which characterized the inquiry, this sudden amity between Kerry and Seton Pasha was not the least remarkable. It represented the fruit of a mutual respect.

There was something about the lean, unshaven face of Seton Pasha, and something, too, in his bright grey eyes which, allowing for difference of coloring, might have reminded a close observer of Kerry's fierce countenance. The tokens of iron determination and utter indifference to danger were perceptible in both. And although Seton was dark and turning slightly grey, while Kerry was as red as a man well could be, that they possessed several common traits of character was a fact which the dissimilarity of their complexions wholly failed to conceal. But while Seton Pasha hid the grimness of his nature beneath a sort of humorous reserve, the dangerous side of Kerry was displayed in his open truculence.

Seated there in that Limehouse attic, a smoky lamp burning on the table between them, and one gripping the stump of a cheroot between his teeth, while the other chewed steadily, they presented a combination which none but a fool would have lightly challenged.

"Sin Sin Wa is cunning," said Seton suddenly. "He is a very clever man. Watch him as closely as you like, he will never lead you to the 'store.' In the character of John Smiles I had some conversation with him this morning, and I formed the same opinion as yourself. He is waiting for something; and he is certain of his ground. I have a premonition, Chief Inspector, that whoever else may fall into the net, Sin Sin Wa will slip out. We have one big chance."

"What's that?" rapped Kerry.

"The dope syndicate can only have got control of 'the traffic' in one way—by paying big prices and buying out competitors. If they cease to carry on for even a week they lose their control. The people who bring the stuff over from Japan, South America, India, Holland, and so forth will sell somewhere else if they can't sell to Kazmah and Company. Therefore we want to watch the ships from likely ports, or, better still, get among the men who do the smuggling. There must be resorts along the riverside used by people of that class. We might pick up information there."

Kerry smiled savagely.

"I've got half a dozen good men doing every dive from Wapping to Gravesend," he answered. "But if you think it worth looking into personally, say the word."

"Well, my dear sir,"—Seton Pasha tossed the end of his cheroot into the empty grate—"what else can we do?"

Kerry banged his fist on the table.

"You're right!" he snapped. "We're stuck! But anything's better than nothing. We'll start here and now; and the first joint we'll make for is Dougal's."

"Dougal's?" echoed Seton Pasha.

"That's it—Dougal's. A danger spot on the Isle of Dogs used by the lowest type of sea-faring men and not barred to Arabs, Chinks, and other gaily-colored fowl. If there's any chat going on about dope, we'll hear it in Dougal's."

Seton Pasha stood up, smiling grimly. "Dougal's it shall be," he said.

XXXII. ON THE ISLE OF DOGS

As the police beat left Limehouse Pier, a clammy south-easterly breeze blowing up-stream lifted the fog in clearly defined layers, an effect very singular to behold. At one moment a great arc-lamp burning above the Lavender Pond of the Surrey Commercial Dock shot out a yellowish light across the Thames. Then, as suddenly as it had come, the light vanished again as a stratum of mist floated before it.

The creaking of the oars sounded muffled and ghostly, and none of the men in the boat seemed to be inclined to converse. Heading across stream they made for the unseen promontory of the Isle of Dogs. Navigation was suspended, and they reached midstream without seeing a ship's light. Then came the damp wind again to lift the fog, and ahead of them they discerned one of the General Steam Navigation Company's boats awaiting an opportunity to make her dock at the head of Deptford Creek. The clamor of an ironworks on the Millwall shore burst loudly upon their ears, and away astern the lights of the Surrey Dock shone out once more. Hugging the bank they pursued a southerly course, and from Limehouse Reach crept down to Greenwich Reach.

Fog closed in upon them, a curtain obscuring both light and sound. When the breeze came again it had gathered force, and it drove the mist before it in wreathing banks, and brought to their ears a dull lowing and to their nostrils a farmyard odor from the cattle pens. Ghostly flames, leaping and falling, leaping and falling, showed where a gasworks lay on the Greenwich bank ahead.

Eastward swept the river now, and fresher blew the breeze. As they rounded the blunt point of the "Isle" the fog banks went swirling past them astern, and the lights on either shore showed clearly ahead. A ship's siren began to roar somewhere behind them. The steamer which they had passed was about to pursue her course.

Closer in-shore drew the boat, passing a series of wharves, and beyond these a tract of waste, desolate bank very gloomy in the half light and apparently boasting no habitation of man. The activities of the Greenwich

bank seemed remote, and the desolation of the Isle of Dogs very near, touching them intimately with its peculiar gloom.

A light sprang into view some little distance inland, notable because it shone lonely in an expanse of utter blackness. Kerry broke the long silence.

"Dougal's," he said. "Put us ashore here."

The police boat was pulled in under a rickety wooden structure, beneath which the Thames water whispered eerily; and Kerry and Seton disembarked, mounting a short flight of slimy wooden steps and crossing a roughly planked place on to a shingly slope. Climbing this, they were on damp waste ground, pathless and uninviting.

"Dougal's is being watched," said Kerry. "I think I told you?"

"Yes," replied Seton. "But I have formed the opinion that the dope gang is too clever for the ordinary type of man. Sin Sin Wa is an instance of what I mean. Neither you nor I doubt that he is a receiver of drugs—perhaps the receiver; but where is our case? The only real link connecting him with the West-End habitue is his wife. And she has conveniently deserted him! We cannot possibly prove that she hasn't while he chooses to maintain that she has."

"H'm," grunted Kerry, abruptly changing the subject. "I hope I'm not recognized here."

"Have you visited the place before?"

"Some years ago. Unless there are any old hands on view tonight, I don't think I shall be spotted."

He wore a heavy and threadbare overcoat, which was several sizes too large for him, a muffler, and a weed cap—the outfit supplied by Seton Pasha; and he had a very vivid and unpleasant recollection of his appearance as viewed in his little pocket-mirror before leaving Seton's room. As they proceeded across the muddy wilderness towards the light which marked the site of Dougal's, they presented a picture of a sufficiently villainous pair.

The ground was irregular, and the path wound sinuously about mounds of rubbish; so that often the guiding light was lost, and they stumbled blindly among nondescript litter, which apparently represented the accumulation of centuries. But finally they turned a corner formed by a stack of rusty scrap iron, and found a long, low building before them. From a ground-floor window light streamed out upon the fragments of rubbish strewing the

ground, from amid which sickly weeds uprose as if in defiance of nature's laws. Seton paused, and:

"What is Dougal's exactly?" he asked; "a public house?"

"No," rapped Kerry. "It's a coffee-shop used by the dockers. You'll see when we get inside. The place never closes so far as I know, and if we made 'em close there would be a dock strike."

He crossed and pushed open the swing door. As Seton entered at his heels, a babel of coarse voices struck upon his ears and he found himself in a superheated atmosphere suggestive of shag, stale spirits, and imperfectly washed humanity.

Dougal's proved to be a kind of hut of wood and corrugated iron, not unlike an army canteen. There were two counters, one at either end, and two large American stoves. Oil lamps hung from the beams, and the furniture was made up of trestle tables, rough wooden chairs, and empty barrels. Coarse, thick curtains covered all the windows but one. The counter further from the entrance was laden with articles of food, such as pies, tins of bully-beef, and "saveloys," while the other was devoted to liquid refreshment in the form of ginger-beer and cider (or so the casks were conspicuously labelled), tea, coffee, and cocoa.

The place was uncomfortably crowded; the patrons congregating more especially around the two stoves. There were men who looked like dock laborers, seamen, and riverside loafers; lascars, Chinese, Arabs, and dagoes; and at the "solid" counter there presided a red-armed, brawny woman, fierce of mien and ready of tongue, while a huge Irishman, possessing a broken nose and deficient teeth, ruled the "liquid" department with a rod of iron and a flow of language which shocked even Kerry. This formidable ruffian, a retired warrior of the ring, was Dougal, said to be the strongest man from Tower Hill to the River Lea.

As they entered, several of the patrons glanced at them curiously, but no one seemed to be particularly interested. Kerry wore his cap pulled well down over his fierce eyes, and had the collar of his topcoat turned up.

He looked about him, as if expecting to recognize someone; and as they made their way to Dougal's counter, a big fellow dressed in the manner of a dock laborer stepped up to the Chief Inspector and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Have one with me, Mike," he said, winking. "The coffee's good."

Kerry bent towards him swiftly, and:

"Anybody here, Jervis?" he whispered.

"George Martin is at the bar. I've had the tip that he 'traffics.' You'll remember he figured in my last report, sir."

Kerry nodded, and the trio elbowed their way to the counter. The pseudo-dock hand was a detective attached to Leman Street, and one who knew the night birds of East End London as few men outside their own circles knew them.

"Three coffees, Pat," he cried, leaning across the shoulder of a heavy, red-headed fellow who lolled against the counter. "And two lumps of sugar in each."

"To hell wid yer sugar!" roared Dougal, grasping three cups deftly in one hairy hand and filling them from a steaming urn. "There's no more sugar tonight."

"Not any brown sugar?" asked the customer.

"Yez can have one tayspoon of brown, and no more tonight," cried Dougal.

He stooped rapidly below the counter, then pushed the three cups of coffee towards the detective. The latter tossed a shilling down, at which Dougal glared ferociously.

"'Twas wid sugar ye said!" he roared.

A second shilling followed. Dougal swept both coins into a drawer and turned to another customer, who was also clamoring for coffee. Securing their cups with difficulty, for the red-headed man surlily refused to budge, they retired to a comparatively quiet spot, and Seton tasted the hot beverage.

"H'm," he said. "Rum! Good rum, too!"

"It's a nice position for me," snapped Kerry. "I don't think I would remind you that there's a police station actually on this blessed island. If there was a dive like Dougal's anywhere West it would be raided as a matter of course. But to shut Dougal's would be to raise hell. There are two laws in England, sir; one for Piccadilly and the other for the Isle of Dogs!" He sipped his coffee with appreciation. Jervis looked about him cautiously, and:

"That's George—the red-headed hooligan against the counter," he said. "He's been liquoring up pretty freely, and I shouldn't be surprised to find

that he's got a job on tonight. He has a skiff beached below here, and I think he's waiting for the tide."

"Good!" rapped Kerry. "Where can we find a boat?"

"Well," Jervis smiled. "There are several lying there if you didn't come in an R.P. boat."

"We did. But I'll dismiss it. We want a small boat."

"Very good, sir. We shall have to pinch one!"

"That doesn't matter," declared Kerry glancing at Seton with a sudden twinkle discernible in his steely eyes. "What do you say, sir?"

"I agree with you entirely," replied Seton quietly. "We must find a boat, and lie off somewhere to watch for George. He should be worth following."

"We'll be moving, then," said the Leman Street detective. "It will be high tide in an hour."

They finished their coffee as quickly as possible; the stuff was not far below boiling-point. Then Jervis returned the cups to the counter. "Good night, Pat!" he cried, and rejoined Seton and Kerry.

As they came out into the desolation of the scrap heaps, the last traces of fog had disappeared and a steady breeze came up the river, fresh and salty from the Nore. Jervis led them in a north-easterly direction, threading a way through pyramids of rubbish, until with the wind in their teeth they came out upon the river bank at a point where the shore shelved steeply downwards. A number of boats lay on the shingle.

"We're pretty well opposite Greenwich Marshes," said Jervis. "You can just see one of the big gasometers. The end boat is George's."

"Have you searched it?" rapped Kerry, placing a fresh piece of chewing-gum between his teeth.

"I have, sir. Oh, he's too wise for that!"

"I propose," said Seton briskly, "that we borrow one of the other boats and pull down stream to where that short pier juts out. We can hide behind it and watch for our man. I take it he'll be bound up- stream, and the tide will help us to follow him quietly."

"Right," said Kerry. "We'll take the small dinghy. It's big enough."

He turned to Jervis.

"Nip across to the wooden stairs," he directed, "and tell Inspector White to stand by, but to keep out of sight. If we've started before you return, go back and join him."

"Very good, sir."

Jervis turned and disappeared into the mazes of rubbish, as Seton and Kerry grasped the boat and ran it down into the rising tide. Kerry boarding, Seton thrust it out into the river and climbed in over the stern.

"Phew! The current drags like a tow-boat!" said Kerry.

They were being drawn rapidly up-stream. But as Kerry seized the oars and began to pull steadily, this progress was checked. He could make little actual headway, however.

"The tide races round this bend like fury," he said. "Bear on the oars, sir."

Seton thereupon came to Kerry's assistance, and gradually the dinghy crept upon its course, until, below the little pier, they found a sheltered spot, where it was possible to run in and lie hidden. As they won this haven:

"Quiet!" said Seton. "Don't move the oars. Look! We were only just in time!"

Immediately above them, where the boats were beached, a man was coming down the slope, carrying a hurricane lantern. As Kerry and Seton watched, the man raised the lantern and swung it to and fro.

"Watch!" whispered Seton. "He's signalling to the Greenwich bank!"

Kerry's teeth snapped savagely together, and he chewed but made no reply, until:

"There it is!" he said rapidly. "On the marshes!"

A speck of light in the darkness it showed, a distant moving lantern on the curtain of the night. Although few would have credited Kerry with the virtue, he was a man of cultured imagination, and it seemed to him, as it seemed to Seton Pasha, that the dim light symbolized the life of the missing woman, of the woman who hovered between the gay world from which tragically she had vanished and some Chinese hell upon whose brink she hovered. Neither of the watchers was thinking of the crime and the criminal, of Sir Lucien Pyne or Kazmah, but of Mrs Monte Irvin, mysterious victim of a mysterious tragedy. "Oh, Dan! ye must find her! ye must find her! Puir weak hairt—dinna ye ken how she is suffering!" Clairvoyantly, to Kerry's ears was borne an echo of his wife's words.

"The traffic!" he whispered. "If we lose George Martin tonight we deserve to lose the case!"

"I agree, Chief Inspector," said Seton quietly.

The grating sound made by a boat thrust out from a shingle beach came to their ears above the whispering of the tide. A ghostly figure in the dim light, George Martin clambered into his craft and took to the oars.

"If he's for the Greenwich bank," said Seton grimly, "he has a stiff task."

But for the Greenwich bank the boat was headed; and pulling mightily against the current, the man struck out into mid-stream. They watched him for some time, silently, noting how he fought against the tide, sturdily heading for the point at which the signal had shown. Then:

"What do you suggest?" asked Seton. "He may follow the Surrey bank up- stream."

"I suggest," said Kerry, "that we drift. Once in Limehouse Reach we'll hear him. There are no pleasure parties punting about that stretch."

"Let us pull out, then. I propose that we wait for him at some convenient point between the West India Dock and Limehouse Basin."

"Good," rapped Kerry, thrusting the boat out into the fierce current. "You may have spent a long time in the East, sir, but you're fairly wise on the geography of the lower Thames."

Gripped in the strongly running tide they were borne smoothly up-stream, using the oars merely for the purpose of steering. The gloomy mystery of the London river claimed them and imposed silence upon them, until familiar landmarks told of the northern bend of the Thames, and the light above the Lavender Pond shone out upon the unctuously moving water.

Each pulling a scull they headed in for the left bank.

"There's a wharf ahead," said Seton, looking back over his shoulder. "If we put in beside it we can wait there unobserved."

"Good enough," said Kerry.

They bent to the oars, stealing stroke by stroke out of the grip of the tide, and presently came to a tiny pool above the wharf structure, where it was possible to lie undisturbed by the eager current.

Those limitations which are common to all humanity and that guile which is peculiar to the Chinese veiled the fact from their ken that the deserted wharf, in whose shelter they lay, was at once the roof and the gateway of Sin Sin Wa's receiving office!

As the boat drew in to the bank, a Chinese boy who was standing on the wharf retired into the shadows. From a spot visible down-stream but

invisible to the men in the boat, he signalled constantly with a hurricane lantern.

Three men from New Scotland Yard were watching the house of Sin Sin Wa, and Sin Sin Wa had given no sign of animation since, some hours earlier, he had extinguished his bedroom light. Yet George, drifting noiselessly up-stream, received a signal to the effect "police" while Seton Pasha and Chief Inspector Kerry lay below the biggest dope cache in London. Seton sometimes swore under his breath. Kerry chewed incessantly. But George never came.

At that eerie hour of the night when all things living, from the lowest to the highest, nor excepting Mother Earth herself, grow chilled, when all Nature's perishable handiwork feels the touch of death—a wild, sudden cry rang out, a wailing, sorrowful cry, that seemed to come from nowhere, from everywhere, from the bank, from the stream; that rose and fell and died sobbing into the hushed whisper of the tide.

Seton's hand fastened like a vise on to Kerry's shoulder, and:

"Merciful God!" he whispered; "what was it? Who was it?"

"If it wasn't a spirit it was a woman," replied Kerry hoarsely; "and a woman very near to her end."

"Kerry!"—Seton Pasha had dropped all formality—"Kerry—if it calls for all the men that Scotland Yard can muster, we must search every building, down to the smallest rathole in the floor, on this bank—and do it by dawn!"

"We'll do it," rapped Kerry.

PART FOURTH

THE EYE OF SIN SIN WA

XXXIII. CHINESE MAGIC

Detective-Sergeant Coombes and three assistants watched the house of Sin Sin Wa, and any one of the three would have been prepared to swear "on the Book" that Sin Sin Wa was sleeping. But he who watches a Chinaman watches an illusionist. He must approach his task in the spirit of a psychical inquirer who seeks to trap a bogus medium. The great Robert Houdin, one of the master wizards of modern times, quitted Petrograd by two gates at the same hour according to credible witnesses; but his performance sinks into insignificance beside that of a Chinese predecessor who flourished under one of the Ming emperors. The palace of this potentate was approached by gates, each having twelve locks, and each being watched by twelve guards. Nevertheless a distinguished member of the wizard family not only gained access to the imperial presence but also departed again unseen by any of the guards, and leaving all the gates locked behind him! If Detective-Sergeant Coombes had known this story he might not have experienced such complete confidence.

That door of Sin Sin Wa's establishment which gave upon a little backyard was oiled both lock and hinge so that it opened noiselessly. Like a shadow, like a ghost, Sin Sin Wa crept forth, closing the door behind him. He carried a sort of canvas kit-bag, so that one observing him might have concluded that he was "moving."

Resting his bag against the end wall, he climbed up by means of holes in the neglected brickwork until he could peer over the top. A faint smell of tobacco smoke greeted him: a detective was standing in the lane below. Soundlessly, Sin Sin Wa descended again. Raising his bag he lifted it lovingly until it rested upright upon the top of the wall and against the side of the house. The night was dark and still. Only a confused beating sound on the Surrey bank rose above the murmur of sleeping London.

From the rubbish amid which he stood, Sin Sin Wa selected a piece of rusty barrel-hoop. Cautiously he mounted upon a wooden structure built against the end wall and raised himself upright, surveying the prospect. Then he hurled the fragment of iron far along the lane, so that it bounded upon a strip of corrugated roofing in a yard twice removed from his own, and fell clattering among a neighbor's rubbish.

A short exclamation came from the detective in the lane. He could be heard walking swiftly away in the direction of the disturbance. And ere he

had gone six paces, Sin Sin Wa was bending like an inverted U over the wall and was lowering his precious bag to the ground. Like a cat he sprang across and dropped noiselessly beside it.

"Hello! Who's there?" cried the detective, standing by the wall of the house which Sin Sin Wa had selected as a target.

Sin Sin Wa, bag in hand, trotted, soft of foot, across the lane and into the shadow of the dock-building. By the time that the C.I.D. man had decided to climb up and investigate the mysterious noise, Sin Sin Wa was on the other side of the canal and rapping gently upon the door of Sam Tuk's hairdressing establishment.

The door was opened so quickly as to suggest that someone had been posted there for the purpose. Sin Sin Wa entered and the door was closed again.

"Light, Ah Fung," he said in Chinese. "What news?"

The boy who had admitted him took a lamp from under a sort of rough counter and turned to Sin Sin Wa.

"George came with the boat, master, but I signalled to him that the red policeman and the agent who has hired the end room were watching."

"They are gone?"

"They gather men at the head depot and are searching house from house. She who sleeps below awoke and cried out. They heard her cry."

"George waits?"

"He waits, master. He will wait long if the gain is great."

"Good."

Sin Sin Wa shuffled across to the cellar stairs, followed by Ah Fung with the lamp. He descended, and, brushing away the carefully spread coal dust, inserted the piece of bent wire into the crevice and raised the secret trap. Bearing his bag upon his shoulder he went down into the tunnel.

"Reclose the door, Ah Fung," he said softly; "and be watchful."

As the boy replaced the stone trap, Sin Sin Wa struck a match. Then, having the lighted match held in one hand and carrying the bag in the other, he crept along the low passage to the door of the cache. Dropping the smouldering match-end, he opened the door and entered that secret warehouse for which so many people were seeking.

Seated in a cane chair by the oil-stove was the shrivelled figure of Sam Tuk, his bald head lolling sideways so that his big horn-rimmed spectacles

resembled a figure 8. On the counter was set a ship's lantern. As Sin Sin Wa came in Sam Tuk slowly raised his head.

No greetings were exchanged, but Sin Sin Wa untied the neck of his kit-bag and drew out a large wicker cage. Thereupon: "Hello! hello!" remarked the occupant drowsily. "Number one p'lice chop lo! Sin Sin Wa—Sin Sin. . . ."

"Come, my Tling-a-Ling," crooned Sin Sin Wa.

He opened the front of the cage and out stepped the raven onto his wrist. Sin Sin Wa raised his arm and Tling-a-Ling settled himself contentedly upon his master's shoulder.

Placing the empty cage on the counter. Sin Sin Wa plunged his hand down into the bag and drew out the gleaming wooden joss. This he set beside the cage. With never a glance at the mummy figure of Sam Tuk, he walked around the counter, raven on shoulder, and grasping the end of the laden shelves, he pulled the last section smoothly to the left, showing that it was attached to a sliding door. The establishments of Sin Sin Wa were as full of surprises as a Sicilian trinketbox.

The double purpose of the timbering which had been added to this old storage vault was now revealed. It not only served to enlarge the store-room, but also shut off from view a second portion of the cellar, smaller than the first, and containing appointments which indicated that it was sometimes inhabited.

There was an oil-stove in the room, which, like that adjoining it, was evidently unprovided with any proper means of ventilation. A paper- shaded lamp hung from the low roof. The floor was covered with matting, and there were arm-chairs, a divan and other items of furniture, which had been removed from Mrs Sin's sanctum in the dismantled House of a Hundred Raptures. In a recess a bed was placed, and as Sin Sin Wa came in Mrs Sin was standing by the bed looking down at a woman who lay there.

Mrs Sin wore her kimona of embroidered green silk and made a striking picture in that sordid setting. Her black hair she had dyed a fashionable shade of red. She glanced rapidly across her shoulder at Sin Sin Wa—a glance of contempt with which was mingled faint distrust.

"So," she said, in Chinese, "you have come at last." Sin Sin Wa smiled. "They watched the old fox," he replied. "But their eyes were as the eyes of the mole."

Still aside, contemptuously, the woman regarded him, and:

"Suppose they are keener than you think?" she said. "Are you sure you have not led them—here?"

"The snail may not pursue the hawk," murmured Sin Sin Wa; "nor the eye of the bat follow his flight."

"Smartest leg," remarked the raven.

"Yes, yes, my little friend," crooned Sin Sin Wa, "very soon now you shall see the paddy-fields of Ho-Nan and watch the great Yellow River sweeping eastward to the sea."

"Pah!" said Mrs Sin. "Much—very much—you care about the paddy-fields of Ho-Nan, and little, oh, very little, about the dollars and the traffic! You have my papers?"

"All are complete. With those dollars for which I care not, a man might buy the world—if he had but enough of the dollars. You are well known in Poplar as 'Mrs Jacobs,' and your identity is easily established—as 'Mrs Jacobs.' You join the Mahratta at the Albert Dock. I have bought you a post as stewardess."

Mrs Sin tossed her head. "And Juan?"

"What can they prove against your Juan if you are missing?"

Mrs Sin nodded towards the bed.

With slow and shuffling steps Sin Sin Wa approached. He continued to smile, but his glittering eye held even less of mirth than usual. Tucking his hands into his sleeves, he stood and looked down—at Rita Irvin.

Her face had acquired a waxen quality, but some of her delicate coloring still lingered, lending her a ghastly and mask-like aspect. Her nostrils and lips were blanched, however, and possessed a curiously pinched appearance. It was impossible to detect the fact that she breathed, and her long lashes lay motionless upon her cheeks.

Sin Sin Wa studied her silently for some time, then:

"Yes," he murmured, "she is beautiful. But women are like adder's eggs. He is a fool who warms them in his bosom." He turned his slow regard upon Mrs Sin. "You have stained your hair to look even as hers. It was discreet, my wife. But one is beautiful and many-shadowed like a copper vase, and the other is like a winter sunset on the poppy-fields. You remind me of the angry red policeman, and I tremble."

"Tremble as much as you like," said Mrs Sin scornfully, "but do something, think; don't leave everything to me. She screamed tonight— and someone heard her. They are searching the river bank from door to door."

"Lo!" murmured Sin Sin Wa, "even this I had learned, nor failed to heed the beating of a distant drum. And why did she scream?"

"I was—keeping her asleep; and the prick of the needle woke her."

"Tchee, tchee," crooned Sin Sin Wa, his voice sinking lower and lower and his eye nearly closing. "But still she lives—and is beautiful."

"Beautiful!" mocked Mrs Sin. "A doll-woman, bloodless and nerveless!"

"So—so. Yet she, so bloodless and nerveless, unmasked the secret of Kazmah, and she, so bloodless and nerveless, struck down—"

Mrs Sin ground her teeth together audibly.

"Yes, yes!" she said in sibilant Chinese. "She is a robber, a thief, a murderess." She bent over the unconscious woman, her jewel-laden fingers crooked and menacing. "With my bare hands I would strangle her, but—"

"There must be no marks of violence when she is found in the river. Tchee, chee—it is a pity."

"Number one p'lice chop, lo!" croaked the raven, following this remark with the police-whistle imitation.

Mrs Sin turned and stared fiercely at the one-eyed bird.

"Why do you bring that evil, croaking thing here?" she demanded. "Have we not enough risks?"

Sin Sin Wa smiled patiently.

"Too many," he murmured. "For failure is nothing but the taking of seven risks when six were enough. Come—let us settle our affairs. The 'Jacobs' account is closed, but it is only a question of hours or days before the police learn that the wharf as well as the house belongs to someone of that name. We have drawn our last dollar from the traffic, my wife. Our stock we are resigned to lose. So let us settle our affairs."

"Smartest—smartest," croaked Tling-a-Ling, and rattled ghostly castanets.

XXXIV. ABOVE AND BELOW

"Thank the guid God I see ye alive, Dan," said Mary Kerry.

Having her husband's dressing-gown over her night attire, and her usually neat hair in great disorder, she stood just within the doorway of the little dining-room at Spenser Road, her face haggard and the fey light in her eyes. Kerry, seated in the armchair dressed as he had come in from the street, a parody of his neat self with mud on his shoes and streaks of green slime on his overall, raised his face from his hands and stared at her wearily.

"I awakened wi' a cry at some hour afore the dawn," she whispered stretching out her hands and looking like a wild-eyed prophetess of old. "My hairt beat sair fast and then grew caud. I droppit on my knees and prayed as I ha' ne'er prayed afore. Dan, Dan, I thought ye were gene from me."

"I nearly was," said Kerry, a faint spark of his old truculency lighting up the weary eyes. "The man from Whitehall only missed me by a miracle."

"'Twas the miracle o' prayer, Dan," declared his wife in a low, awe-stricken voice. "For as I prayed, a great comfort came to me an' a great peace. The second sight was wi' me, Dan, and I saw, no' yersel' —whereby I seemed to ken that ye were safe—but a puir dying soul stretched on a bed o' sorrow. At the fuit o' the bed was standing a fearsome figure o' a man—yellow and wicked, wi' his hands tuckit in his sleeves. I thought 'twas a veesion that was opening up tee me and that a' was about to be made clear, when as though a curtain had been droppit before my een, it went awe' an' I kenned it nae more; but plain—plain, I heerd the howling o' a dog."

Kerry started and clutched the arms of the chair.

"A dog!" he said. "A dog!"

"The howling o' a sma' dog," declared his wife; "and I thought 'twas a portent, an' the great fear came o'er me again. But as I prayed 'twas unfolder to me that the portent was no' for yersel' but for her—the puir weak hairt ye ha' tee save."

She ceased speaking and the strange fey light left her eyes. She dropped upon her knees beside Kerry, bending her head and throwing her arms about him. He glanced down at her tenderly and laid his hands upon her shoulders; but he was preoccupied, and the next moment, his jaws moving mechanically, he was staring straight before him.

"A dog," he muttered, "a dog!"

Mary Kerry did not move; until, a light of understanding coming into Kerry's fierce eyes, he slowly raised her and stood upright himself.

"I have it!" he said. "Mary, the case is won! Twenty men have spent the night and early morning beating the river bank so that the very rats have been driven from their holes. Twenty men have failed where a dog would have succeeded. Mary, I must be off."

"Ye're no goin' out again, Dan. Ye're weary tee death."

"I must, my dear, and it's you who send me."

"But, Dan, where are ye goin'?"

Kerry grabbed his hat and cane from the sideboard upon which they lay, and:

"I'm going for the dog!" he rapped.

Weary as he was and travel-stained, for once neglectful of that neatness upon which he prided himself, he set out, hope reborn in his heart. His assertion that the very rats had been driven from their holes was scarce an exaggeration. A search-party of twenty men, hastily mustered and conducted by Kerry and Seton Pasha, had explored every house, every shop, every wharf, and, as Kerry believed, every cellar adjoining the bank, between Limehouse Basin and the dock gates. Where access had been denied them or where no one had resided they had never hesitated to force an entrance. But no trace had they found of those whom they sought.

For the first time within Kerry's memory, or, indeed, within the memory of any member of the Criminal Investigation Department, Detective-Sergeant Coombes had ceased to smile when the appalling truth was revealed to him that Sin Sin Wa had vanished—that Sin Sin Wa had mysteriously joined that invisible company which included Kazmah, Mrs Sin and Mrs Monte Irvin. Not a word of reprimand did the Chief Inspector utter, but his eyes seemed to emit sparks. Hands plunged deeply in his pockets he had turned away, and not even Seton Pasha had dared to speak to him for fully five minutes.

Kerry began to regard the one-eyed Chinaman with a superstitious fear which he strove in vain to stifle. That any man could have succeeded in converting a chandu-khan such as that described by Mollie Gretna into a filthy deserted dwelling such as that visited by Kerry, within the space of some thirty-six hours, was well nigh incredible. But the Chief Inspector had deduced (correctly) that the exotic appointments depicted by Mollie were

all of a detachable nature—merely masking the filthiness beneath; so that at the shortest notice the House of a Hundred Raptures could be dismantled. The communicating door was a larger proposition, but that it was one within the compass of Sin Sin Wa its effectual disappearance sufficiently demonstrated.

Doubtless (Kerry mused savagely) the appointments of the opium-house had been smuggled into that magically hidden cache which now concealed the conjurer Sin Sin Wa as well as the other members of the Kazmah company. How any man of flesh and blood could have escaped from a six-roomed house surrounded by detectives surpassed Kerry's powers of imagination. How any apartment large enough to contain a mouse, much less half a dozen human beings, could exist anywhere within the area covered by the search-party he failed to understand, nor was he prepared to admit it humanly possible.

Kerry chartered a taxicab by Brixton Town Hall and directed the man to drive to Prince's Gate. To the curious glances of certain of his neighbors who had never before seen the Chief Inspector otherwise than a model of cleanliness and spruceness he was indifferent. But the manner in which the taxi-driver looked him up and down penetrated through the veil of abstraction which hitherto had rendered Kerry impervious to all external impressions, and:

"Give me another look like that, my lad," he snapped furiously, "and I'll bash your head through your blasted wind-screen."

A ready retort trembled upon the cabman's tongue, but a glance into the savage blue eyes reduced him to fearful silence. Kerry entered the cab and banged the door; and the man drove off positively trembling with indignation.

Deep in reflection the Chief Inspector was driven westward through the early morning traffic. Fine rain was falling, and the streets presented that curiously drab appearance which only London streets can present in all its dreary perfection. Workers bound Cityward fought for places inside trams and buses. A hundred human comedies and tragedies were to be witnessed upon the highways; but to all of them Kerry was blind as he was deaf to the din of workaday Babylon. In spirit he was roaming the bank of old Father Thames where the river sweeps eastward below Limehouse Causeway—wonder-stricken before the magic of the one-eyed wizard who could at will

efface himself as an artist rubs out a drawing, who could camouflage a drug warehouse so successfully that human skill, however closely addressed to the task, failed utterly to detect its whereabouts. Above the discord of the busy streets he heard again and again that cry in the night which had come from a hapless prisoner whom they were powerless to succor. He beat his cane upon the floor of the cab and swore savagely and loudly. The intimidated cabman, believing these demonstrations designed to urge him to a greater speed, performed feats of driving calculated to jeopardize his license. But still the savage passenger stamped and cursed, so that the cabby began to believe that a madman was seated behind him.

At the corner of Kennington Oval Kerry was effectually aroused to the realities. A little runabout car passed his cab, coming from a southerly direction. Proceeding at a rapid speed it was lost in the traffic ahead. Unconsciously Kerry had glanced at the occupants and had recognized Margaret Halley and Seton Pasha. The old spirit of rivalry between himself and the man from Whitehall leapt up hotly within Kerry's breast.

"Now where the hell has he been!" he muttered.

As a matter of fact, Seton Pasha, acting upon a suggestion of Margaret's had been to Brixton Prison to interview Juan Mareno who lay there under arrest. Contents bills announcing this arrest as the latest public development in the Bond Street murder case were to be seen upon every newstand; yet the problem of that which had brought Seton to the south of London was one with which Kerry grappled in vain. He had parted from the Home office agent in the early hours of the morning, and their parting had been one of mutual despair which neither had sought to disguise.

It was a coincidence which a student of human nature might have regarded as significant, that whereas Kerry had taken his troubles home to his wife, Seton Pasha had sought inspiration from Margaret Halley; and whereas the guidance of Mary Kerry had led the Chief Inspector to hurry in quest of Rita Irvin's spaniel, the result of Seton's interview with Margaret had been an equally hurried journey to the big jail.

Unhappily Seton had failed to elicit the slightest information from the saturnine Mareno. Unmoved alike by promises or threats, he had coolly adhered to his original evidence.

So, while the authorities worked feverishly and all England reading of the arrest of Mareno inquired indignantly, "But who is Kazmah, and where

is Mrs Monte Irvin?" Sin Sin Wa placidly pursued his arrangements for immediate departure to the paddyfields of Ho-Nan, and sometimes in the weird crooning voice with which he addressed the raven he would sing a monotonous chant dealing with the valley of the Yellow River where the opium-poppy grows. Hidden in the cunning vault, the search had passed above him; and watchful on a quay on the Surrey shore whereto his dinghy was fastened, George Martin awaited the signal which should tell him that Kazmah and Company were ready to leave. Any time after dark he expected to see the waving lantern and to collect his last payment from the traffic.

At the very hour that Kerry was hastening to Prince's Gate, Sin Sin Wa sat before the stove in the drug cache, the green-eyed joss upon his knee. With a fragment of chamois leather he lovingly polished the leering idol, crooning softly to himself and smiling his mirthless smile. Perched upon his shoulder the raven studied this operation with apparent interest, his solitary eye glittering bead-like. Upon the opposite side of the stove sat the ancient Sam Tuk and at intervals of five minutes or more he would slowly nod his hairless head.

The sliding door which concealed the inner room was partly open, and from the opening there shone forth a dim red light, cast by the paper-shaded lamp which illuminated the place. The coarse voice of the Cuban-Jewess rose and fell in a ceaseless half-muttered soliloquy, indescribably unpleasant but to which Sin Sin Wa was evidently indifferent.

Propped up amid cushions on the divan which once had formed part of the furniture of the House of a Hundred Raptures, Mrs Sin was smoking opium. The long bamboo pipe had fallen from her listless fingers, and her dark eyes were partly glazed. Buddha-like immobility was claiming her, but it had not yet effaced that expression of murderous malice with which the smoker contemplated the unconscious woman who lay upon the bed at the other end of the room.

As the moments passed the eyes of Mrs Sin grew more and more glazed. Her harsh voice became softened, and presently: "Ah!" she whispered; "so you wait to smoke with me?"

Immobile she sat propped up amid the cushions, and only her full lips moved.

"Two pipes are nothing to Cy," she murmured. "He smokes five. But you are not going to smoke?"

Again she paused, then:

"Ah, my Lucy. You smoke with me?" she whispered coaxingly.

Chandu had opened the poppy gates. Mrs Sin was conversing with her dead lover.

"Something has changed you," she sighed. "You are different—lately. You have lots of money now. Your investments have been good. You want to become—respectable, eh?"

Slightly—ever so slightly—the red lips curled upwards. No sound of life came from the woman lying white and still in the bed. But through the partly open door crept snatches of Sin Sin Wa's crooning melody.

"Yet once," she murmured, "yet once I seemed beautiful to you, Lucy. For La Belle Lola you forgot that English pride." She laughed softly. "You forgot Sin Sin Wa. If there had been no Lola you would never have escaped from Buenos Ayres with your life, my Lucy. You forgot that English pride, and did not ask me where I got them from—the ten thousand dollars to buy your 'honor' back."

She became silent, as if listening to the dead man's reply. Finally:

"No—I do not reproach you, my dear," she whispered. "You have paid me back a thousand fold, and Sin Sin Wa, the old fox, grows rich and fat. Today we hold the traffic in our hands, Lucy. The old fox cares only for his money. Before it is too late let us go—you and I. Do you remember Havana, and the two months of heaven we spent there? Oh, let us go back to Havana, Lucy. Kazmah has made us rich. Let Kazmah die. . . . You smoke with me?"

Again she became silent, then:

"Very likely," she murmured; "very likely I know why you don't smoke. You have promised your pretty little friend that you will stay awake and see that nobody tries to cut her sweet white throat."

She paused momentarily, then muttered something rapidly in Spanish, followed by a short, guttural phrase in Chinese.

"Why do you bring her to the house?" she whispered hoarsely. "And you brought her to Kazmah's. Ah! I see. Now everybody says you are changed. Yes. She is a charming friend."

The Buddha-like face became suddenly contorted, and as suddenly grew placid again.

"I know! I know!" Mrs Sin muttered harshly. "Do you think I am blind! If she had been like any of the others, do you suppose it would have mattered to me? But you respect her—you respect. . . ." Her voice died away to an almost inaudible whisper: "I don't believe you. You are telling me lies. But you have always told me lies; one more does not matter, I suppose. . . . How strong you are. You have hurt my wrists. You will smoke with me now?"

She ceased speaking abruptly, and abruptly resumed again:

"And I do as you wish—I do as you wish. How can I keep her from it except by making the price so high that she cannot afford to buy it? I tell you I do it. I bargain for the pink and white boy, Quentin, because I want her to be indebted to him—because I want her to be so sorry for him that she lets him take her away from you! Why should you respect her—"

Silence fell upon the drugged speaker. Sin Sin Wa could be heard crooning softly about the Yellow River and the mountain gods who sent it sweeping down through the valleys where the opium-poppy grows.

"Go, Juan," hissed Mrs Sin. "I say—go!"

Her voice changed eerily to a deep, mocking bass; and Rita Irvin lying, a pallid wraith of her once lovely self, upon the untidy bed, stirred slightly—her lashes quivering. Her eyes opened and stared straightly upward at the low, dirty ceiling, horror growing in their shadowy depths.

XXXV. BEYOND THE VEIL

Rita Irvin's awakening was no awakening in the usually accepted sense of the word; it did not even represent a lifting of the veil which cut her off from the world, but no more than a momentary perception of the existence of such a veil and of the existence of something behind it. Upon the veil, in grey smoke, the name "Kazmah" was written in moving characters. Beyond the veil, dimly divined, was life.

As of old the victims of the Inquisition, waking or dreaming, beheld ever before them the instrument of their torture, so before this woman's racked and half-numbed mind panoramically passed, an endless pageant, the incidents of the night which had cut her off from living men and women. She tottered on the border-line which divides sanity from madness. She was

learning what Sir Lucien had meant when, once, long long ago, in some remote time when she was young and happy and had belonged to a living world, he had said "a day is sure to come." It had come, that "day." It had dawned when she had torn the veil before Kazmah—and that veil had enveloped her ever since. All that had preceded the fatal act was blotted out, blurred and indistinct; all that had succeeded it lived eternally, passing, an endless pageant, before her tortured mind.

The horror of the moment when she had touched the hands of the man seated in the big ebony chair was of such kind that no subsequent terrors had supplanted it. For those long, slim hands of the color of old ivory were cold, rigid, lifeless—the hands of a corpse! Thus the pageant began, and it continued as hereafter, memory and delusion taking the stage in turn.

* * * * *

Complete darkness came.

Rita uttered a wild cry of horror and loathing, shrinking back from the thing which sat in the ebony chair. She felt that consciousness was slipping from her; felt herself falling, and shrieked to know herself helpless and alone with Kazmah. She groped for support, but found none; and, moaning, she sank down, and was unconscious of her fall.

A voice awakened her. Someone knelt beside her in the darkness, supporting her; someone who spoke wildly, despairingly, but with a strange, emotional reverence curbing the passion in his voice.

"Rita—my Rita! What have they done to you? Speak to me. . . . Oh God! Spare her to me. . . . Let her hate me for ever, but spare her—spare her. Rita, speak to me! I tried, heaven hear me, to save you little girl. I only want you to be happy!"

She felt herself being lifted gently, tenderly. And as though the man's passionate entreaty had called her back from the dead, she reentered into life and strove to realize what had happened.

Sir Lucien was supporting her, and she found it hard to credit the fact that it was he, the hard, nonchalant man of the world she knew, who had spoken. She clutched his arm with both hands.

"Oh, Lucy!" she whispered. "I am so frightened—and so ill."

"Thank God," he said huskily, "she is alive. Lean against me and try to stand up. We must get away from here."

Rita managed to stand upright, clinging wildly to Sir Lucien. A square, vaguely luminous opening became visible to her. Against it, silhouetted, she could discern part of the outline of Kazmah's chair. She drew back, uttering a low, sobbing cry. Sir Lucien supported her, and:

"Don't be afraid, dear," he said reassuringly. "Nothing shall hurt you."

He pushed open a door, and through it shone the same vague light which she had seen in the opening behind the chair. Sir Lucien spoke rapidly in a language which sounded like Spanish. He was answered by a perfect torrent of words in the same tongue.

Fiercely he cried something back at the hidden speaker.

A shriek of rage, of frenzy, came out of the darkness. Rita felt that consciousness was about to leave her again. She swayed forward dizzily, and a figure which seemed to belong to delirium—a lithe shadow out of which gleamed a pair of wild eyes—leapt upon her. A knife glittered. . . .

In order to have repelled the attack, Sir Lucien would have had to release Rita, who was clinging to him, weak and terror-stricken. Instead he threw himself before her. . . . She saw the knife enter his shoulder. . . .

Through absolute darkness she sank down into a land of chaotic nightmare horrors. Great bells clanged maddeningly. Impish hands plucked at her garments, dragged her hair. She was hurried this way and that, bruised, torn, and tossed helpless upon a sea of liquid brass. Through vast avenues lined with yellow, immobile Chinese faces she was borne upon a bier. Oblique eyes looked into hers. Knives which glittered greenly in the light of lamps globular and suspended in immeasurable space, were hurled at her in showers. . . .

Sir Lucien stood before her, supporting her; and all the knives buried themselves in his body. She tried to cry out, but no sound could she utter. Darkness fell again. . . .

A Chinaman was bending over her. His hands were tucked in his loose sleeves. He smiled, and his smile was hideous but friendly. He was strangely like Sin Sin Wa, save that he did not lack an eye.

Rita found herself lying in an untidy bed in a room laden with opium fumes and dimly lighted. On a table beside her were the remains of a meal. She strove to recall having partaken of food, but was unsuccessful. . . .

There came a blank—then a sharp, stabbing pain in her right arm. She thought it was the knife, and shrieked wildly again and again. . . .

Years seemingly elapsed, years of agony spent amid oblique eyes which floated in space unattached to any visible body, amid reeking fumes and sounds of ceaseless conflict. Once she heard the cry of some bird, and thought it must be the parakeet which eternally sat on a branch of a lonely palm in the heart of the Great Sahara. . . . Then, one night, when she lay shrinking from the plucking yellow hands which reached out of the darkness:

"Tell me your dream," boomed a deep, mocking voice; "and I will read its portent!"

She opened her eyes. She lay in the untidy bed in the room which was laden with the fumes of opium. She stared upward at the low, dirty ceiling.

"Why do you come to me with your stories of desperation?" continued the mocking voice. "You have insisted upon seeing me. I am here."

Rita managed to move her head so that she could see more of the room.

On a divan at the other end of the place, propped up by a number of garish cushions, Rita beheld Mrs Sin. The long bamboo pipe had fallen from her listless fingers. Her face wore an expression of mystic rapture, like that characterizing the features of some Chinese Buddhas. . . .

In the other corner of the divan, contemplating her from under heavy brows, sat Kazmah. . . .

XXXVI. SAM TUK MOVES

Chinatown was being watched as Chinatown had never been watched before, even during the most stringent enforcement of the Defence of the Realm Act. K Division was on its mettle, and Scotland Yard had sent to aid Chief Inspector Kerry every man that could be spared to the task. The River Police, too, were aflame with zeal; for every officer in the service whose work lay east of London Bridge had appropriated to himself the stigma implied by the creation of Lord Wrexborough's commission.

"Corners" in foodstuffs, metals, and other indispensable commodities are appreciated by every man, because every man knows such things to exist;

but a corner in drugs was something which the East End police authorities found very difficult to grasp. They could not free their minds of the traditional idea that every second Chinaman in the Causeway was a small importer. They were seeking a hundred lesser stores instead of one greater one. Not all Seton's quiet explanations nor Kerry's savage language could wean the higher local officials from their ancient beliefs. They failed to conceive the idea of a wealthy syndicate conducted by an educated Chinaman and backed, covered, and protected by a crooked gentleman and accomplished man of affairs.

Perhaps they knew and perhaps they knew not, that during the period ruled by D.O.R.A. as much as L25 was paid by habitues for one pipe of chandu. The power of gold is often badly estimated by an official whose horizon is marked by a pension. This is mere lack of imagination, and no more reflects discredit upon a man than lack of hair on his crown or of color in his cheeks. Nevertheless, it may prove very annoying.

Towards the close of an afternoon which symbolized the worst that London's particular climate can do in the matter of drizzling rain and gloom, Chief Inspector Kerry, carrying an irritable toy spaniel, came out of a turning which forms a V with Limehouse Canal, into a narrow street which runs parallel with the Thames. He had arrived at the conclusion that the neighborhood was sown so thickly with detectives that one could not throw a stone without hitting one. Yet Sin Sin Wa had quietly left his abode and had disappeared from official ken.

Three times within the past ten minutes the spaniel had tried to bite Kerry, nor was Kerry blind to the amusement which his burden had occasioned among the men of K Division whom he had met on his travels. Finally, as he came out into the riverside lane, the ill-tempered little animal essayed a fourth, and successful, attempt, burying his wicked white teeth in the Chief Inspector's wrist.

Kerry hooked his finger into the dog's collar, swung the yapping animal above his head, and hurled it from him into the gloom and rain mist.

"Hell take the blasted thing!" he shouted. "I'm done with it!"

He tenderly sucked his wounded wrist, and picking up his cane, which he had dropped, he looked about him and swore savagely. Of Seton Pasha he had had news several times during the day, and he was aware that the Home office agent was not idle. But to that old rivalry which had leapt up anew

when he had seen Seton near Kennington oval had succeeded a sort of despair; so that now he would have welcomed the information that Seton had triumphed where he had failed. A furious hatred of the one-eyed Chinaman around whom he was convinced the mystery centred had grown up within his mind. At that hour he would gladly have resigned his post and sacrificed his pension to know that Sin Sin Wa was under lock and key. His outlook was official, and accordingly peculiar. He regarded the murder of Sir Lucien Pyne and the flight or abduction of Mrs Monte Irvin as mere minor incidents in a case wherein Sin Sin Wa figured as the chief culprit. Nothing had acted so powerfully to bring about this conviction in the mind of the Chief Inspector as the inexplicable disappearance of the Chinaman under circumstances which had apparently precluded such a possibility.

A whimpering cry came to Kerry's ears; and because beneath the mask of ferocity which he wore a humane man was concealed: "Flames!" he snapped; "perhaps I've broken the poor little devil's leg."

Shaking a cascade of water from the brim of his neat bowler, he set off through the murk towards the spot from whence the cries of the spaniel seemed to proceed. A few paces brought him to the door of a dirty little shop. In a window close beside it appeared the legend:

SAM TUK
BARBER.

The spaniel crouched by the door whining and scratching, and as Kerry came up it raised its beady black eyes to him with a look which, while it was not unfearful, held an unmistakable appeal. Kerry stood watching the dog for a moment, and as he watched he became conscious of an exhilarated pulse.

He tried the door and found it to be open. Thereupon he entered a dirty little shop, which he remembered to have searched in person in the grey dawn of the day which now was entering upon a premature dusk. The dog ran in past him, crossed the gloomy shop, and raced down into a tiny coal cellar, which likewise had been submitted during the early hours of the morning to careful scrutiny under the directions of the Chief Inspector.

A Chinese boy, who had been the only occupant of the place on that occasion and who had given his name as Ah Fung, was surprised by the

sudden entrance of man and dog in the act of spreading coal dust with his fingers upon a portion of the paved floor. He came to his feet with a leap and confronted Kerry. The spaniel began to scratch feverishly upon the spot where the coal dust had been artificially spread. Kerry's eyes gleamed like steel. He shot out his hand and grasped the Chinaman by his long hair. "Open that trap," he said, "or I'll break you in half!"

Ah Fung's oblique eyes regarded him with an expression difficult to analyze, but partly it was murder. He made no attempt to obey the order. Meanwhile the dog, whining and scratching furiously, had exposed the greater part of a stone slab somewhat larger than those adjoining it, and having a large crack or fissure in one end.

"For the last time," said Kerry, drawing the man's head back so that his breath began to whistle through his nostrils, "open that trap."

As he spoke he released Ah Fung, and Ah Fung made one wild leap towards the stairs. Kerry's fist caught him behind the ear as he sprang, and he went down like a dead man upon a small heap of coal which filled the angle of the cellar.

Breathing rapidly and having his teeth so tightly clenched that his maxillary muscles protruded lumpishly, Kerry stood looking at the fallen man. But Ah Fung did not move. The dog had ceased to scratch, and now stood uttering short staccato barks and looking up at the Chief Inspector. Otherwise there was no sound in the house, above or below.

Kerry stooped, and with his handkerchief scrupulously dusted the stone slab. The spaniel, resentment forgotten, danced excitedly beside him and barked continuously.

"There's some sort of hook to fit in that crack," muttered Kerry.

He began to hunt about among the debris which littered one end of the cellar, testing fragment after fragment, but failing to find any piece of scrap to suit his purpose. By sheer perseverance rather than by any process of reasoning, he finally hit upon the piece of bent wire which was the key to this door of Sin Sin Wa's drug warehouse.

One short exclamation of triumph he muttered at the moment that his glance rested upon it, and five seconds later he had the trapdoor open and was peering down into the narrow pit in which wooden steps rested. The spaniel began to bark wildly, whereupon Kerry grasped him, tucked him under his arm, and ran up to the room above, where he deposited the

furiously wriggling animal. He stepped quickly back again and closed the upper door. By this act he plunged the cellar into complete darkness, and accordingly he took out from the pocket of his rain-drenched overall the electric torch which he always carried. Directing its ray downwards into the cellar, he perceived Ah Fung move and toss his hand above his head. He also detected a faint rattling sound.

"Ah!" said Kerry.

He descended, and stooping over the unconscious man extracted from the pocket of his baggy blue trousers four keys upon a ring. At these Kerry stared eagerly. Two of them belonged to yale locks; the third was a simple English barrel-key, which probably fitted a padlock; but the fourth was large and complicated.

"Looks like the key of a jail," he said aloud.

He spoke with unconscious prescience. This was the key of the door of the vault. Removing his overall, Kerry laid it with his cane upon the scrap-heap, then he climbed down the ladder and found himself in the mouth of that low timbered tunnel, like a trenchwork, which owed its existence to the cunning craftsmanship of Sin Sin Wa. Stooping uncomfortably, he made his way along the passage until the massive door confronted him. He was in no doubt as to which key to employ; his mental condition was such that he was indifferent to the dangers which probably lay before him.

The well-oiled lock operated smoothly. Kerry pushed the door open and stepped briskly into the vault.

His movements, from the moment that he had opened the trap, had been swift and as nearly noiseless as the difficulties of the task had permitted. Nevertheless, they had not been so silent as to escape the attention of the preternaturally acute Sin Sin Wa. Kerry found the place occupied only by the aged Sam Tuk. A bright fire burned in the stove, and a ship's lantern stood upon the counter. Dense chemical fumes rendered the air difficult to breathe; but the shelves, once laden with the largest illicit collection of drugs in London, were bare.

Kerry's fierce eyes moved right and left; his jaws worked automatically. Sam Tuk sat motionless, his hands concealed in his sleeves, bending decrepitly forward in his chair. Then:

"Hi! Guy Fawkes!" rapped Kerry, striding forward. "Who's been letting off fire-works?"

Sam Tuk nodded senilely, but spoke not a word.

Kerry stooped and stared into the heart of the fire. A dense coat of white ash lay upon the embers. He grasped the shoulder of the aged Chinaman, and pushed him back so that he could look into the bleared eyes behind the owlish spectacles.

"Been cleaning up the 'evidence,' eh?" he shouted. "This joint stinks of opium and a score of other dopes. Where are the gang?" He shook the yielding, ancient frame. "Where's the smart with one eye?"

But Sam Tuk merely nodded, and as Kerry released his hold sank forward again, nodding incessantly.

"H'm, you're a hard case," said the Chief Inspector. "A couple of witnesses like you and the jury would retire to Bedlam!"

He stood glaring fiercely at the limp frame of the old Chinaman, and as he glared his expression changed. Lying on the dirty floor not a yard from Sam Tuk's feet was a ball of leaf opium!

"Ha!" exclaimed Kerry, and he stooped to pick it up.

As he did so, with a lightning movement of which the most astute observer could never have supposed him capable, Sam Tuk whipped a loaded rubber tube from his sleeve and struck Kerry a shrewd blow across the back of the skull.

The Chief Inspector, without word or cry, collapsed upon his knees, and then fell gently forward—forward—and toppled face downwards before his assailant. His bowler fell off and rolled across the dirty floor.

Sam Tuk sank deeply into his chair, and his toothless jaws worked convulsively. The skinny hand which clutched the piece of tubing twitched and shook, so that the primitive deadly weapon fell from its wielder's grasp.

Silently, that set of empty shelves nearest to the inner wall of the vault slid open, and Sin Sin Wa came out. He, too, carried his hands tucked in his sleeves, and his yellow, pock-marked face wore its eternal smile.

"Well done," he crooned softly in Chinese. "Well done, bald father of wisdom. The dogs draw near, but the old fox sleeps not."

XXXVII. SETON PASHA REPORTS

At about the time that the fearless Chief Inspector was entering the establishment of Sam Tuk Seton Pasha was reporting to Lord Wrexborough in Whitehall. His nautical disguise had served its purpose, and he had now finally abandoned it, recognizing that he had to deal with a criminal of genius to whom disguise merely afforded matter for amusement.

In his proper person, as Greville Seton, he afforded a marked contrast to that John Smiles, seaman, who had sat in a top room in Limehouse with Chief Inspector Kerry. And although he had to report failure, the grim, bronzed face and bright grey eyes must have inspired in the heart of any thoughtful observer confidence in ultimate success. Lord Wrexborough, silver-haired, florid and dignified, sat before a vast table laden with neatly arranged dispatch-boxes, books, documents tied with red tape, and the other impressive impedimenta which characterize the table of a Secretary of State. Quentin Gray, unable to conceal his condition of nervous excitement, stared from a window down into Whitehall.

"I take it, then, Seton," Lord Wrexborough was saying, "that in your opinion—although perhaps it is somewhat hastily formed—there is and has been no connivance between officials and receivers of drugs?"

"That is my opinion, sir. The traffic has gradually and ingeniously been 'ringed' by a wealthy group. Smaller dealers have been bought out or driven out, and today I believe it would be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain opium, cocaine, or veronal illicitly anywhere in London. Kazmah and Company had the available stock cornered. Of course, now that they are out of business, no doubt others will step in. It is a trade that can never be suppressed under existing laws."

"I see, I see," muttered Lord Wrexborough, adjusting his pince-nez. "You also believe that Kazmah and Company are in hiding within what you term"—he consulted a written page—"the 'Causeway area'? And you believe that the man called Sin Sin Wa is the head of the organization?"

"I believe the late Sir Lucien Pyne was the actual head of the group," said Seton bluntly. "But Sin Sin Wa is the acting head. In view of his physical peculiarities, I don't quite see how he's going to escape us, either, sir. His wife has a fighting chance, and as for Mohammed el-Kazmah, he might sail for anywhere tomorrow, and we should never know. You see, we have no description of the man."

"His passports?" murmured Lord Wrexborough.

Seton Pasha smiled grimly.

"Not an insurmountable difficulty, sir," he replied, "but Sin Sin Wa is a marked man. He has the longest and thickest pigtail which I ever saw on a human scalp. I take it he is a Southerner of the old school; therefore, he won't cut it off. He has also only one eye, and while there are many one-eyed Chinamen, there are few one-eyed Chinamen who possess pigtails like a battleship's hawser. Furthermore, he travels with a talking raven, and I'll swear he won't leave it behind. On the other hand, he is endowed with an amount of craft which comes very near to genius."

"And—Mrs Monte Irvin?"

Quentin Gray turned suddenly, and his boyish face was very pale.

"Seton, Seton!" he said. "For God's sake tell me the truth! Do you think __"

He stopped, choking emotionally. Seton Pasha watched him with that cool, confident stare which could either soothe or irritate; and:

"She was alive this morning, Gray," he replied quietly, "we heard her. You may take it from me that they will offer her no violence. I shall say no more."

Lord Wrexborough cleared his throat and took up a document from the table.

"Your remark raises another point, Quentin," he said sternly, "which has to be settled today. Your appointment to Cairo was confirmed this morning. You sail on Tuesday."

Quentin Gray turned again abruptly and stared out of the window.

"You're practically kicking me out, sir," he said. "I don't know what I've done."

"You have done nothing," replied Lord Wrexborough "which an honorable man may not do. But in common with many others similarly circumstanced, you seem inclined, now that your military duties are at an end, to regard life as a sort of perpetual 'leave.' I speak frankly before Seton because I know that he agrees with me. My friend the Foreign Secretary has generously offered you an appointment which opens up a career that should not—I repeat, that should not prove less successful than his own."

Gray turned, and his face had flushed deeply.

"I know that Margaret has been scaring you about Rita Irvin," he said, "but on my word, sir, there was no need to do it."

He met Seton Pasha's cool regard, and:

"Margaret's one of the best," he added. "I know you agree with me?"

A faint suggestion of added color came into Seton's tanned cheeks.

"I do, Gray," he answered quietly. "I believe you are good enough to look upon me as a real friend; therefore allow me to add my advice, for what it is worth, to that of Lord Wrexborough and your cousin: take the Egyptian appointment. I know where it will lead. You can do no good by remaining in London; and when we find Mrs Irvin your presence would be an embarrassment to the unhappy man who waits for news at Prince's Gate. I am frank, but it's my way."

He held out his hand, smiling. Quentin Gray's mercurial complexion was changing again, but:

"Good old Seton!" he said, rather huskily, and gripped the outstretched hand. "For Irvin's sake, save her!"

He turned to his father.

"Thank you, sir," he added, "you are always right. I shall be ready on Tuesday. I suppose you are off again, Seton?"

"I am," was the reply. "Chief Inspector Kerry is moving heaven and earth to find the Kazmah establishment, and I don't want to come in a poor second."

Lord Wrexborough cleared his throat and turned in the padded revolving chair.

"Honestly, Seton," he said, "what do you think of your chance of success?"

Seton Pasha smiled grimly.

"Many ascribe success to wit," he replied, "and failure to bad luck; but the Arab says 'Kismet.'"

XXXVIII. THE SONG OF SIN SIN WA

Mrs Sin, aroused by her husband from the deep opium sleep, came out into the fume-laden vault. Her dyed hair was disarranged, and her dark eyes

stared glassily before her; but even in this half-drugged state she bore herself with the lithe carriage of a dancer, swinging her hips lazily and pointing the toes of her high-heeled slippers.

"Awake, my wife," crooned Sin Sin Wa. "Only a fool seeks the black smoke when the jackals sit in a ring."

Mrs Sin gave him a glance of smiling contempt—a glance which, passing him, rested finally upon the prone body of Chief Inspector Kerry lying stretched upon the floor before the stove. Her pupils contracted to mere pin-points and then dilated blackly. She recoiled a step, fighting with the stupor which her ill-timed indulgence had left behind.

At this moment Kerry groaned loudly, tossed his arm out with a convulsive movement, and rolled over on to his side, drawing up his knees.

The eye of Sin Sin Wa gleamed strangely, but he did not move, and Sam Tuk who sat huddled in his chair where his feet almost touched the fallen man, stirred never a muscle. But Mrs Sin, who still moved in a semi-phantasmagoric world, swiftly raised the hem of her kimona, affording a glimpse of a shapely silk-clad limb. From a sheath attached to her garter she drew a thin stilletto. Curiously feline, she crouched, as if about to spring.

Sin Sin Wa extended his hand, grasping his wife's wrist.

"No, woman of indifferent intelligence," he said in his queer sibilant language, "since when has murder gone unpunished in these British dominions?"

Mrs Sin snatched her wrist from his grasp, falling back wild-eyed.

"Yellow ape! yellow ape!" she said hoarsely. "One more does not matter—now."

"One more?" crooned Sin Sin Wa, glancing curiously at Kerry.

"They are here! We are trapped!"

"No, no," said Sin Sin Wa. "He is a brave man; he comes alone."

He paused, and then suddenly resumed in pidgin English:

"You likee killa him, eh?"

Perhaps unconscious that she did so, Mrs Sin replied also in English:

"No, I am mad. Let me think, old fool!"

She dropped the stiletto and raised her hand dazedly to her brow.

"You gotchee tired of knifee chop, eh?" murmured Sin Sin Wa.

Mrs Sin clenched her hands, holding them rigidly against her hips; and, nostrils dilated, she stared at the smiling Chinaman.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

Sin Sin Wa performed his curious oriental shrug.

"You putta topside pidgin on Sir Lucy alla lightee," he murmured. "Givee him hell alla velly proper."

The pupils of the woman's eyes contracted again, and remained so. She laughed hoarsely and tossed her head.

"Who told you that?" she asked contemptuously. "It was the doll-woman who killed him—I have said so."

"You tella me so—hoi, hoi! But old Sin Sin Wa catchee wonder. Lo!"—he extended a yellow forefinger, pointing at his wife—"Mrs Sin make him catchee die! No bhobbery, no palaber. Sin Sin Wa gotchee you sized up allee timee."

Mrs Sin snapped her fingers under his nose then stooped, picked up the stiletto, and swiftly restored it to its sheath. Her hands resting upon her hips, she came forward, until her dark evil face almost touched the yellow, smiling face of Sin Sin Wa.

"Listen, old fool," she said in a low, husky voice; "I have done with you, ape-man, for good! Yes! I killed Lucy, I killed him! He belonged to me—until that pink and white thing took him away. I am glad I killed him. If I cannot have him neither can she. But I was mad all the same."

She glanced down at Kerry, and:

"Tie him up," she directed, "and send him to sleep. And understand, Sin, we've shared out for the last time—You go your way and I go mine. No stinking Yellow River for me. New York is good enough until it's safe to go to Buenos Ayres."

"Smartest leg in Buenos Ayres," croaked the raven from his wicker cage, which was set upon the counter.

Sin Sin Wa regarded him smilingly.

"Yes, yes, my little friend," he crooned in Chinese, while Tling-a-Ling rattled ghostly castanets. "In Ho-Nan they will say that you are a devil and I am a wizard. That which is unknown is always thought to be magical, my Tling-a-Ling."

Mrs Sin, who was rapidly throwing off the effects of opium and recovering her normal self-confident personality, glanced at her husband scornfully.

"Tell me," she said, "what has happened? How did he come here?"

"Blinga filly doggy," murmured Sin Sin Wa. "Knockee Ah Fung on him head and comee down here, lo. Ah Fung allee lightee now—topside. Chasee filly doggy. Allee velly proper. No bhobbery."

"Talk less and act more," said Mrs Sin. "Tie him up, and if you must talk, talk Chinese. Tie him up."

She pointed to Kerry. Sin Sin Wa tucked his hands into his sleeves and shuffled towards the masked door communicating with the inner room.

"Only by intelligent speech are we distinguished from the other animals," he murmured in Chinese.

Entering the inner room, he began to extricate a long piece of thin rope from amid a tangle of other materials with which it was complicated. Mrs Sin stood looking down at the fallen man. Neither Kerry nor Sam Tuk gave the slightest evidence of life. And as Sin Sin Wa disentangled yard upon yard of rope from the bundle on the floor by the bed where Rita Irvin lay in her long troubled sleep, he crooned a queer song. It was in the Ho-Nan dialect and intelligible to himself alone.

"Shoa, the evil woman (he chanted), the woman of
many strange loves. . . .
Shoa, the ghoul. . . .
Lo, the Yellow River leaps forth from the nostrils
of the mountain god. . . .
Shoa, the betrayer of men. . . .
Blood is on her brow.
Lo, the betrayer is betrayed. Death sits at her elbow.
See, the Yellow River bears a corpse upon its tide. . .
Dead men hear her secret.
Shoa, the ghoul. . . .
Shoa, the evil woman. Death sits at her elbow.
Black, the vultures flock about her. . . .
Lo, the Yellow River leaps forth from the nostrils
of the mountain god."

Meanwhile Kerry, lying motionless at the feet of Sam Tuk was doing some hard and rapid thinking. He had recovered consciousness a few moments before Mrs Sin had come into the vault from the inner room.

There were those, Seton Pasha among them, who would have regarded the groan and the convulsive movements of Kerry's body with keen suspicion. And because the Chief Inspector suffered from no illusions respecting the genius of Sin Sin Wa, the apparent failure of the one- eyed Chinaman to recognize these preparations for attack nonplussed the Chief Inspector. His outstanding vice as an investigator was the directness of his own methods and of his mental outlook, so that he frequently experienced great difficulty in penetrating to the motives of a tortuous brain such as that of Sin Sin Wa.

That Sin Sin Wa thought him to be still unconscious he did not believe. He was confident that his tactics had deceived the Jewess, but he entertained an almost superstitious respect for the cleverness of the Chinaman. The trick with the ball of leaf opium was painfully fresh in his memory.

Kerry, in common with many members of the Criminal Investigation Department, rarely carried firearms. He was a man with a profound belief in his bare hands—aided when necessary by his agile feet. At the moment that Sin Sin Wa had checked the woman's murderous and half insane outburst Kerry had been contemplating attack. The sudden change of language on the part of the Chinaman had arrested him in the act; and, realizing that he was listening to a confession which placed the hangman's rope about the neck of Mrs Sin, he lay still and wondered.

Why had Sin Sin Wa forced his wife to betray herself? To clear Mareno? To clear Mrs Irvin—or to save his own skin?

It was a frightful puzzle for Kerry. Then—where was Kazmah? That Mrs Irvin, probably in a drugged condition, lay somewhere in that mysterious inner room Kerry felt fairly sure. His maltreated skull was humming like a bee-hive and aching intensely, but the man was tough as men are made, and he could not only think clearly, but was capable of swift and dangerous action.

He believed that he could tackle the Chinaman with fair prospects of success; and women, however murderous, he habitually disregarded as adversaries. But the mummy-like, deceptive Sam Tuk was not negligible, and Kazmah remained an unknown quantity.

From under that protective arm, cast across his face, Kerry's fierce eyes peered out across the dirty floor. Then quickly he shut his eyes again.

Sin Sin Wa, crooning his strange song, came in carrying a coil of rope — and a Mauser pistol!

"P'licemanee gotchee catchee sleepee," he murmured, "or maybe he catchee die!"

He tossed the rope to his wife, who stood silent tapping the floor with one slim restless foot.

"Number one top-side tie up," he crooned. "Sin Sin Wa watchee withum gun!"

Kerry lay like a dead man; for in the Chinaman's voice were menace and warning.

XXXIX. THE EMPTY WHARF

The suspected area of Limehouse was closely invested as any fortress of old when Seton Pasha once more found himself approaching that painfully familiar neighborhood. He had spoken to several pickets, and had gathered no news of interest, except that none of them had seen Chief Inspector Kerry since some time shortly before dusk. Seton, newly from more genial climes, shivered as he contemplated the misty, rain-swept streets, deserted and but dimly lighted by an occasional lamp. The hooting of a steam siren on the river seemed to be in harmony with the prevailing gloom, and the most confirmed optimist must have suffered depression amid those surroundings.

He had no definite plan of action. Every line of inquiry hitherto followed had led to nothing but disappointment. With most of the details concerning the elaborate organization of the Kazmah group either gathered or in sight, the whereabouts of the surviving members remained a profound mystery. From the Chinese no information could be obtained. Distrust of the police resides deep within the Chinese heart; for the Chinaman, and not unjustly, regards the police as ever ready to accuse him and ever unwilling to defend him; knows himself for a pariah capable of the worst crimes, and who may therefore be robbed, beaten and even murdered by his white neighbors with impunity. But when the police seek information from Chinatown, Chinatown takes its revenge—and is silent.

Out on the river, above and below Limehouse, patrols watched for signals from the Asiatic quarter, and from a carefully selected spot on the Surrey side George Martin watched also. Not even the lure of a neighboring tavern could draw him from his post. Hour after hour he waited patiently—for Sin Sin Wa paid fair prices, and tonight he bought neither opium nor cocaine, but liberty.

Seton Pasha, passing from point to point, and nowhere receiving news of Kerry, began to experience a certain anxiety respecting the safety of the intrepid Chief Inspector. His mind filled with troubled conjectures, he passed the house formerly occupied by the one-eyed Chinaman—where he found Detective-Sergeant Coombes on duty and very much on the alert—and followed the bank of the Thames in the direction of Limehouse Basin. The narrow, ill-lighted street was quite deserted. Bad weather and the presence of many police had driven the Asiatic inhabitants indoors. But from the river and the docks arose the incessant din of industry. Whistles shrieked and machinery clanked, and sometimes remotely came the sound of human voices.

Musing upon the sordid mystery which seems to underlie the whole of this dingy quarter, Seton pursued his way, crossing inlets and circling around basins dimly divined, turning to the right into a lane flanked by high eyeless walls, and again to the left, finally to emerge nearly opposite a dilapidated gateway giving access to a small wharf.

All unconsciously, he was traversing the same route as that recently pursued by the fugitive Sin Sin Wa; but now he paused, staring at the empty wharf. The annexed building, a mere shell, had not escaped examination by the search party, and it was with no very definite purpose in view that Seton pushed open the rickety gate. Doubtless Kismet, of which the Arabs speak, dictated that he should do so.

The tide was high, and the water whispered ghostly under the pile-supported structure. Seton experienced a new sense of chill which did not seem to be entirely physical as he stared out at the gloomy river prospect and listened to the uncanny whisperings of the tide. He was about to turn back when another sound attracted his attention. A dog was whimpering somewhere near him.

At first he was disposed to believe that the sound was due to some other cause, for the deserted wharf was not a likely spot in which to find a dog,

but when to the faint whimpering there was added a scratching sound, Seton's last doubts vanished.

"It's a dog," he said, "a small dog."

Like Kerry, he always carried an electric pocket-lamp, and now he directed its rays into the interior of the building.

A tiny spaniel, whining excitedly, was engaged in scratching with its paws upon the dirty floor as though determined to dig its way through. As the light shone upon it the dog crouched affrightedly, and, glancing in Seton's direction, revealed its teeth. He saw that it was covered with mud from head to tail, presenting a most woe-begone appearance, and the mystery of its presence there came home to him forcibly.

It was a toy spaniel of a breed very popular among ladies of fashion, and to its collar was still attached a tattered and muddy fragment of ribbon.

The little animal crouched in a manner which unmistakably pointed to the fact that it apprehended ill-treatment, but these personal fears had only a secondary place in its mind, and with one eye on the intruder it continued to scratch madly at the floor.

Seton acted promptly. He snapped off the light, and, replacing the lamp in his pocket, stepped into the building and dropped down upon his knees beside the dog. He next lay prone, and having rapidly cleared a space with his sleeve of some of the dirt which coated it, he applied his ear to the floor.

In spite of that iron control which habitually he imposed upon himself, he became aware of the fact that his heart was beating rapidly. He had learned at Leman Street that Kerry had brought Mrs Irvin's dog from Prince's Gate to aid in the search for the missing woman. He did not doubt that this was the dog which snarled and scratched excitedly beside him. Dimly he divined something of the truth. Kerry had fallen into the hands of the gang, but the dog, evidently not without difficulty, had escaped. What lay below the wharf?

Holding his breath, he crouched, listening; but not a sound could he detect.

"There's nothing here, old chap," he said to the dog.

Responsive to the friendly tone, the little animal began barking loudly with high staccato notes, which must have been audible on the Surrey shore.

Seton was profoundly mystified by the animal's behavior. He had personally searched every foot of this particular building, and was confident that it afforded no hiding-place. The behavior of the dog, however, was susceptible of only one explanation; and Seton recognizing that the clue to the mystery lay somewhere within this ramshackle building, became seized with a conviction that he was being watched.

Standing upright, he paused for a moment, irresolute, thinking that he had detected a muffled shriek. But the riverside noises were misleading and his imagination was on fire.

That almost superstitious respect for the powers of Sin Sin Wa, which had led Chief Inspector Kerry to look upon the Chinaman as a being more than humanly endowed, began to take possession of Seton Pasha. He regretted having entered the place so overtly, he regretted having shown a light. Keen eyes, vigilant, regarded him. It was perhaps a delusion, bred of the mournful night sounds, the gloom, and the uncanny resourcefulness, already proven, of the Kazmah group. But it operated powerfully.

Theories, wild, improbable, flocked to his mind. The great dope cache lay beneath his feet—and there must be some hidden entrance to it which had escaped the attention of the search-party. This in itself was not improbable, since they had devoted no more time to this building than to any other in the vicinity. That wild cry in the night which had struck so mournful a chill to the hearts of the watchers on the river had seemed to come out of the void of the blackness, had given but slight clue to the location of the place of captivity. Indeed, they could only surmise that it had been uttered by the missing woman. Yet in their hearts neither had doubted it.

He determined to cause the place to be searched again, as secretly as possible; he determined to set so close a guard over it and over its approaches that none could enter or leave unobserved.

Yet Kismet, in whose omnipotence he more than half believed, had ordained otherwise; for man is merely an instrument in the hand of Fate.

XL. COIL OF THE PIGTAIL

The inner room was in darkness and the fume-laden air almost unbreathable. A dull and regular moaning sound proceeded from the corner where the bed was situated, but of the contents of the place and of its other occupant or occupants Kerry had no more than a hazy idea. His imagination supplied those details which he had failed to observe. Mrs Monte Irvin, in a dying condition, lay upon the bed, and someone or some thing crouched on the divan behind Kerry as he lay stretched upon the matting-covered floor. His wrists, tied behind him, gave him great pain; and since his ankles were also fastened and the end of the rope drawn taut and attached to that binding his wrists, he was rendered absolutely helpless. For one of his fiery temperament this physical impotence was maddening, and because his own handkerchief had been tied tightly around his head so as to secure between his teeth a wooden stopper of considerable size which possessed an unpleasant chemical taste and smell, even speech was denied him.

How long he had lain thus he had no means of judging accurately; but hours—long, maddening hours—seemed to have passed since, with the muzzle of Sin Sin Wa's Mauser pressed coldly to his ear, he had submitted willy-nilly to the adroit manipulations of Mrs Sin. At first he had believed, in his confirmed masculine vanity, that it would be a simple matter to extricate himself from the fastenings made by a woman; but when, rolling him sideways, she had drawn back his heels and run the loose end of the line through the loop formed by the lashing of his wrists behind him, he had recognized a Chinese training, and had resigned himself to the inevitable. The wooden gag was a sore trial, and if it had not broken his spirit it had nearly caused him to break an artery in his impotent fury.

Into the darkened inner chamber Sin Sin Wa had dragged him, and there Kerry had lain ever since, listening to the various sounds of the place, to the coarse voice, often raised in anger, of the Cuban- Jewess, to the crooning tones of the imperturbable Chinaman. The incessant moaning of the woman on the bed sometimes became mingled with another sound more remote, which Kerry for long failed to identify; but ultimately he concluded it to be occasioned by the tide flowing under the wharf. The raven was silent, because, imprisoned in his wicker cage, he had been placed in some dark spot below the counter. Very dimly from time to time a steam siren might be

heard upon the river, and once the thudding of a screw-propeller told of the passage of a large vessel along Limehouse Reach.

In the eyes of Mrs Sin Kerry had read menace, and for all their dark beauty they had reminded him of the eyes of a cornered rat. Beneath the contemptuous nonchalance which she flaunted he read terror and remorse, and a foreboding of doom—panic ill repressed, which made her dangerous as any beast at bay. The attitude of the Chinaman was more puzzling. He seemed to bear the Chief Inspector no personal animosity, and indeed, in his glittering eye, Kerry had detected a sort of mysterious light of understanding which was almost mirthful, but which bore no relation to Sin Sin Wa's perpetual smile. Kerry's respect for the one-eyed Chinaman had increased rather than diminished upon closer acquaintance. Underlying his urbanity he failed to trace any symptom of apprehension. This Sin Sin Wa, accomplice of a murderess self- confessed, evident head of a drug syndicate which had led to the establishment of a Home office inquiry—this badly "wanted" man, whose last hiding-place, whose keep, was closely invested by the agents of the law, was the same Sin Sin Wa who had smilingly extended his wrists, inviting the manacles, when Kerry had first made his acquaintance under circumstances legally very different.

Sometimes Kerry could hear him singing his weird crooning song, and twice Mrs Sin had shrieked blasphemous execrations at him because of it. But why should Sin Sin Wa sing? What hope had he of escape? In the case of any other criminal Kerry would have answered "None," but the ease with which this one-eyed singing Chinaman had departed from his abode under the very noses of four detectives had shaken the Chief Inspector's confidence in the efficiency of ordinary police methods where this Chinese conjurer was concerned. A man who could convert an elaborate opium house into a dirty ruin in so short a time, too, was capable of other miraculous feats, and it would not have surprised Kerry to learn that Sin Sin Wa, at a moment's notice, could disguise himself as a chest of tea, or pass invisible through solid walls.

For evidence that Seton Pasha or any of the men from Scotland Yard had penetrated to the secret of Sam Tuk's cellar Kerry listened in vain. What was about to happen he could not imagine, nor if his life was to be spared. In the confession so curiously extorted from Mrs Sin by her husband he

perceived a clue to this and other mysteries, but strove in vain to disentangle it from the many maddening complexities of the case.

So he mused, wearily, listening to the moaning of his fellow captive, and wondering, since no sign of life came thence, why he imagined another presence in the stuffy room or the presence of someone or of some thing on the divan behind him. And in upon these dreary musings broke an altercation between Mrs Sin and her husband.

"Keep the blasted thing covered up!" she cried hoarsely.

"Tling-a-Ling wantchee catchee bleathee sometime," crooned Sin Sin Wa.

"Hello, hello!" croaked the raven drowsily. "Smartest—smartest—smartest leg."

"You catchee sleepee, Tling-a-Ling," murmured the Chinaman. "Mrs Sin no likee you palaber, lo!"

"Burn it!" cried the woman, "burn the one-eyed horror!"

But when, carrying a lighted lantern, Sin Sin Wa presently came into the inner room, he smiled as imperturbably as ever, and was unmoved so far as external evidence showed.

Sin Sin Wa set the lantern upon a Moorish coffee-table which once had stood beside the divan in Mrs Sin's sanctum at the House of a Hundred Raptures. A significant glance—its significance an acute puzzle to the recipient—he cast upon Chief Inspector Kerry. His hands tucked in the loose sleeves of his blouse, he stood looking down at the woman who lay moaning on the bed; and:

"Tchee, tchee," he crooned softly, "you hate no catchee die, my beautiful. You sniffee plenty too muchee 'white snow,' hoi, hoi! Velly bad woman tly makee you catchee die, but Sin Sin Wa no hate got for killee chop. Topside pidgin no good enough, lo!"

His thick, extraordinary long pigtail hanging down his back and gleaming in the rays of the lantern, he stood, head bowed, watching Rita Irvin. Because of his position on the floor, Mrs Irvin was invisible from Kerry's point of view, but she continued to moan incessantly, and he knew that she must be unconscious of the Chinaman's scrutiny.

"Hurry, old fool!" came Mrs Sin's harsh voice from the outer room. "In ten minutes Ah Fung will give the signal. Is she dead yet—the doll-woman?"

"She hate no catchee die," murmured Sin Sin Wa, "She still vella beautiful—tchee!"

It was at the moment that he spoke these words that Seton Pasha entered the empty building above and found the spaniel scratching at the paved floor. So that, as Sin Sin Wa stood looking down at the wan face of the unfortunate woman who refused to die, the dog above, excited by Seton's presence, ceased to whine and scratch and began to bark.

Faintly to the vault the sound of the high-pitched barking penetrated.

Kerry tensed his muscles and groaned impotently feeling his heart beating like a hammer in his breast. Complete silence reigned in the outer room. Sin Sin Wa never stirred. Again the dog barked, then:

"Hello, hello!" shrieked the raven shrilly. "Number one p'lice chop, lo! Sin Sin Wa! Sin Sin Wa!"

There came a fierce exclamation, the sound of something being hastily overturned, of a scuffle, and:

"Sin—Sin—Wa!" croaked the raven feebly.

The words ended in a screeching cry, which was followed by a sound of wildly beating wings. Sin Sin Wa, hands tucked in sleeves, turned and walked from the inner room, closing the sliding door behind him with a movement of his shoulder.

Resting against the empty shelves, he stood and surveyed the scene in the vault.

Mrs Sin, who had been kneeling beside the wicker cage, which was upset, was in the act of standing upright. At her feet, and not far from the motionless form of old Sam Tuk who sat like a dummy figure in his chair before the stove, lay a palpitating mass of black feathers. Other detached feathers were sprinkled about the floor. Feebly the raven's wings beat the ground once, twice—and were still.

Sin Sin Wa uttered one sibilant word, withdrew his hands from his sleeves, and, stepping around the end of the counter, dropped upon his knees beside the raven. He touched it with long yellow fingers, then raised it and stared into the solitary eye, now glazed and sightless as its fellow. The smile had gone from the face of Sin Sin Wa.

"My Tling-a-Ling!" he moaned in his native mandarin tongue. "Speak to me, my little black friend!"

A bead of blood, like a ruby, dropped from the raven's beak. Sin Sin Wa bowed his head and knelt awhile in silence; then, standing up, he reverently laid the poor bedraggled body upon a chest. He turned and looked at his wife.

Hands on hips, she confronted him, breathing rapidly, and her glance of contempt swept him up and down.

"I've often threatened to do it," she said in English. "Now I've done it. They're on the wharf. We're trapped—thanks to that black, squalling horror!"

"Tchee, tchee!" hissed Sin Sin Wa.

His gleaming eye fixed upon the woman unblinkingly, he began very deliberately to roll up his loose sleeves. She watched him, contempt in her glance, but her expression changed subtly, and her dark eyes grew narrowed. She looked rapidly towards Sam Tuk but Sam Tuk never stirred.

"Old fool!" she cried at Sin Sin Wa. "What are you doing?"

But Sin Sin Wa, his sleeves rolled up above his yellow, sinewy forearms, now tossed his pigtail, serpentine, across his shoulder and touched it with his fingers, an odd, caressing movement.

"Ho!" laughed Mrs Sin in her deep scoffing fashion, "it is for me you make all this bhobbery, eh? It is me you are going to chastise, my dear?"

She flung back her head, snapping her fingers before the silent Chinaman. He watched her, and slowly—slowly—he began to crouch, lower and lower, but always that unblinking regard remained fixed upon the face of Mrs Sin.

The woman laughed again, more loudly. Bending her lithe body forward in mocking mimicry, she snapped her fingers, once—again—and again under Sin Sin Wa's nose. Then:

"Do you think, you blasted yellow ape, that you can frighten me?" she screamed, a swift flame of wrath lighting up her dark face.

In a flash she had raised the kimona and had the stiletto in her hand. But, even swifter than she, Sin Sin Wa sprang. . .

Once, twice she struck at him, and blood streamed from his left shoulder. But the pigtail, like an executioner's rope, was about the woman's throat. She uttered one smothered shriek, dropping the knife, and then was silent. . .

Her dyed hair escaped from its fastenings and descended, a ruddy torrent, about her as she writhed, silent, horrible, in the death-coil of the pigtail.

Rigidly, at arms-length, he held her, moment after moment, immovable, implacable; and when he read death in her empurpled face, a miraculous thing happened.

The "blind" eye of Sin Sin Wa opened!

A husky rattle told of the end, and he dropped the woman's body from his steely grip, disengaging the pigtail with a swift movement of his head. Opening and closing his yellow fingers to restore circulation, he stood looking down at her. He spat upon the floor at her feet.

Then, turning, he held out his arms and confronted Sam Tuk.

"Was it well done, bald father of wisdom?" he demanded hoarsely.

But old Sam Tuk seated lumpish in his chair like some grotesque idol before whom a human sacrifice has been offered up, stirred not. The length of loaded tubing with which he had struck Kerry lay beside him where it had fallen from his nerveless hand. And the two oblique, beady eyes of Sin Sin Wa, watching, grew dim. Step by step he approached the old Chinaman, stooped, touched him, then knelt and laid his head upon the thin knees.

"Old father," he murmured, "Old bald father who knew so much. Tonight you know all."

For Sam Tuk was no more. At what moment he had died, whether in the excitement of striking Kerry or later, no man could have presumed to say, since, save by an occasional nod of his head, he had often simulated death in life—he who was so old that he was known as "The Father of Chinatown."

Standing upright, Sin Sin Wa looked from the dead man to the dead raven. Then, tenderly raising poor Tling-a-Ling, he laid the great dishevelled bird—a weird offering—upon the knees of Sam Tuk.

"Take him with you where you travel tonight, my father," he said. "He, too, was faithful."

A cheap German clock commenced a muted clangor, for the little hammer was muffled.

Sin Sin Wa walked slowly across to the counter. Taking up the gleaming joss, he unscrewed its pedestal. Then, returning to the spot where Mrs Sin lay, he coolly detached a leather wallet which she wore beneath her dress fastened to a girdle. Next he removed her rings, her bangles and other

ornaments. He secreted all in the interior of the joss—his treasure-chest. He raised his hands and began to unplait his long pigtail, which, like his "blind" eye, was camouflage—a false queue attached to his own hair, which he wore but slightly longer than some Europeans and many Americans. With a small pair of scissors he clipped off his long, snake-like moustaches. . . .

XLI. THE FINDING OF KAZMAH

At a point just above the sweep of Limehouse Reach a watchful river police patrol observed a moving speck of light on the right bank of the Thames. As if in answer to the signal there came a few moments later a second moving speck at a point not far above the district once notorious in its possession of Ratcliff Highway. A third light answered from the Surrey bank, and a fourth shone out yet higher up and on the opposite side of the Thames.

The tide had just turned. As Chief Inspector Kerry had once observed, "there are no pleasure parties punting about that stretch," and, consequently, when George Martin tumbled into his skiff on the Surrey shore and began lustily to pull up stream, he was observed almost immediately by the River Police.

Pulling hard against the stream, it took him a long time to reach his destination—stone stairs near the point from which the second light had been shown. Rain had ceased and the mist had cleared shortly after dusk, as often happens at this time of year, and because the night was comparatively clear the pursuing boats had to be handled with care.

George did not disembark at the stone steps, but after waiting there for some time he began to drop down on the tide, keeping close inshore.

"He knows we've spotted him," said Sergeant Coombes, who was in one of the River Police boats. "It was at the stairs that he had to pick up his man."

Certainly, the tactics of George suggested that he had recognized surveillance, and, his purpose abandoned, now sought to efface himself without delay. Taking advantage of every shadow, he resigned his boat to the gentle current. He had actually come to the entrance of Greenwich

Reach when a dock light, shining out across the river, outlined the boat yellowly.

"He's got a passenger!" said Coombes amazedly.

Inspector White, who was in charge of the cutter, rested his arm on Coombes' shoulder and stared across the moving tide.

"I can see no one," he replied. "You're over anxious, Detective- Sergeant —and I can understand it!"

Coombes smiled heroically.

"I may be over anxious, Inspector," he replied, "but if I lost Sin Sin Wa, the River Police had never even heard of him till the C.I.D. put 'em wise."

"H'm!" muttered the Inspector. "D'you suggest we board him?"

"No," said Coombes, "let him land, but don't trouble to hide any more. Show him we're in pursuit."

No longer drifting with the outgoing tide, George Martin had now boldly taken to the oars. The River Police boat close in his wake, he headed for the blunt promontory of the Isle of Dogs. The grim pursuit went on until:

"I bet I know where he's for," said Coombes.

"So do I," declared Inspector White; "Dougal's!"

Their anticipations were realized. To the wooden stairs which served as a water-gate for the establishment on the Isle of Dogs, George Martin ran in openly; the police boat followed, and:

"You were right!" cried the Inspector, "he has somebody with him!"

A furtive figure, bearing a burden upon its shoulder, moved up the slope and disappeared. A moment later the police were leaping ashore. George deserted his boat and went running heavily after his passenger.

"After them!" cried Coombes. "That's Sin Sin Wa!"

Around the mazey, rubbish-strewn paths the pursuit went hotly. In sight of Dougal's Coombes saw the swing door open and a silhouette— that of a man who carried a bag on his shoulder—pass in. George Martin followed, but the Scotland Yard man had his hand upon his shoulder.

"Police!" he said sharply. "Who's your friend?"

George turned, red and truculent, with clenched fists.

"Mind your own bloody business!" he roared.

"Mind yours, my lad!" retorted Coombes warningly. "You're no Thames waterman. Who's your friend?"

"Wotcher mean?" shouted George. "You're up the pole or canned you are!"

"Grab him!" said Coombes, and he kicked open the door and entered the saloon, followed by Inspector White and the boat's crew.

As they appeared, the Inspector conspicuous in his uniform, backed by the group of River Police, one of whom grasped George Martin by his coat collar:

"Splits!" bellowed Dougal in a voice like a fog-horn.

Twenty cups of tea, coffee and cocoa, too hot for speedy assimilation, were spilled upon the floor.

The place as usual was crowded, more particularly in the neighborhood of the two stoves. Here were dock laborers, seamen and riverside loafers, lascars, Chinese, Arabs, negroes and dagoes. Mrs Dougal, defiant and red, brawny arms folded and her pose as that of one contemplating a physical contest, glared from behind the "solid" counter. Dougal rested his hairy hands upon the "wet" counter and revealed his defective teeth in a vicious snarl. Many of the patrons carried light baggage, since a P and O boat, an oriental, and the S. S. Mahratta, were sailing that night or in the early morning, and Dougal's was the favorite house of call for a doch-an-dorrich for sailormen, particularly for sailormen of color.

Upon the police group became focussed the glances of light eyes and dark eyes, round eyes, almond-shaped eyes, and oblique eyes. Silence fell.

"We are police officers," called Coombes formally. "All papers, please."

Thereupon, without disturbance, the inspection began, and among the papers scrutinized were those of one, Chung Chow, an able-bodied Chinese seaman. But since his papers were in order, and since he possessed two eyes and wore no pigtail, he excited no more interest in the mind of Detective-Sergeant Coombes than did any one of the other Chinamen in the place.

A careful search of the premises led to no better result, and George Martin accounted for his possession of a considerable sum of money found upon him by explaining that he had recently been paid off after a long voyage and had been lucky at cards.

The result of the night's traffic, then, spelled failure for British justice, the S.S. Mahratta sailed one stewardess short of her complement; but among the Chinese crew of another steamer Eastward bound was one, Chung Chow, formerly known as Sin Sin Wa. And sometimes in the night watches

there arose before him the picture of a black bird resting upon the knees of an aged Chinaman. Beyond these figures dimly he perceived the paddy-fields of Ho-Nan and the sweeping valley of the Yellow River, where the opium poppy grows.

It was about an hour before the sailing of the ship which numbered Chung Chow among the yellow members of its crew that Seton Pasha returned once more to the deserted wharf whereon he had found Mrs Monte Irvin's spaniel. Afterwards, in the light of ascertained facts, he condemned himself for a stupidity passing the ordinary. For while he had conducted a careful search of the wharf and adjoining premises, convinced that there was a cellar of some kind below, he had omitted to look for a water-gate to this hypothetical cache.

Perhaps his self-condemnation was deserved, but in justice to the agent selected by Lord Wrexborough, it should be added that Chief Inspector Kerry had no more idea of the existence of such an entrance, and exit, than had Seton Pasha.

Leaving the dog at Leman Street then, and learning that there was no news of the missing Chief Inspector, Seton had set out once more. He had been informed of the mysterious signals flashed from side to side of the Lower Pool, and was hourly expecting a report to the effect that Sin Sin Wa had been apprehended in the act of escaping. That Sin Sin Wa had dropped into the turgid tide from his underground hiding- place, and pushing his property—which was floatable—before him, encased in a waterproof bag, had swum out and clung to the stern of George Martin's boat as it passed close to the empty wharf, neither Seton Pasha nor any other man knew—except George Martin and Sin Sin Wa.

At a suitably dark spot the Chinaman had boarded the little craft, not without difficulty, for his wounded shoulder pained him, and had changed his sodden attire for a dry outfit which awaited him in the locker at the stern of the skiff. The cunning of the Chinese has the simplicity of true genius.

Not two paces had Seton taken on to the mystifying wharf when:

"Sam Tuk barber! Entrance in cellar!" rapped a ghostly, muffled voice from beneath his feet. "Sam Tuk barber! Entrance in cellar!"

Seton Pasha stood still, temporarily bereft of speech. Then, "Kerry!" he cried. "Kerry! Where are you?"

But apparently his voice failed to reach the invisible speaker, for:

"Sam Tuk barber! Entrance in cellar!" repeated the voice.

Seton Pasha wasted no more time. He ran out into the narrow street. A man was on duty there.

"Call assistance!" ordered Seton briskly, "Send four men to join me at the barber's shop called Sam Tuk's! You know it?"

"Yes, sir; I searched it with Chief Inspector Kerry."

The note of a police whistle followed.

Ten minutes later the secret of Sam Tuk's cellar was unmasked. The place was empty, and the subterranean door locked; but it succumbed to the persistent attacks of axe and crowbar, and Seton Pasha was the first of the party to enter the vault. It was laden with chemical fumes. . . .

He found there an aged Chinaman, dead, seated by a stove in which the fire had burned very low. Sprawling across the old man's knees was the body of a raven. Lying at his feet was a woman, lithe, contorted, the face half hidden in masses of bright red hair.

"End case near the door!" rapped the voice of Kerry. "Slides to the left!"

Seton Pasha vaulted over the counter, drew the shelves aside, and entered the inner room.

By the dim light of a lantern burning upon a moorish coffee-table he discerned an untidy bed, upon which a second woman lay, pallid.

"God!" he muttered; "this place is a morgue!"

"It certainly isn't healthy!" said an irritable voice from the floor. "But I think I might survive it if you could spare a second to untie me."

Kerry's extensive practice in chewing and the enormous development of his maxillary muscles had stood him in good stead. His keen, strong teeth had bitten through the extemporized gag, and as a result the tension of the handkerchief which had held it in place had become relaxed, enabling him to rid himself of it and to spit out the fragments of filthy-tasting wood which the biting operation had left in his mouth.

Seton turned, stooped on one knee to release the captive . . . and found himself looking into the face of someone who sat crouched upon the divan behind the Chief Inspector. The figure was that of an oriental, richly robed. Long, slim, ivory hands rested upon his knees, and on the first finger of the right hand gleamed a big talismanic ring. But the face, surmounted by a white turban, was wonderful, arresting in its immobile intellectual beauty;

and from under the heavy brows a pair of abnormally large eyes looked out hypnotically.

"My God!" whispered Seton, then:

"If you've finished your short prayer," rapped Kerry, "set about my little job."

"But, Kerry—Kerry, behind you!"

"I haven't any eyes in my back hair!"

Mechanically, half fearfully, Seton touched the hands of the crouching oriental. A low moan came from the woman in the bed, and:

"It's Kazmah!" gasped Seton. "Kerry . . . Kazmah is—a wax figure!"

"Hell!" said Chief Inspector Kerry.

XLII. A YEAR LATER

Beneath an awning spread above the balcony of one of those modern elegant flats, which today characterize Heliopolis, the City of the Sun, site of perhaps the most ancient seat of learning in the known world, a party of four was gathered, awaiting the unique spectacle which is afforded when the sun's dying rays fade from the Libyan sands and the violet wonder of the afterglow conjures up old magical Egypt from the ashes of the desert.

"Yes," Monte Irvin was saying, "only a year ago; but, thank God, it seems more like ten! Merciful time effaces sadness but spares joy."

He turned to his wife, whose flower-like face peeped out from a nest of white fur. Covertly he squeezed her hand, and was rewarded with a swift, half coquettish glance, in which he read trust and contentment. The dreadful ordeal through which she had passed had accomplished that which no physician in Europe could have hoped for, since no physician would have dared to adopt such drastic measures. Actuated by deliberate cruelty, and with the design of bringing about her death from apparently natural causes, the Kazmah group had deprived her of cocaine for so long a period that sanity, life itself, had barely survived; but for so long a period that, surviving, she had outlived the drug craving. Kazmah had cured her!

Monte Irvin turned to the tall fair girl who sat upon the arm of a cane rest-chair beside Rita.

"But nothing can ever efface the memory of all you have done for Rita, and for me," he said, "nothing, Mrs Seton."

"Oh," said Margaret, "my mind was away back, and that sounded—so odd."

Seton Pasha, who occupied the lounge-chair upon the broad arm of which his wife was seated, looked up, smiling into the suddenly flushed face. They were but newly returned from their honeymoon, and had just taken possession of their home, for Seton was now stationed in Cairo. He flicked a cone of ash from his cheroot.

"It seems to me that we are all more or less indebted to one another," he declared. "For instance, I might never have met you, Margaret, if I had not run into your cousin that eventful night at Princes; and Gray would not have been gazing abstractedly out of the doorway if Mrs Irvin had joined him for dinner as arranged. One can trace almost every episode in life right back, and ultimately come—"

"To Kismet!" cried his wife, laughing merrily. "So before we begin dinner tonight—which is a night of reunion—I am going to propose a toast to Kismet!"

"Good!" said Seton, "we shall all drink it gladly. Eh, Irvin?"

"Gladly, indeed," agreed Monte Irvin. "You know, Seton," he continued, "we have been wandering, Rita and I; and ever since your wife handed her patient over to me as cured we have covered some territory. I don't know if you or Chief Inspector Kerry has been responsible, but the press accounts of the Kazmah affair have been scanty to baldness. One stray bit of news reached us—in Colorado, I think."

"What was that, Mr Irvin?" asked Margaret, leaning towards the speaker.

"It was about Mollie Gretna. Someone wrote and told me that she had eloped with a billiard marker—a married man with five children!"

Seton laughed heartily, and so did Margaret and Rita.

"Right!" cried Seton. "She did. When last heard of she was acting as barmaid in a Portsmouth tavern!"

But Monte Irvin did not laugh.

"Poor, foolish girl!" he said gravely. "Her life might have been so different—so useful and happy."

"I agree," replied Seton, "if she had had a husband like Kerry."

"Oh, please don't!" said Margaret. "I almost fell in love with Chief Inspector Kerry myself."

"A grand fellow!" declared her husband warmly. "The Kazmah inquiry was the triumph of his career."

Monte Irvin turned to him.

"You did your bit, Seton," he said quietly. "The last words Inspector Kerry spoke to me before I left England were in the nature of a splendid tribute to yourself, but I will spare your blushes."

"Kerry is as white as they're made," replied Seton, "but we should never have known for certain who killed Sir Lucien if he had not risked his life in that filthy cellar as he did."

Rita Irvin shuddered slightly and drew her furs more closely about her shoulders.

"Shall we change the conversation, dear?" whispered Margaret.

"No, please," said Rita. "You cannot imagine how curious I am to learn the true details—for, as Monte says, we have been out of touch with things, and although we were so intimately concerned, neither of us really knows the inner history of the affair to this day. Of course, we know that Kazmah was a dummy figure, posed in the big ebony chair. He never moved, except to raise his hand, and this was done by someone seated in the inner room behind the figure. But who was seated there?"

Seton glanced inquiringly at his wife, and she nodded, smiling.

"Right-o!" he said. "If you will excuse me for a moment I will get my notes. Hello, here's Gray!"

A little two-seater came bowling along the road from Cairo, and drew up beneath the balcony. It was the car which had belonged to Margaret when in practice in Dover Street. Quentin Gray jumped out, waving his hand cheerily to the quartette above, and went in at the doorway. Seton walked through the flat and admitted him.

"Sorry I'm late!" cried Gray, impetuous and boyish as ever, although he looked older and had grown very bronzed. "The chief detained me."

"Go through to them," said Seton informally. "I'm getting my notes; we're going to read the thrilling story of the Kazmah mystery before dinner."

"Good enough!" cried Gray. "I'm in the dark on many points."

He had outlived his youthful infatuation, although it was probable enough that had Rita been free he would have presented himself as a suitor

without delay. But the old relationship he had no desire to renew. A generous self-effacing regard had supplanted the madness of his earlier passion. Rita had changed too; she had learned to know herself and to know her husband.

So that when Seton Pasha presently rejoined his guests, he found the most complete harmony to prevail among them. He carried a bulky notebook, and, tapping his teeth with his monocle:

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began whimsically, "I will bore you with a brief account of the extraordinary facts concerning the Kazmah case."

Margaret was seated in the rest-chair which her husband had vacated, and Seton took up a position upon the ledge formed by one of the wide arms. Everyone prepared to listen, with interest undisguised.

"There were three outstanding personalities dominating what we may term the Kazmah group," continued Seton. "In order of importance they were: Sin Sin Wa, Sir Lucien Pyne and Mrs Sin."

Rita Irvin inhaled deeply, but did not interrupt the speaker.

"I shall begin with Sir Lucien," Seton went on. "For some years before his father's death he seems to have lived a very shady life in many parts of the world. He was a confirmed gambler, and was also somewhat unduly fond of the ladies' society. In Buenos Ayres—the exact date does not matter—he made the acquaintance of a variety artiste known as La Belle Lola, a Cuban-Jewess, good-looking and unscrupulous. I cannot say if Sir Lucien was aware from the outset of his affair with La Belle that she was a married woman. But it is certain that her husband, Sin Sin Wa, very early learned of the intrigue, and condoned it.

"How Sir Lucien came to get into the clutches of the pair I do not know. But that he did so we have ascertained beyond doubt. I think, personally, that his third vice—opium—was probably responsible. For Sin Sin Wa appears throughout in the character of a drug dealer.

"These three people really become interesting from the time that La Belle Lola quitted the stage and joined her husband in the conducting of a concern in Buenos Ayres, which was the parent, if I may use the term, of the Kazmah business later established in Bond Street. From a music-hall illusionist, who came to grief during a South American tour, they acquired the oriental waxwork figure which subsequently mystified so many thousands of dupes. It was the work of a famous French artist in wax, and

had originally been made to represent the Pharaoh, Rameses II., for a Paris exhibition. Attired in Eastern robes, and worked by a simple device which raised and lowered the right hand, it was used, firstly, in a stage performance, and secondly, in the character of 'Kazmah the Dream-reader.'

"Even at this time Sir Lucien had access to good society, or to the best society which Buenos Ayres could offer, and he was the source of the surprising revelations made to patrons by the 'dream-reader.' At first, apparently, the drug business was conducted independently of the Kazmah concern, but the facilities offered by the latter for masking the former soon became apparent to the wily Sin Sin Wa. Thereupon the affair was reorganized on the lines later adopted in Bond Street. Kazmah's became a secret dope-shop, and annexed to it was an elaborate chandu-khan, conducted by the Chinaman. Mrs Sin was the go-between.

"You are all waiting to hear—or, to be exact, two are waiting to hear, Gray and Margaret already know—who spoke as Kazmah through the little window behind the chair. The deep-voiced speaker was Juan Mareno, Mrs Sin's brother! Mrs Sin's maiden name was Lola Mareno.

"Many of these details were provided by Mareno, who, after the death of his sister, to whom he was deeply attached, volunteered to give crown evidence. Most of them we have confirmed from other sources.

"Behold 'Kazmah the dream-reader,' then, established in Buenos Ayres. The partners in the enterprise speedily acquired considerable wealth. Sir Lucien—at this time plain Mr Pyne—several times came home and lived in London and elsewhere like a millionaire. There is no doubt, I think, that he was seeking a suitable opportunity to establish a London branch of the business."

"My God!" said Monte Irvin. "How horrible it seems!"

"Horrible, indeed!" agreed Seton. "But there are two features of the case which, in justice to Sir Lucien, we should not overlook. He, who had been a poor man, had become a wealthy one and had tasted the sweets of wealth; also he was now hopelessly in the toils of the woman Lola.

"With the ingenious financial details of the concern, which were conducted in the style of the 'Jose Santos Company,' I need not trouble you now. We come to the second period, when the flat in Albemarle Street and the two offices in old Bond Street became vacant and were promptly leased by Mareno, acting on Sir Lucien's behalf, and calling himself sometimes Mr

Isaacs, sometimes Mr Jacobs, and at other times merely posing as a representative of the Jose Santos Company in some other name.

"All went well. The concern had ample capital, and was organized by clever people. Sin Sin Wa took up new quarters in Limehouse; they had actually bought half the houses in one entire street as well as a wharf! And Sin Sin Wa brought with him the good-will of an illicit drug business which already had almost assumed the dimensions of a control.

"Sir Lucien's household was a mere bluff. He rarely entertained at home, and lived himself entirely at restaurants and clubs. The private entrance to the Kazmah house of business was the back window of the Cubanis Cigarette Company's office. From thence down the back stair to Kazmah's door it was a simple matter for Mareno to pass unobserved. Sir Lucien resumed his role of private inquiry agent, and Mareno recited the 'revelations' from notes supplied to him.

"But the 'dream reading' part of the business was merely carried on to mask the really profitable side of the concern. We have recently learned that drugs were distributed from that one office alone to the amount of thirty thousand pounds' worth annually! This is excluding the profits of the House of a Hundred Raptures and of the private chandu orgies organized by Mrs Sin.

"The Kazmah group gradually acquired control of the entire market, and we know for a fact that at one period during the war they were actually supplying smuggled cocaine, indirectly, to no fewer than twelve R.A.M.C. hospitals! The complete ramifications of the system we shall never know.

"I come, now, to the tragedy, or series of tragedies, which brought about the collapse of the most ingenious criminal organization which has ever flourished, probably, in any community. I will dare to be frank. Sir Lucien was the victim of a woman's jealousy. Am I to proceed?"

Seton paused, glancing at his audience; and:

"If you please," whispered Rita. "Monte knows and I know—why—she killed him. But we don't know—"

"The nasty details," said Quentin Gray. "Carry on, Seton. Are you agreeable, Irvin?"

"I am anxious to know," replied Irvin, "for I believe Sir Lucien deserved well of me, bad as he was."

Seton clapped his hands, and an Egyptian servant appeared, silently and mysteriously as is the way of his class.

"Cocktails, Mahmoud!"

The Egyptian disappeared.

"There's just time," declared Margaret, gazing out across the prospect, "before sunset."

XLIII. THE STORY OF THE CRIME

"You are all aware," Seton continued, "that Sir Lucien Pyne was an admirer of Mrs Irvin. God knows, I hold no brief for the man, but this love of his was the one redeeming feature of a bad life. How and when it began I don't profess to know, but it became the only pure thing which he possessed. That he was instrumental in introducing you, Mrs Irvin, to the unfortunately prevalent drug habit, you will not deny; but that he afterwards tried sincerely to redeem you from it I can positively affirm. In seeking your redemption he found his own, for I know that he was engaged at the time of his death in extricating himself from the group. You may say that he had made a fortune, and was satisfied; that is your view, Gray. I prefer to think that he was anxious to begin a new life and to make himself more worthy of the respect of those he loved.

"There was one obstacle which proved too great for him—Mrs Sin. Although Juan Mareno was the spokesman of the group, Lola Mareno was the prompter. All Sir Lucien's plans for weaning Mrs Irvin from the habits which she had acquired were deliberately and malignantly foiled by this woman. She endeavored to inveigle Mrs Irvin into indebtedness to you, Gray, as you know now. Failing in this, she endeavored to kill her by depriving her of that which had at the time become practically indispensable. A venomous jealousy led her to almost suicidal measures. She risked exposure and ruin in her endeavors to dispose of one whom she looked upon as a rival.

"During Sir Lucien's several absences from London she was particularly active, and this brings me to the closing scene of the drama. On the night

that you determined, in desperation, Mrs Irvin, to see Kazmah personally, you will recall that Sir Lucien went out to telephone to him?"

Rita nodded but did not speak.

"Actually," Seton explained, "he instructed Mareno to go across the leads to Kazmah's directly you had left the flat, and to give you a certain message as 'Kazmah.' He also instructed Mareno to telephone certain orders to Rashid, the Egyptian attendant. In spite of the unforeseen meeting with Gray, all would have gone well, no doubt, if Mrs Sin had not chanced to be on the Kazmah premises at the time that the message was received!

"I need not say that Mrs Sin was a remarkable woman, possessing many accomplishments, among them that of mimicry. She had often amused herself by taking Mareno's place at the table behind Kazmah, and, speaking in her brother's oracular voice, had delivered the 'revelations.' Mareno was like wax in his sister's hands, and on this fateful night, when he arrived at the place—which he did a few minutes before Mrs Irvin, Gray and Sir Lucien—Mrs Sin peremptorily ordered him to wait upstairs in the Cubanis office, and she took her seat in the room from which the Kazmah illusions were controlled.

"So carefully arranged was every detail of the business that Rashid, the Egyptian, was ignorant of Sir Lucien's official connection with the Kazmah concern. He had been ordered—by Mareno speaking from Sir Lucien's flat—to admit Mrs Irvin to the room of seance and then to go home. He obeyed and departed, leaving Sir Lucien in the waiting- room.

"Driven to desperation by 'Kazmah's' taunting words, we know that Mrs Irvin penetrated to the inner room. I must slur over the details of the scene which ensued. Hearing her cry out, Sir Lucien ran to her assistance. Mrs Sin, enraged by his manner, lost all control of her insane passion. She attempted Mrs Irvin's life with a stiletto which habitually she carried—and Sir Lucien died like a gentleman who had lived like a blackguard. He shielded her—"

Seton paused. Margaret was biting her lip hard, and Rita was looking down so that her face could not be seen.

"The shock consequent upon the deed sobered the half crazy woman," continued the speaker. "Her usual resourcefulness returned to her. Self-preservation had to be considered before remorse. Mrs Irvin had swooned,

and"—he hesitated—"Mrs Sin saw to it that she did not revive prematurely. Mareno was summoned from the room above. The outer door was locked.

"It affords evidence of this woman's callous coolness that she removed from the Kazmah premises, and—probably assisted by her brother, although he denies it—from the person and garments of the dead man, every scrap of evidence. They had not by any means finished the task when you knocked at the door, Gray. But they completed it, faultlessly, after you had gone.

"Their unconscious victim, and the figure of Kazmah, as well as every paper or other possible clue, they carried up to the Cubanis office, and from thence across the roof to Sir Lucien's study. Next, while Mareno went for the car, Mrs Sin rifled the safe, bureaus and desks in Sir Lucien's flat, so that we had the devil's own work, as you know, to find out even the more simple facts of his everyday life.

"Not a soul ever came forward who noticed the big car being driven into Albemarle Street or who observed it outside the flat. The chances run by the pair in conveying their several strange burdens from the top floor, down the stairs and out into the street were extraordinary. Yet they succeeded unobserved. Of course, the street was imperfectly lighted, and is but little frequented after dusk.

"The journey to Limehouse was performed without discovery—aided, no doubt, by the mistiness of the night; and Mareno, returning to the West End, ingeniously inquired for Sir Lucien at his club. Learning, although he knew it already, that Sir Lucien had not been to the club that night, he returned the car to the garage and calmly went back to the flat.

"His reason for taking this dangerous step is by no means clear. According to his own account, he did it to gain time for the fugitive Mrs Sin. You see, there was really only one witness of the crime (Mrs Irvin) and she could not have sworn to the identity of the assassin. Rashid was warned and presumably supplied with sufficient funds to enable him to leave the country.

"Well, the woman met her deserts, no doubt at the hands of Sin Sin Wa. Kerry is sure of this. And Sin Sin Wa escaped, taking with him an enormous sum of ready money. He was the true genius of the enterprise. No one, his wife and Mareno excepted—we know of no other—suspected that the real Sin Sin Wa was clean-shaven, possessed two eyes, and no pigtail! A wonderfully clever man!"

The native servant appeared to announce that dinner was served; African dusk drew its swift curtain over the desert, and a gun spoke sharply from the Citadel. In silence the party watched the deepening velvet of the sky, witnessing the birth of a million stars, and in silence they entered the gaily lighted dining-room.

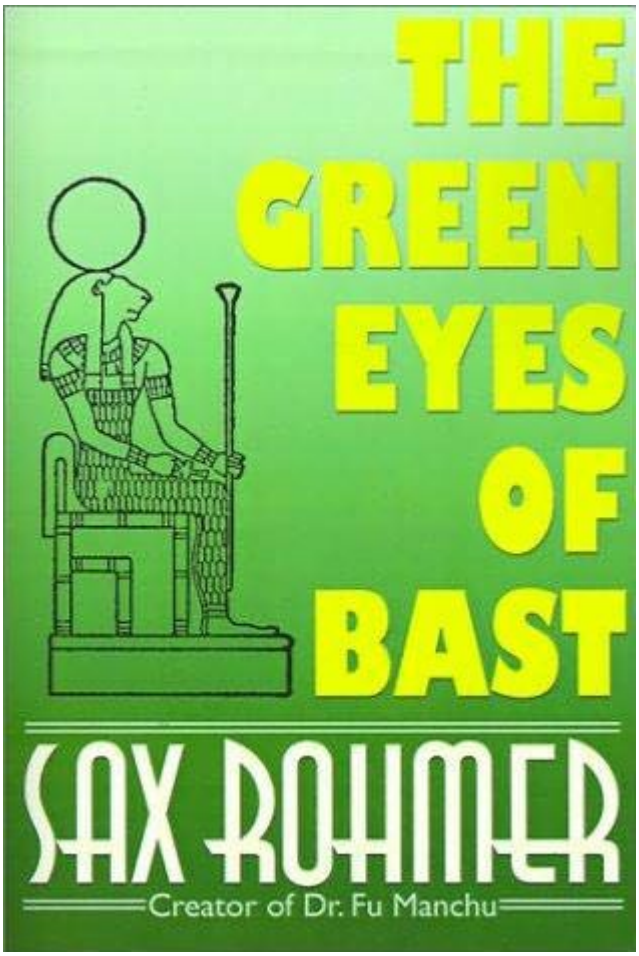
Seton Pasha moved one of the lights so as to illuminate a small oil painting which hung above the sideboard. It represented the head and shoulders of a savage-looking red man, his hair close-cropped like that of a pugilist, and his moustache trimmed in such a fashion that a row of large, fierce teeth were revealed in an expression which might have been meant for a smile. A pair of intolerant steel-blue eyes looked squarely out at the spectator.

"What a time I had," said Seton, "to get him to sit for that! But I managed to secure his wife's support, and the trick was done. You are down to toast Kismet, Margaret, but I am going to propose the health, long life and prosperity of Chief Inspector Kerry, of the Criminal Investigation Department."

THE END

The Green Eyes of Bâst

First Published 1920



Contents

I. I See the Eyes
II. The Sign of the Cat
III. The Green Image
IV. Isobel
V. The Interrupted Supper
VI. The Voice
VII. The Cat of Bubastis
VIII. My Visitor
IX. The Velvet Curtain

X. "Hanging Evidence"
XI. The Scarred Man
XII. I Dream of Green Eyes
XIII. Dr. Damar Greefe
XIV. The Black Doctor
XV. I Receive Visitors
XVI. The Golden Cat
XVII. The Nubian Mute
XVIII. The Secret of Friar's Park
XIX. The Man on the Tower
XX. Gatton's Story
XXI. In London Again
XXII. The Gray Mist
XXIII. The Inevitable
XXIV. A Conference—Interrupted
XXV. Statement of Dr. Damar Greefe, M.D.
XXVI. Statement of Dr. Damar Greefe (continued)
XXVII. Statement of Dr. Damar Greefe (concluded)
XXVIII. The Claws of the Cat
XXIX. An Afterward

I. I See the Eyes

"Good evening, sir. A bit gusty?"

"Very much so, sergeant," I replied. "I think I will step into your hut for a moment and light my pipe if I may."

"Certainly, sir. Matches are too scarce nowadays to take risks with 'em. But it looks as if the storm had blown over."

"I'm not sorry," said I, entering the little hut like a sentry-box which stands at the entrance to this old village high street for accommodation of the officer on point duty at that spot. "I have a longish walk before me."

"Yes. Your place is right off the beat, isn't it?" mused my acquaintance, as sheltered from the keen wind I began to load my briar. "Very inconvenient

I've always thought it for a gentleman who gets about as much as you do."

"That's why I like it," I explained. "If I lived anywhere accessible I should never get a moment's peace, you see. At the same time I have to be within an hour's journey of Fleet Street."

I often stopped for a chat at this point and I was acquainted with most of the men of P. division on whom the duty devolved from time to time. It was a lonely spot at night when the residents in the neighborhood had retired, so that the darkened houses seemed to withdraw yet farther into the gardens separating them from the highroad. A relic of the days when trains and motor-buses were not, dusk restored something of an old-world atmosphere to the village street, disguising the red brick and stucco which in many cases had displaced the half-timbered houses of the past. Yet it was possible in still weather to hear the muted bombilation of the sleepless city and when the wind was in the north to count the hammer-strokes of the great bell of St. Paul's.

Standing in the shelter of the little hut, I listened to the rain dripping from over-reaching branches and to the gurgling of a turgid little stream which flowed along the gutter near my feet whilst now and again swift gusts of the expiring tempest would set tossing the branches of the trees which lined the way.

"It's much cooler to-night," said the sergeant.

I nodded, being in the act of lighting my pipe. The storm had interrupted a spell of that tropical weather which sometimes in July and August brings the breath of Africa to London, and this coolness resulting from the storm was very welcome. Then:

"Well, good night," I said, and was about to pursue my way when the telephone bell in the police-hut rang sharply.

"Hullo," called the sergeant.

I paused, idly curious concerning the message, and:

"The Red House," continued the sergeant, "in College Road? Yes, I know it. It's on Bolton's beat, and he is due here now. Very good; I'll tell him."

He hung up the receiver and, turning to me, smiled and nodded his head resignedly.

"The police get some funny jobs, sir," he confided. "Only last night a gentleman rang up the station and asked them to tell me to stop a short, stout lady with yellow hair and a big blue hat (that was the only description)

as she passed this point and to inform her that her husband had had to go out but that he had left the door-key just inside the dog-kennel!"

He laughed good-humoredly.

"Now to-night," he resumed, "here's somebody just rung up to say that he thinks, only *thinks*, mind you, that he has forgotten to lock his garage and will the constable on that beat see if the keys have been left behind. If so, will he lock the door from the inside, go out through the back, lock that door and leave the keys at the station on coming off duty!"

"Yes," I said. "There are some absent-minded people in the world. But do you mean the Red House in College Road?"

"That's it," replied the sergeant, stepping out of the hut and looking intently to the left.

"Ah, here comes Bolton."

He referred to a stolid, red-faced constable who at that moment came plodding across the muddy road, and:

"A job for you, Bolton," he cried. "Listen. You know the Red House in College Road?"

Bolton removed his helmet and scratched his closely-cropped head.

"Let me see," he mused; "it's on the right—"

"No, no," I interrupted. "It is a house about half-way down on the left; very secluded, with a high brick wall in front."

"Oh! You mean the *empty* house?" inquired the constable.

"Just what I was about to remark, sergeant," said I, turning to my acquaintance. "To the best of my knowledge the Red House has been vacant for twelve months or more."

"Has it?" exclaimed the sergeant. "That's funny. Still, it's none of my business; besides it may have been let within the last few days. Anyway, listen, Bolton. You are to see if the garage is unlocked. If it is and the keys are there, go in and lock the door behind you. There's another door at the other end; go out and lock that too. Leave the keys at the depôt when you go off. Got that fixed?"

"Yes," replied Bolton, and he stood helmet in hand, half inaudibly muttering the sergeant's instructions, evidently with the idea of impressing them upon his memory.

"I have to pass the Red House, constable," I interrupted, "and as you seem doubtful respecting its whereabouts, I will point the place out to you."

"Thank you, sir," said Bolton, replacing his helmet and ceasing to mutter.

"Once more—good night, sergeant," I cried, and met by a keen gust of wind which came sweeping down the village street, showering cascades of water from the leaves above, I set out in step with my stolid companion.

It is supposed poetically that unusual events cast their shadows before them, and I am prepared to maintain the correctness of such a belief. But unless the silence of the constable who walked beside me was due to the unseen presence of such a shadow, and not to a habitual taciturnity, there was nothing in that march through the deserted streets calculated to arouse me to the fact that I was entering upon the first phase of an experience more strange and infinitely more horrible than any of which I had ever known or even read.

The shadow had not yet reached me.

We talked little enough on the way, for the breeze when it came was keen and troublesome, so that I was often engaged in clutching my hat. Except for a dejected-looking object, obviously a member of the tramp fraternity, who passed us near the gate of the old chapel, we met never a soul from the time that we left the police-box until the moment when the high brick wall guarding the Red House came into view beyond a line of glistening wet hedgerow.

"This is the house, constable," I said. "The garage is beyond the main entrance."

We proceeded as far as the closed gates, whereupon:

"There you are, sir," said Bolton triumphantly. "I told you it was empty."

An estate agent's bill faced us, setting forth the desirable features of the residence, the number of bedrooms and reception rooms, modern conveniences, garage, etc., together with the extent of the garden, lawn and orchard.

A faint creaking sound drew my glance upward, and stepping back a pace I stared at a hatchet-board projecting above the wall which bore two duplicates of the bill posted upon the gate.

"That seems to confirm it," I declared, peering through the trees in the direction of the house. "The place has all the appearance of being deserted."

"There's some mistake," muttered Bolton.

"Then the mistake is not ours," I replied. "See, the bills are headed 'To be let or sold. The Red House, etc.'"

"H'm," growled Bolton. "It's a funny go, this is. Suppose we have a look at the garage."

We walked along together to where, set back in a recess, I had often observed the doors of a garage evidently added to the building by some recent occupier. Dangling from a key placed in the lock was a ring to which another key was attached!

"Well, I'm blowed," said Bolton, "this *is* a funny go, this is."

He unlocked the door and swept the interior of the place with a ray of light cast by his lantern. There were one or two petrol cans and some odd lumber suggesting that the garage had been recently used, but no car, and indeed nothing of sufficient value to have interested even such a derelict as the man whom we had passed some ten minutes before. That is if I except a large and stoutly-made packing-case which rested only a foot or so from the entrance so as partly to block it, and which from its appearance might possibly have contained spare parts. I noticed, with vague curiosity, a device crudely representing a seated cat which was painted in green upon the case.

"If there ever was anything here," said Bolton, "it's been pinched and we're locking the stable door after the horse has gone. You'll bear me out, sir, if there's any complaint?"

"Certainly," I replied. "Technically I shall be trespassing if I come in with you, so I shall say good night."

"Good night, sir," cried the constable, and entering the empty garage, he closed the door behind him.

I set off briskly alone towards the cottage which I had made my home. I have since thought that the motives which had induced me to choose this secluded residence were of a peculiarly selfish order. Whilst I liked sometimes to be among my fellowmen and whilst I rarely missed an important first night in London, my inherent weakness for obscure studies and another motive to which I may refer later had caused me to abandon my chambers in the Temple and to retire with my library to this odd little backwater where my only link with Fleet Street, with the land of theaters and clubs and noise and glitter, was the telephone. I scarcely need add that I had sufficient private means to enable me to indulge these whims, otherwise as a working journalist I must have been content to remain nearer to the heart of things. As it was I followed the careless existence of the

independent free-lance, and since my work was accounted above the average I was enabled to pick and choose the subjects with which I should deal. Mine was not an ambitious nature—or it may have been that stimulus was lacking—and all I wrote I wrote for the mere joy of writing, whilst my studies, of which I shall have occasion to speak presently, were not of a nature calculated to swell my coffers in this commercial-minded age.

Little did I know how abruptly this chosen calm of my life was to be broken nor how these same studies were to be turned in a new and strange direction. But if on this night which was to witness the overture of a horrible drama, I had not hitherto experienced any premonition of the coming of those dark forces which were to change the whole tenor of my existence, suddenly, now, in sight of the elm tree which stood before my cottage the *shadow* reached me.

Only thus can I describe a feeling otherwise unaccountable which prompted me to check my steps and to listen. A gust of wind had just died away, leaving the night silent save for the dripping of rain from the leaves and the vague and remote roar of the town. Once, faintly, I thought I detected the howling of a dog. I had heard nothing in the nature of following footsteps, yet, turning swiftly, I did not doubt that I should detect the presence of a follower of some kind. This conviction seized me suddenly and, as I have said, unaccountably. Nor was I wrong in my surmise.

Fifty yards behind me a vaguely defined figure showed for an instant outlined against the light of a distant lamp—ere melting into the dense shadow cast by a clump of trees near the roadside.

Standing quite still, I stared in the direction of the patch of shadow for several moments. It may be said that there was nothing to occasion alarm or even curiosity in the appearance of a stray pedestrian at that hour; for it was little after midnight. Indeed thus I argued with myself, whereby I admit that at sight of that figure I had experienced a sensation which was compounded not only of alarm and curiosity but also of some other emotion which even now I find it hard to define. Instantly I knew that the lithe shape, glimpsed but instantaneously, was that of no chance pedestrian—was indeed that of no ordinary being. At the same moment I heard again, unmistakably, the howling of a dog.

Having said so much, why should I not admit that, turning again very quickly, I hurried on to the gate of my cottage and heaved a great sigh of relief when I heard the reassuring bang of the door as I closed it behind me? Coates, my batman, had turned in, having placed a cold repast upon the table in the little dining-room; but although I required nothing to eat I partook of a stiff whisky and soda, idly glancing at two or three letters which lay upon the table.

They proved to contain nothing of very great importance, and having smoked a final cigarette, I turned out the light in the dining-room and walked into the bedroom—for the cottage was of bungalow pattern—and, crossing the darkened room, stood looking out of the window.

It commanded a view of a little kitchen-garden and beyond of a high hedge, with glimpses of sentinel trees lining the main road. The wind had dropped entirely, but clouds were racing across the sky at a tremendous speed so that the nearly full moon alternately appeared and disappeared, producing an ever-changing effect of light and shadow. At one moment a moon-bathed prospect stretched before me as far as the eye could reach, in the next I might have been looking into a cavern as some angry cloud swept across the face of the moon to plunge the scene into utter darkness.

And it was during such a dark spell and at the very moment that I turned aside to light the lamp that I saw *the eyes*.

From a spot ten yards removed, low down under the hedges bordering the garden, they looked up at me—those great, glittering cat's eyes, so that I stifled an exclamation, drawing back instinctively from the window. A tiger, I thought, or some kindred wild beast, must have escaped from captivity. And so rapidly does the mind work at such times that instinctively I had reviewed the several sporting pieces in my possession and had selected a rifle which had proved serviceable in India ere I had taken one step towards the door.

Before that step could be taken the light of the moon again flooded the garden; and although there was no opening in the hedge by which even a small animal could have retired, no living thing was in sight! But, near and remote, dogs were howling mournfully.

II. The Sign of the Cat

When Coates brought in my tea, newspapers and letters in the morning, I awakened with a start, and:

"Has there been any rain during the night, Coates?" I asked.

Coates, whose unruffled calm at all times provided an excellent sedative, replied:

"Not since a little before midnight, sir."

"Ah!" said I, "and have you been in the garden this morning, Coates?"

"Yes, sir," he replied, "for raspberries for breakfast, sir."

"But not on this side of the cottage?"

"Not on this side."

"Then will you step out, Coates, keeping carefully to the paths, and proceed as far as the tool-shed? Particularly note if the beds have been disturbed between the hedge and the path, but don't make any marks yourself. You are looking for *spoor*, you understand?"

"Spoor? Very good, sir. Of big game?"

"Of big game, yes, Coates."

Unmoved by the strangeness of his instructions, Coates, an object-lesson for those who decry the excellence of British Army disciplinary methods, departed.

It was with not a little curiosity and interest that I awaited his report. As I sat sipping my tea I could hear his regular tread as he passed along the garden path outside the window. Then it ceased and was followed by a vague muttering. He had found something. All traces of the storm had disappeared and there was every indication of a renewal of the heat-wave; but I knew that the wet soil would have preserved a perfect impression of any imprint made upon it on the previous night. Nevertheless, with the early morning sun streaming into my window out of a sky as near to turquoise as I had ever seen it in England, I found it impossible to recapture that uncanny thrill which had come to me in the dark hours when out of the shadows under the hedge the great cat's eyes had looked up at me.

And now, becoming more fully awake, I remembered something else which hitherto I had not associated with the latter phenomenon. I remembered that lithe and evasive pursuing shape which I had detected behind me on the road. Even now, however, it was difficult to associate one

with the other; for whereas the dimly-seen figure had resembled that of a man (or, more closely, that of a woman) the eyes had looked out upon me from a point low down near the ground, like those of some crouching feline.

Coates' footsteps sounded again upon the path and I heard him walking round the cottage and through the kitchen. Finally he reëntered the bedroom and stood just within the doorway in that attitude of attention which was part and parcel of the man. His appearance would doubtless have violated the proprieties of the Albany, for in my rural retreat he was called upon to perform other and more important services than those of a valet. His neatly shaved chin, stolid red countenance and perfectly brushed hair were unexceptionable of course, but because his duties would presently take him into the garden he wore, not the regulation black, but an ancient shooting-jacket, khaki breeches and brown gaiters, looking every inch of him the old soldier that he was.

"Well, Coates?" said I.

He cleared his throat.

"There are footprints in the radish-beds, sir," he reported.

"Footprints?"

"Yes, sir. Very deep. As though some one had jumped over the hedge and landed there."

"Jumped over the hedge!" I exclaimed. "That would be a considerable jump, Coates, from the road."

"It would, sir. Maybe she scrambled up."

"She?"

Coates cleared his throat again.

"There are three sets of prints in all. First a very deep one where the party had landed, then another broken up like, where she had turned round, and the third set with the heel-marks very deep where she had sprung back over the hedge."

"She?" I shouted.

"The prints, sir," resumed Coates, unmoved, "are those of a lady's high-heeled shoes."

I sat bolt upright in bed, staring at the man and scarcely able to credit my senses. Words failed me. Whereupon:

"Will you have tea or coffee for breakfast?" inquired Coates.

"Tea or coffee be damned, Coates!" I cried. "I'm going out to look at those footprints! If you had seen what I saw last night, even your old mahogany countenance would relax for once, I assure you."

"Indeed, sir," said Coates; "did you see the lady, then?"

"Lady!" I exclaimed, tumbling out of bed. "If the eyes that looked at me last night belonged to a 'lady' either I am mad or the 'lady' is of another world."

I pulled on a bath-robe and hurried out into the garden, Coates showing me the spot where he had found the mysterious foot-prints. A very brief examination sufficed to convince me that his account had been correct. Some one wearing high-heeled shoes clearly enough had stood there at some time whilst the soil was quite wet; and as no track led to or from the marks, Coates' conclusion that the person who had made them must have come over the hedge was the only feasible one. I turned to him in amazement, but recognizing in time the wildly fantastic nature of the sight which I had seen in the night, I refrained from speaking of the blazing eyes and made my way to the bathroom wondering if some chance reflection might not have deceived me and the presence of a woman's footmarks at the same spot be no more than a singular coincidence. Even so the mystery of their presence there remained unexplained.

My thoughts were diverted from a trend of profitless conjecture when shortly after breakfast time my 'phone bell rang. It was the editor of the *Planet*, to whom I had been indebted for a number of special commissions —including my fascinating quest of the Giant Gnu, which, generally supposed to be extinct, was reported by certain natives and others to survive in a remote corner of the Dark Continent.

Readers of the *Planet* will remember that although I failed to discover the Gnu I came upon a number of notable things on my journey through the almost unexplored country about the head-waters of the Niger.

"A most extraordinary case has cropped up," he said, "quite in your line, I think, Addison. Evidently a murder, and the circumstances seem to be most dramatic and unusual. I should be glad if you would take it up."

I inquired without much enthusiasm for details. Criminology was one of my hobbies, and in several instances I had traced cases of alleged haunting and other supposedly supernatural happenings to a criminal source; but the ordinary sordid murder did not interest me.

"The body of Sir Marcus Coverly has been found in a crate!" explained my friend. "The crate was being lowered into the hold of the S.S. *Oritoga* at the West India Docks. It had been delivered by a conveyance specially hired for the purpose apparently, as the *Oritoga* is due to sail in an hour. There are all sorts of curious details but these you can learn for yourself. Don't trouble to call at the office; proceed straight to the dock."

"Right!" I said shortly. "I'll start immediately."

And this sudden decision had been brought about by the mention of the victim's name. Indeed, as I replaced the receiver on the hook I observed that my hand was shaking and I have little doubt that I had grown pale.

In the first place, then, let me confess that my retirement to the odd little retreat which at this time was my home, and my absorption in the obscure studies to which I have referred were not so much due to any natural liking for the life of a recluse as to the shattering of certain matrimonial designs. I had learned of the wreck of my hopes upon reading a press paragraph which announced the engagement of Isobel Merlin to Eric Coverly. And it was as much to conceal my disappointment from the world as for any better reason that I had slunk into retirement; for if I am slow to come to a decision in such a matter, once come to, it is of no light moment.

Yet although I had breathed no word of my lost dreams to Isobel but had congratulated her with the rest, often and bitterly I had cursed myself for a sluggard. Too late I had learned that she had but awaited a word from me; and I had gone off to Mesopotamia, leaving that word unspoken. During my absence Coverly had won the prize which I had thrown away. He was heir to the title, for his cousin, Sir Marcus, was unmarried. Now here, a bolt from the blue, came the news of his cousin's death!

It can well be imagined with what intense excitement I hurried to the docks. All other plans abandoned, Coates, arrayed in his neat blue uniform, ran the Rover round from the garage, and ere long we were jolting along the hideously uneven Commercial Road, East, dodging traction-engines drawing strings of lorries, and continually meeting delay in the form of those breakdowns which are of hourly occurrence in this congested but rugged highway.

In the West India Dock Road the way became slightly more open, but when at last I alighted and entered the dock gates I recognized that every

newspaper and news agency in the kingdom was apparently represented. Jones, of the *Gleaner*, was coming out as I went in, and:

"Hello, Addison!" he cried, "this is quite in your line! It's as mad as 'Alice in Wonderland.'"

I did not delay, however, but hurried on in the direction of a dock building, at the door of which was gathered a heterogeneous group comprising newspaper men, dock officials, police and others who were unclassifiable. Half a dozen acquaintances greeted me as I came up, and I saw that the door was closed and that a constable stood on duty before it.

"I call it damned impudence, Addison!" exclaimed one pressman. "The dock people are refusing everybody information until Inspector Somebody-or-Other arrives from New Scotland Yard. I should think he has stopped on the way to get his lunch."

The speaker glanced impatiently at his watch and I went to speak to the man on duty.

"You have orders to admit no one, constable?" I asked.

"That's so, sir," he replied. "We're waiting for Detective-Inspector Gatton, who has been put in charge of the case."

"Ah! Gatton," I muttered, and, stepping aside from the expectant group, I filled and lighted my pipe, convinced that anything to be learned I should learn from Inspector Gatton, for he and I were old friends, having been mutually concerned in several interesting cases.

A few minutes later the Inspector arrived—a thick-set, clean-shaven, very bronzed man, his dark hair streaked with gray, and with all the appearance of a retired naval officer, in his well-cut blue serge suit and soft felt hat; a very reserved man whose innocent-looking blue eyes gave him that frank and open expression which is more often associated with a seaman than with a detective. He nodded to several acquaintances in the group, and then, observing me where I stood, came over and shook hands.

"Open the door, constable," he ordered quietly.

The constable produced a key and unlocked the door of the small stone building. Immediately there was a forward movement of the whole waiting group, but:

"If you please, gentlemen," said Gatton, raising his hand. "I must make my examination first; and Mr. Addison," he added, seeing the resentment

written upon the faces of my disappointed confrères, "has special information which I am going to ask him to place at my disposal."

The constable stood aside and I followed Inspector Gatton into the stone shed.

"Lock the door again, constable," he ordered; "no one is to be admitted."

Thereupon I looked about me, and the scene which I beheld was so strange and gruesome that its every detail remains imprinted upon my memory.

The building then was lighted by four barred windows set so high in the walls that no one could look in from the outside. Blazing sunlight poured in at the two southerly windows and drew a sharp black pattern of the bars across the paved floor. Kneeling beside a stretcher, fully in this path of light, so that he presented a curious striped appearance, was a man who presently proved to be the divisional surgeon, and two paces beyond stood a police inspector who was engaged at the moment of our entrance in making entries in his note-book.

On the stretcher, so covered up that only his face was visible, lay one whom at first I failed to recognize, for the horribly contorted features presented a kind of mottled green appearance utterly indescribable.

Stifling an exclamation of horror, I stared and stared at that ghastly face, then:

"My God!" I muttered. "Yes! it *is* Sir Marcus!"

The surgeon stood up and the inspector advanced to meet Gatton, but my horrified gaze had strayed from the stretcher to a badly damaged and splintered packing-case, which was the only other object in the otherwise empty shed. At this I stared as much aghast as I had stared at the dead man.

The iron bands were broken and twisted and the whole of one side lay in fragments on the floor; but upon a board which had formed part of the top I perceived the figure of a cat roughly traced in green paint.

Beyond any shadow of doubt this crate was the same which on the night before had lain in the garage of the Red House!

III. The Green Image

"YES," said Gatton, "I was speaking no more than the truth when I told them that you had special information which I hoped you would place at my disposal. Some of the particulars were given to me over the 'phone, you see, and I was glad to find you here when I arrived. I should have consulted you in any event, and principally about—that."

He pointed to an object which I held in my hand. It was a little green enamel image; the crouching figure of a woman having a cat's head, a piece of Egyptian workmanship probably of the fourth century B.C. Considered in conjunction with the figure painted upon the crate, the presence of this little image was so amazing a circumstance that from the moment when it had been placed in my hand I had stood staring at it almost dazedly.

The divisional surgeon had gone, and only the local officer remained with Gatton and myself in the building. Sir Marcus Coverly presented all the frightful appearance of one who has died by asphyxia, and although of course there would be an autopsy, little doubt existed respecting the mode of his death. The marks of violence found upon the body could be accounted for by the fact that the crate had fallen a distance of thirty feet into the hold, and the surgeon was convinced that the injuries to the body had all been received after death, death having taken place in his opinion fully twelve hours before.

"You see," said Gatton, "when the crate broke several things which presumably were in Sir Marcus' pockets were found lying loose amongst the wreckage. That cat-woman was one of them."

"Yet it may not have been in any of his pockets at all," said I.

"It *may* not," agreed Gatton. "But that it was somewhere in the crate is beyond dispute, I think. Besides this is more than a coincidence."

And he pointed to the painted cat upon the lid of the packing-case. I had already told him of the episode at the Red House on the previous night, and now:

"The fates are on our side," I said, "for at least we know where the crate was despatched from."

"Quite so," agreed Gatton. "We should have got that from the carter later, of course, but every minute saved in an affair such as this is worth considering. As a pressman you will probably disagree with me, but I

propose to suppress these two pieces of evidence. Premature publication of clews too often handicaps us. Now, what *is* that figure exactly?"

"It is a votive offering of a kind used in Ancient Egypt by pilgrims to Bubastis. It is a genuine antique, and if you think the history of such relics is likely to assist the investigation I can give you some further particulars this evening if you have time to call at my place."

"I think," said Gatton, taking the figure from me and looking at it with a singular expression on his face, "that the history of the thing is very important. The fact that a rough reproduction of a somewhat similar figure is painted upon the case cannot possibly be a coincidence."

I stared at him silently for a moment, then:

"You mean that the crate was specially designed to contain the body?" I asked.

"I am certainly of that opinion," declared Inspector Heath, the local officer. "It is of just the right size and shape for the purpose."

Once more I began to examine the fragments stacked upon the floor, and then I looked again at the several objects which lay beside the crate. They were the personal belongings of the dead baronet and the police had carefully noted in which of his pockets each object had been found. He was in evening dress and a light top-coat had been packed into the crate beside him. In this had been found a cigar-case and a pair of gloves; a wallet containing £20 in Treasury notes and a number of cards and personal papers had fallen out of the crate together with the cat statuette. The face of his watch was broken. It had been in his waistcoat pocket but it still ticked steadily on where it lay there beside its dead owner. A gold-mounted malacca cane also figured amongst the relics of the gruesome crime; so that whatever had been the object of the murderer, that of robbery was out of the question.

"The next thing to do," said Gatton, "is to trace Sir Marcus's movements from the time that he left home last night to the time that he met his death. I am going out now to 'phone to the Yard. We ought to have succeeded in tracing the carter who brought the crate here before the evening. I personally shall proceed to Sir Marcus's rooms and then to this Red House around which it seems to me that the mystery centers."

He put the enamel figure into his pocket and taking up the broken board which bore the painted cat:

"You are carrying a top-coat," he said. "Hide this under it!"

He turned to Inspector Heath, nodding shortly.

"All right," he said, with a grim smile, "go out now and talk to the crowd!"

Having issued certain telephonic instructions touching the carter who had delivered the crate to the docks, and then imparting to the representatives of the press a guarded statement for publication, Inspector Gatton succeeded in wedging himself into my little two-seater and ere long we were lurching and bumping along the ill-paved East-end streets.

The late Sir Marcus's London address, which had been unknown to me, we had learned from his cards, and it was with the keenest anticipation of a notable discovery that I presently found myself with Gatton mounting the stairs to the chambers of the murdered baronet.

At the very moment of our arrival the door was opened and a man—quite obviously a constable in plain clothes—came out. Behind him I observed one whom I took to be the late Sir Marcus's servant, a pathetic and somewhat disheveled figure.

"Hello, Blythe!" said Gatton, "who instructed you to come here?"

"Sir Marcus's man—Morris—telephoned the Yard," was the reply, "as he couldn't understand what had become of his master and I was sent along to see him."

"Oh," said Gatton, "very good. Report to me in due course."

Blythe departed, and Gatton and I entered the hall. The man, Morris, closed the door, and led us into a small library. Beside the telephone stood a tray bearing decanter and glasses, and there was evidence that Morris had partaken of a hurried breakfast consisting only of biscuits and whisky and soda.

"I haven't been to bed all night, gentlemen," he began the moment that we entered the room. "Sir Marcus was a good master and if he was sleeping away from home he never failed to advise me, so that I knew even before the dreadful news reached me that something was amiss."

He was quite unstrung and his voice was unsteady. The reputation of the late baronet had been one which I personally did not envy him, but whatever his faults, and I knew they had been many, he had evidently possessed the redeeming virtue of being a good employer.

"A couple of hours' sleep would make a new man of you," said Gatton kindly. "I understand your feelings, but no amount of sorrow can mend matters, unfortunately. Now, I don't want to worry you, but there are one or two points which I must ask you to clear up. In the first place did you ever see this before?"

From his pocket he took out the little figure of Bâst, the cat-goddess, and held it up before Morris.

The man stared at it with lack-luster eyes, scratching his unshaven chin; then he shook his head slowly.

"Never," he declared. "No, I am positive I never saw a figure like that before."

"Then, secondly," continued Gatton, "was your master ever in Egypt?"

"Not that I am aware of; certainly not since I have been with him—six years on the thirty-first of this month."

"Ah," said Gatton. "Now, when did you last see Sir Marcus?"

"At half-past six last night, sir. He was dining at his club and then going to the New Avenue Theater. I booked a seat for him myself."

"He was going alone, then?"

"Yes."

Gatton glanced at me significantly and I experienced an uncomfortable thrill. In the inspector's glance I had read that he suspected the presence of a woman in the case and at the mention of the New Avenue Theater it had instantly occurred to me that Isobel Merlin was appearing there! Gatton turned again to Morris.

"Sir Marcus had not led you to suppose that there was any likelihood of his *not* returning last night?"

"No, sir; that was why, knowing his regular custom, I became so alarmed when he failed to come back or to 'phone."

Gatton stared hard at the speaker and:

"It will be no breach of confidence on your part," he said, speaking slowly and deliberately, "for you to answer my next question. The best service you can do your late master now will be to help us to apprehend his murderer."

He paused a moment, then:

"Was Sir Marcus interested in some one engaged at the New Avenue Theater?" he asked.

Morris glanced from face to face in a pathetic, troubled fashion. He rubbed the stubble on his chin again and hesitated. Finally:

"I believe," he replied, "that there was a lady there who—"

He paused, swallowing, and:

"Yes," Gatton prompted, "who—?"

"Who—interested Sir Marcus; but I don't know her name nor anything about her," he declared. "I knew about—some of the others, but Sir Marcus was—very reserved about this lady, which made me think—"

"Yes?"

"That he perhaps hadn't been so successful."

Morris ceased speaking and sat staring at a bookcase vacantly.

"Ah," murmured Gatton. Then, abruptly: "Did Sir Marcus ever visit any one who lived in College Road?" he demanded.

Morris looked up wearily.

"College Road?" he repeated. "Where is that, sir?"

"It doesn't matter," said Gatton shortly, "if the name is unfamiliar to you. Had Sir Marcus a car?"

"Not latterly, sir."

"Any other servants?"

"No. As a bachelor he had no use for a large establishment, and Friars' Park remains in the possession of the late Sir Burnham's widow."

"Sir Burnham? Sir Marcus's uncle?"

"Yes."

"What living relatives had Sir Marcus?"

"His aunt—Lady Burnham Coverly—with whom I believe he was on bad terms. Her own son, who ought to have inherited the title, was dead, you see. I think she felt bitterly towards my master. The only other relative I ever heard of was Mr. Eric—Sir Marcus's second cousin—now *Sir* Eric, of course."

I turned aside, glancing at some books which lay scattered on the table. The wound was a new one and I suppose I was not man enough to hide the pain which mention of Eric Coverly still occasioned me.

"Were the cousins good friends?" continued the even, remorseless voice of the inquisitor.

Morris looked up quickly.

"They were not, sir," he answered. "They never had been. But some few months back a fresh quarrel arose and one night in this very room it almost came to blows."

"Indeed? What was the quarrel about?"

The old hesitancy claimed Morris again, but at last:

"Of course," he said, with visible embarrassment, "it was—a woman."

I felt my heart leaping wildly, but I managed to preserve an outward show of composure.

"What woman?" demanded Gatton.

"I don't know, sir."

"Do you mean it?"

A fierce note of challenge had come into the quiet voice, but Morris looked up and met Gatton's searching stare unflinchingly.

"I swear it," he said. "I never was an eavesdropper."

"I suggest it was the same woman that Sir Marcus went to see last night?" Gatton continued.

The examination of Morris had reached a point at which I found myself hard put to it to retain even a seeming of composure. All Gatton's questions had been leading up to this suggestion, as I now perceived clearly enough; and from the cousins' quarrel to Isobel, Eric's *fiancée*, who was engaged at the New Avenue Theater, was an inevitable step. But:

"Possibly, sir," was Morris's only answer.

Inspector Gatton stared hard at the man for a moment or so, then:

"Very well," he said. "Take my advice and turn in. There will be much for you to do presently, I am afraid. Who was Sir Marcus's solicitor?"

Morris gave the desired information in a tired, toneless voice, and we departed. Little did Gatton realize that his words were barbed, when, as we descended to the street, he said:

"I have a call to make at Scotland Yard next, after which my first visit will be to the stage-doorkeeper of the New Avenue Theater."

"Can I be of further assistance to you at the moment?" I asked, endeavoring to speak casually.

"Thanks, no. But I should welcome your company this afternoon at my examination of the Red House. I understand that it is in your neighborhood, so perhaps as you are also professionally interested in the case, you might

arrange to meet me there. Are you returning home now or going to the *Planet* office?"

"I think to the office," I replied. "In any event 'phone there making an appointment and I will meet you at the Red House."

IV. Isobel

Ten minutes later I was standing in a charming little boudoir which too often figured in my daydreams. My own photograph was upon the mantelpiece, and in Isobel's dark eyes when she greeted me there was a light which I lacked the courage to try to understand. I had not at that time learned what I learned later, and have already indicated, that my own foolish silence had wounded Isobel as deeply as her subsequent engagement to Eric Coverly had wounded me.

The psychology of a woman is intriguing in its very naïveté, and now as she stood before me, slim and graceful in her well-cut walking costume, a quick flicker of red flaming in her cheeks and her eyes alight with that sweet tantalizing look in which expectation and a hot pride were mingled, I wondered and felt sick at heart. Desirable she was beyond any other woman I had known, and I called myself witling coward, to have avoided putting my fortune to the test on that fatal day of my departure for Mesopotamia. For just as she looked at me now she had looked at me then. But to-day she was evidently on the point of setting out—I did not doubt with the purpose of meeting Eric Coverly; on that day of the irrevocable past she had been free and I had been silent.

"You nearly missed me, Jack," she said gayly. "I was just going out."

By the very good-fellowship of her greeting she restored me to myself and enabled me to stamp down—at least temporarily—the monster through whose greedy eyes I had found myself considering the happiness of Eric Coverly.

"I am afraid, Isobel," I replied, "that what I have to tell you is not by any means pleasant—although—"

"Yes?" she prompted, noting how I hesitated.

"Although it means that you are now the future Lady Coverly."

The bright color left her cheeks. That some black tragedy underlay my words she had intuitively perceived, but I could see that she failed to grasp the whole meaning of my bald statement. She sank down slowly into a cushioned chair, so that a beam of golden light pouring in through the opened window set aglowing the russet tints in her dark brown hair.

"Did you know Sir Marcus?" I asked, speaking as gently as I could.

With what intense, if hidden, emotion I awaited her answer it were impossible to describe.

"Do you mean—"

She met my glance, and I nodded gravely.

"Oh, Jack! When did it happen?"

"Last night. But you have not told me if you knew him?" I persisted.

Isobel shook her head.

"Not in any way—intimately," she replied. "Eric"—she hesitated, glancing up quickly and as quickly down again—"and he were not on good terms."

"But you had met him?" I persisted; for I had detected in her manner a reluctance to discuss Sir Marcus which I failed to understand.

"I used to meet him, Jack, when—when you were away. He came once or twice with Eric. They were not good friends, even then. But I never liked him. I quite lost sight of him from the time that he came into the title—about four years ago, was it not?—until quite recently. He had been in Russia, I think. Then he—" Again she hesitated. It was odd how often people hesitated, as if seeking for words, when speaking of the late baronet. "He called at the theater. Considering that he knew of my engagement to Eric, his manner was not quite nice. But I was anxious to prevent trouble, and did not mention the visit to Eric. Sir Marcus was very persistent, however. One night Eric saw him leaving the stage-door and I believe there was a dreadful scene at Eric's rooms."

"And that is all you know of him, Isobel?"

"Practically all, except what I have heard, of course. I might add that I instructed Marie to tell Sir Marcus I was engaged whenever he might call in future."

"And did he call again?"

"Marie said that he sent his card up on several occasions, but she knew how the affair worried me and did not tell me at the time. I saw him in the

stalls occasionally, and—oh!—"

The last word was a mere murmur. Isobel's expression grew more than ever troubled.

"He was there last night," she whispered, and raising her eyes to me: "Tell me how it happened, and where—"

But ere I had time to begin there was an interruption. Dimly, a telephone bell rang. I could hear the voice of Marie, Isobel's maid, answering the call then:

"Mr. Coverly to speak to you, madam," said Marie, entering the room.

"He must have only just heard the news!" cried Isobel, rising swiftly and going out.

Consumed by impatience, I walked up and down the dainty apartment listening to Isobel's muffled voice speaking in the lobby. Twice I went to the window and peered down into the street, expecting to see the thick-set figure of Inspector Gatton approaching. My frame of mind was peculiar and troubled. Gatton's inquiries pointed unmistakably to a suspicion that Sir Marcus's last hours had been spent, if not actually with, at any rate near to Isobel. And since the man who would most directly profit by the baronet's death happened also to be Isobel's *fiancé*, I foresaw a dreadful ordeal for both if Eric Coverly was not in a position to establish an alibi.

I had been about to ask her if Coverly had been in her company on the previous night when the interruption had occurred. Now if Gatton should arrive and find me in Isobel's flat, what construction would he put upon my presence?

Yet again I went to the window and peered anxiously up and down the street. Every cab that approached I expected to contain the inspector, and I heaved a sigh of relief as one after another passed the door. Pedestrians who turned the distant corner I scrutinized closely and was so employed when Isobel came running back to the room.

All her color had fled and her eyes were wide and fear-stricken.

"Oh, Jack, Jack!" she cried, "it is horrible, horrible! Eric is at his solicitors' and they tell him that suspicion is bound to fall on *him*! It's preposterous—unthinkable. It must have been some fiend who committed such a crime, not a human being—"

"Then," I interrupted excitedly, "Coverly was not with you last night?"

"No! That is the crowning tragedy of it all. He 'phoned me early in the evening saying that he had an unavoidable business appointment to keep. From the tone of his voice—"

She ceased speaking abruptly, and stared at me rather wildly.

"Isobel," I said, "you should surely know that you can trust your life to me—and the life of any one dear to you."

She quickly laid her hand on my arm and her face flushed sweetly. I fear I had infused my words with an ardor which exhibited at an earlier and more opportune moment might have changed the course of both our lives.

"Of course I know, Jack," she said. "But I am so frightened that I distrust my very self. Well, then, I thought that I noticed a change in Eric's manner last night—in the tone of his voice. In fact I asked him if I had done anything of which he had disapproved." She gave me a quick little embarrassed glance. "He is somewhat exacting, you know. He laughed at the idea, but in rather a forced way, it seemed. Then he arranged to meet me for lunch at the Carlton to-day."

"But surely he can satisfactorily account for his movements? He must have been seen by those who know him."

Isobel frowned in a troubled manner that awakened strange, wild longings.

"I cannot make it out," she replied. "He appears to be keeping something back."

"He is very ill-advised. He will certainly have to make up his mind to speak out when Inspector Gatton examines him. I cannot disguise from you, Isobel, that the police know that Sir Marcus was at the New Avenue last night, and since his death occurred some hours later the nature of their suspicion is obvious enough. Are you joining him at the solicitors', Isobel?"

"Yes, he asked me to do so."

"Then come along at once. I expect a Scotland Yard man to arrive at any moment and it would be advisable to see Coverly and to take a legal opinion before you give your testimony."

"But, Jack!" Isobel confronted me. "You don't think that I or Eric have anything to hide?"

"Certainly not. You must know that I do not think so. But on the other hand, the legal mind being used to considering problems of evidence, a solicitor will be able to advise you of the best course to adopt, and that most

likely to result in your being spared all association with the inquiry. Meanwhile—let us hurry. I prefer to give Inspector Gatton my own account of this visit rather than to be discovered here by him. He will learn from Marie that I have called, of course, but that doesn't matter."

We had now quitted the flat and were descending the stairs. On reaching the street I glanced sharply to right and left. But Gatton was not in sight.

I secured a taxi at the corner and Isobel set out for the office of Coverly's solicitor. I stood looking after the cab until it was out of sight and then I set out to walk to the *Planet* office. By the time that I had reached Fleet Street I had my ideas in some sort of order and I sat down to write the first of my articles on the "*Oritoga* mystery"—for under that title the murder of Sir Marcus Coverly was destined to figure as the *cause célèbre* of the moment. I had more than one reason for reticence and indeed I experienced no little difficulty in preparing the requisite amount of copy without involving Isobel and Eric Coverly. Half-way through my task I paused, laid down my pen, and was on the point of tearing up the pages already written and declining the commission at the eleventh hour.

A few minutes' reflection, however, enabled me to see that the best service I could offer to the suspected man (always assuming that he had no alibi to offer) was that of representing the facts as I saw them to the vast public reached by this influential journal. In my own mind I had never entertained a shadow of suspicion that Coverly was the culprit. Underlying the horrible case I thought I could perceive even darker things—a mystery within a mystery; a horror overtopping horror.

I had just resumed work, then, when a boy came in to inform me that Gatton had rung up and wished to speak to me.

Half fearful of what I should hear, I went to the adjoining room and took up the receiver. Presently:

"Hullo! Is that Mr. Addison?" came Gatton's voice.

"Yes, speaking. What developments, Gatton?"

"Several. I've got the report of the estate-agent and I've seen the stage-doorkeeper of the New Avenue! You mustn't write anything until I see you, but in order to regularize things a bit I've spoken to the Chief and formally asked his permission to consult you on the case—about the Egyptian figures, you know. He remembered you at once, so it's all square. But I've got a bone to pick with you."

"What is that?"

"Never mind now. Can you meet me at the Red House at five o'clock?"

"Yes. I will be there."

"Good. I don't hope for much. It's the strangest case I ever touched. We are dealing with unusual people, not ordinary criminals."

"I agree."

"If there is any man in London who can see daylight through the mystery I believe you are the man. Do you know on what I think the whole thing turns?"

"On some undiscovered incident in Sir Marcus's past, beyond a doubt. Probably an amorous adventure."

"You're wrong," said Gatton grimly. "It turns on the figure of the green cat. Good-by. Five o'clock."

V. The Interrupted Supper

I arrived at the Red House before Inspector Gatton. A constable was on duty at the gate and as I came up and paused he regarded me rather doubtfully until I told him that I had an appointment with Gatton. I stared up the drive towards the house. It was not, apparently, a very old building, presenting some of the worst features of the mid-Victorian period, and from whence it derived its name I could not conjecture unless from the fact that the greater part of the facade was overgrown with some kind of red creeper.

The half-moon formed by the crescent-shaped carriage-way and the wall bordering the road was filled with rather unkempt shrubbery, laurels and rhododendrons for the most part, from amid which arose several big trees. In the blaze of the afternoon sun the place looked commonplace enough with estate agents' bills pasted in the dirty windows, and it was difficult to conceive that it had been the scene of the mysterious crime of which at that hour all London was talking and which later was to form a subject of debate throughout the civilized world.

Gatton joined me within a few minutes of my arrival. He was accompanied by Constable Bolton with whom I had first visited the Red House. Bolton was now in plain clothes, and he had that fish-out-of-water

appearance which characterizes the constable in mufti. Indeed he looked rather dazed, and on arriving before the house he removed his bowler and mopped his red face with a large handkerchief, nodding to me as he did so.

"Good afternoon, sir; it was lucky you came along with me last night. I thought it was a funny go and I was right, it seems."

"Quite right," said Gatton shortly, "and now here are the keys which you returned to the depôt this morning."

From his pocket the Inspector produced a steel ring bearing a large and a small key which I recognized as that which had hung from the lock of the garage door on the previous night.

We walked along to the garage and Inspector Gatton placed the key in the lock; then turning to Bolton:

"Now," he directed, "show us exactly what you did."

Bolton replaced his bowler, which hitherto he had carried in his hand, hesitated for a moment, and then unlocked the door.

"Of course I had my lantern with me last night," he explained, "and this gentleman and myself stood looking in for a moment."

"Mr. Addison has already described to me exactly what he saw," said Gatton. "Show us what you did after Mr. Addison left you."

Bolton, with a far-away look in his eyes betokening an effort of retrospection, withdrew the key from the lock and entered the garage, Gatton and I following. There was a sky window to light the place, so that when Bolton reclosed the door we could see well enough. His movements were as follows: Relocking the door from the inside, he walked slowly along to a smaller door at the opposite end and with the other key attached to the ring unfastened it.

"Wait a moment," said Gatton. "Did you look about you at all before opening this door?"

"Only long enough to find where it was, sir. Just about as long as I showed you."

"All right. Go on, then."

We followed Bolton out into a very narrow hedge-bordered path, evidently a tradesman's entrance, and he turned and locked the door behind him. Slipping the keys into his pocket, he tramped stolidly out to the main road whereon we emerged immediately beside the garage.

"Ah," murmured Gatton. "Now give me the keys," and as the man did so: "Throughout all this time did you see or hear anything of an unusual nature?"

Bolton removed his bowler once more. I had gathered by this time that he regarded fresh air as an aid to reflection.

"Well, sir," he replied in a puzzled way, "that first door—"

"Well," said Gatton, as the man hesitated.

"It seemed to open more easily just now than it did last night. There seemed to be a sort of hitch before when it was about half-way open."

"Perhaps the crate was in the way?" suggested Gatton. "Except for the absence of the crate do you notice anything different, anything missing, or anything there now that was not there before?"

Bolton shook his head.

"No," he answered; "it looks just the same to me—except, as I say, that the door seemed to open more easily."

"H'm," muttered Gatton; "and you carried the keys in your pocket until you went off duty?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. You can go now."

Bolton touched his bowler and departed, and Gatton turned to me with a grim smile.

"We'll just step inside again," he said, "so as not to attract any undue attention."

He again unlocked the garage door and closed it as we entered.

"Now," said he, "before we go any further what was your idea in keeping back the fact that one of the missing links in the chain of evidence was already in your possession?"

"No doubt," I said rather guiltily, "you refer to the fact of my acquaintance with Miss Isobel Merlin?"

"I do!" said Gatton, "and to the fact that you nipped in ahead of me and interviewed this important witness before I had even heard of her existence." He continued to smile, but the thoroughness and unflinching pursuit of duty which were the outstanding features of the man, underlay his tone of badinage. "I want to say," he continued, "that for your cooperation, which has been very useful to me on many occasions, I am always grateful,

but if in return I give you facilities which no other pressman has, I don't expect you to abuse them."

"Really, Inspector," I replied, "you go almost too far. I have done nothing to prejudice your case nor could I possibly have known until my interview this morning with Miss Merlin, that it was she in whom the late Sir Marcus was interested."

"H'm," said Gatton, but still rather dubiously, his frank, wide-open eyes regarding me in that naïve manner which was so deceptive.

"All that I learned," I continued, "is unequivocally at your disposal. Finally I may tell you—and I would confess it to few men—that Miss Merlin is a very old friend and might have been something more if I had not been a fool."

"Oh!" said Gatton, and his expression underwent a subtle change—"Oh! That's rather awkward; in fact"—he frowned perplexedly—"it's damned awkward!"

"What do you mean?" I demanded.

"Well," said he, "I don't know what account Miss Merlin gave to you of her relations with Sir Marcus—"

"Relations!" I said hotly, "the man was a mere acquaintance; she hadn't even seen him, except from the stage, for some months past."

"Oh," replied Gatton, "is that so?" He looked at me very queerly. "It doesn't seem to dovetail with the evidence of the stage-doorkeeper."

I felt myself changing color, and:

"What, then, does the stage-doorkeeper assert?" I asked.

Gatton continued to look at me in that perplexed way, and believing that I detected the trend of his reflections:

"Look here, Inspector," I said, "let us understand one another. Whatever may be the evidence of stage-doorkeepers and others, upon one point you can be assured. Miss Merlin had nothing whatever to do with this horrible crime. The idea is unthinkable. So confident am I of this, that you can be perfectly open with me and I give you my word of honor that I shall be equally frank with you. The truth of the matter cannot possibly injure her in the end and I am as anxious to discover it as you are."

Gatton suddenly extended his hand, and:

"Good!" he said. "We understand one another, but how is Miss Merlin going to explain this?"

He drew a note-book from his pocket, turned over several leaves, and then:

"On no fewer than six occasions," he said, "I have approximate dates here, Sir Marcus sent his card to Miss Merlin's dressing-room."

"I know," I interrupted him; "he persecuted her, but she never saw him."

"Wait a minute. Last night"—Gatton glanced at me sharply—"Marie, the maid, came down after Sir Marcus's card had been sent to the dressing-room and talked for several minutes to the late baronet, just by the doorkeeper's box, but out of earshot. That was at ten o'clock. At eleven, that is after the performance, Sir Marcus returned, and again Marie came down to see him. They went out into the street together and Sir Marcus entered a cab which was waiting and drove off. Miss Merlin left a quarter of an hour later."

Our glances met and a silence of some moments' duration fell between us; then:

"You suggest," I said, "that Miss Merlin had arranged a rendezvous with him and to save appearances had joined him there later?"

"Well"—Gatton raised his eyebrows—"what do *you* suggest?"

I found myself temporarily at a loss for words, but:

"Knowing nothing of this," I explained, "naturally I was not in a position to tax Miss Merlin with it. Possibly you have done so. What is her explanation?"

"I have not seen her," confessed Gatton; "I arrived at her flat ten minutes after she had gone out—with you."

"You saw Marie?"

"Unfortunately Marie was also out, but I saw an old charwoman who attends daily, I understand, and it was from her that I learned of your visit."

"Marie," I said, "may be able to throw some light on the matter."

"I don't doubt it!" replied Gatton grimly. "Meanwhile we have sufficient evidence to show that Sir Marcus drove from the New Avenue Theater to this house."

"He may not have driven here at all," I interrupted; "he may have driven somewhere else and performed the latter part of his journey here—"

"In the crate!" cried Gatton. "Yes, you are right; his body may actually have been inside the crate at the time that you and Bolton arrived here last night; for that would be fully an hour after Sir Marcus left the stage-door."

"But who can have rung up the police station last night?" I cried, "and what can have been the object of this unknown person?"

"That we have to find out," said Gatton quietly; "undoubtedly it formed part of a scheme planned with extraordinary cunning; it was not an accident or an oversight, I mean. The men who are assisting me haven't been idle, for we have already learned some most amazing facts about the case. I haven't yet visited the house myself, but I have here the report of one of my assistants who has done so; also I have the keys. The garage I will inspect more carefully later on."

He glanced quickly about the place before we left it, then, leaving the door locked behind us, we walked along to the gate before which the constable stood on duty, and from thence proceeded up the drive to the front entrance. There was a deep porch supported by pillars and densely overgrown with creeper. I noted, too, a heavy and unhealthy odor as of decaying leaves, and observed that a perfect carpet of these lay on the path. In the shade of the big trees it was comparatively cool, but the heavy malarious smell did not please me and I imagined that it must have repelled more than one would-be lessee.

As we approached the porch I saw that the windows of the rooms immediately left and right of it had been stripped of the agent's bills, for I could see where fragments of paper still adhered to the glass. There were no bills in the porch either; but when Gatton opened the front door I uttered an exclamation of surprise.

We stood in a small lounge-hall. There was a staircase on the left and three doors opened on to the hall. But although the Red House was palpably unoccupied, the hall was furnished! There were some rugs upon the polished floor, a heavy bronze club-fender in front of the grate, several chairs against the walls and a large palm in a Chinese pot.

"Why," I exclaimed, "the place is furnished and the stairs are carpeted too!"

"Yes," said Gatton, looking keenly about him, "but according to report if you will step upstairs you will get a surprise."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, suppose we go and see."

Gatton led the way and I followed up the stairs as far as the first landing. Here I paused in amazement. For at this point all attempts at furnishing

ceased. The landing was quite bare and so were the stairs above it! Seeing my expression of incredulous surprise:

"Yes," said Gatton, smiling, "it's a strange arrangement, isn't it?"

We descended again to the furnished hall.

"Look here," continued my companion.

He unlocked a door on the left, having tried several keys from the bunch which he carried without success, but finally discovering the right one.

A long rectangular room was revealed, evidently intended for a dining-room. It was empty and unfurnished, odds and ends of newspaper and other rubbish lying here and there upon the floor. My astonishment was momentarily increasing. A second door, that in the center, Gatton opened, revealing another empty room, but:

"I have reserved this one for the last," he said: "you will find that it is unlocked."

He pointed to the third door, that on the right, and as he evidently intended me to open it, I stepped forward, turned the handle and entered a small square room, exquisitely furnished.

A heavy Persian carpet was spread upon the floor and the windows were draped with some kind of brightly colored Madras. Tastefully-framed water-colors hung upon the wall. There was a quaint cabinet in the room, too; a low cushioned settee and two armchairs. In the center was a table upon which stood a lamp with a large mosaic shade. Two high-backed chairs were set to the table—and the table was laid for supper! A bottle of wine stood in an ice-pail, in which the ice had long since melted, and a tempting cold repast was spread. The table was decorated with a bowl of perfect white roses. The silver was good; the napery was snowy.

Like a fool I stood gaping at the spectacle, until, noting the direction of Gatton's glance, I turned my attention to the mantelpiece upon which a clock was ticking with a dull and solemn note.

Standing beside the clock, in a curious carved frame, was a large photograph of Isobel!

VI. The Voice

"This is where the mystery centers," said Gatton.

I made no reply, for I had not yet recovered from the shock of that discovery in the deserted supper room. It was so wholly unexpected and yet it so cruelly confirmed the Inspector's undisguised suspicions that it seemed to me to have created a sort of impalpable barrier between us. Of this Gatton was evidently conscious. He endeavored to arouse my interest in the inquiries which he was conducting in the garage, but for long enough I saw nothing of the place in which we stood; I could only see that photograph smiling at me inquiringly through a haze of doubt, and my companion's words reached me in a muffled fashion. Finally, however, I succeeded in rousing myself from this dazed condition, and confident as ever that Isobel was innocent of all complicity in the matter:

"The presence of the photograph," I said, "takes us a step further. Don't you see, Inspector, that this is a deeply and cunningly laid trap? What I had taken for a series of unfortunate coincidences I perceive now to be the workings of an elaborate scheme involving perfectly innocent people in the crime."

"H'm," said Gatton doubtfully; "it may be as you suggest; at any rate it is a new point of view and one which I confess had not occurred to me. There is one witness who can clear up any doubt on the subject."

"You mean Marie?"

"Exactly. She will lie, beyond doubt, but we shall find means to reach the truth."

"Would it not be advisable, Inspector," I asked excitedly, "to make sure of her at once?"

Gatton smiled grimly, and:

"Marie would have to make herself invisible to evade Scotland Yard now," he replied. "She is being watched closely. But," he continued, "what do you make of these marks on the door?"

We had reclosed the garage door and now were standing immediately inside. The marks to which my companion had drawn my attention were situated high up near the roof.

"This may account for the statement of Bolton that the door seemed more difficult to open last night than to-day," he said. "Unless I am greatly mistaken, some sort of attachment existed here until quite recently."

"Possibly a contrivance for reclosing the door?" I suggested.

The marks in fact roughly corresponded to those which would be made by the presence of such a contrivance and there seemed to have been some attempt where it had been removed to disguise the holes left by the screws.

"But the purpose of it?" muttered Gatton helplessly.

"God knows," I said; "the purpose of the whole thing is a mystery beyond me entirely."

"Assuming that such a piece of mechanism as you suggest had been attached to the door," mused Gatton, "you would have noticed its operation last night, unless one of you held the door open."

"Neither of us held the door!" I interrupted excitedly. "I remember that we stood just outside looking in. I was behind the constable and he was directing the rays of his lantern into the place."

"H'm," muttered Gatton. "Then it wasn't a contrivance for closing the door; it was something else. Suppose we investigate the other door?"

We proceeded to the other door and I became aware of an intense curiosity respecting what we should find, and of a conviction too that there would be evidence here of another attachment. In this I was quite correct. Some piece of mechanism had evidently been fastened to this door also. Together we stood staring up at these tell-tale screw-holes and then rather blankly we stared at one another.

"We only lack one thing," said Gatton; "the scheme upon which all these contrivances and apparently isolated episodes were hung together. Nothing, as we have already assumed, was accident, and nothing coincidence. It was with some deliberate purpose that the constable was instructed to walk through this garage, opening and shutting the doors behind him."

"From whom did these instructions come?"

"That is one of the minor points which I have already cleared up," he replied. "On my way here I called at the house agent's, as you know, since I have the keys; I also called at the station. The sergeant who was on duty last night I could not see, unfortunately, but I learned—that it was a woman who rang up."

My heart sank lower and lower. It seemed to me as we stood in that empty garage that an invisible hand was drawing a net closer and closer about Isobel and my ideas became increasingly chaotic, for the purpose of it

all eluded me, try how I would to conceive of a scheme by which any one could profit which necessitated the imprisonment, or worse, of Isobel.

"And the agent?" I asked in a rather toneless voice.

Gatton shook his head.

"I have no reason to doubt the word of this man of business," he replied, "because at the time when I saw him he could not possibly have learned of the crime, but nevertheless his account is almost unbelievable. It appears then, he, too, received his instructions throughout by telephone."

"What?" I exclaimed.

"By telephone," repeated Gatton. "He was rung up about ten days ago by some one who made a verbal offer to lease the Red House for a period of twelve months. A foreigner, who in lieu of the usual references, was prepared to pay the annual rent in advance. As the Red House, to use an Irishism, was regarded as something of a white elephant, the agent was interested, apparently; and when on the following day the sum agreed upon arrived by post, he did not demur about delivering the keys to the prospective lessee, who desired to take certain measurements in regard to carpets and so forth."

"Wait a moment," I interrupted; "to whom did he deliver these keys?"

"To a district messenger who called for them, as the agent had been advised that one would do."

"Very well. What then?"

"That is all that the agent had to say."

"What, that is all?"

"Substantially there is nothing more. It is quite evident that the sole intention of this unknown lessee was to secure possession of the house for the purpose of the crime only."

"Do you mean that from first to last no one but the district messenger appeared in the matter?"

"No one," Gatton assured me, "and the rent, payment of which quite disarmed the agent of course, was sent in the form of Treasury notes and not by check."

"But surely some name, some address, must have been given?"

"A name was given," replied Gatton, "and a hotel address, but confirmation of their accuracy was never sought, after the receipt of the money."

"And the voice on the telephone?"

Again I saw that odd expression creep over Gatton's face, and:

"It was a woman's voice," he answered.

"Great heavens!" I muttered—"what does it all mean?"

That the evidence of the cabman when he was discovered and of the carter who had taken the box from the garage to the docks, and (for it was possibly the same man) who had first delivered it at the Red House, would but tighten the net about Isobel, whom I knew to be innocent, I felt assured.

"Gatton," I said, "this case appears to me to resolve itself into a deliberate conspiracy of which the end was not the assassination of Sir Marcus, but the conviction of Miss Merlin!"

Gatton looked at me with evident complexity written all over him.

"I begin to think the same," he confessed. "This business was never planned and carried out by a woman, I'll swear to that. There is a woman concerned in it, for at every point we come upon evidence of her voice issuing the mysterious instructions; but she is not alone in the matter. Already the intricacy of the thing points to a criminal of genius. When we know the whole truth, if we ever do, that the crime was planned by a man of amazing, if perverted, intellect, will be put beyond dispute, I think."

"What is puzzling me, Gatton," I said, "is the connection existing between the incidents which took place in this garage and those, unknown at present, which took place in the furnished room in the Red House."

"Obviously," replied Gatton, "a supper for two had been prepared, and that one of those two was the late Sir Marcus is perfectly obvious. That he expected the other to be Miss Merlin is at least suggested by the presence of her photograph in the room; for you will have noticed that it is the *only* photograph there."

"Nevertheless," I said firmly, "I am positive that no one would be more surprised than herself to learn of its presence."

"And as I have already said," replied Gatton, "I am rapidly coming round to your way of thinking. But even if I were quite sure of it the evidence at the moment is all the other way, you will admit. As to the connection between this garage and the interrupted supper party (for obviously it was interrupted) this it must be my business to find out."

"Don't you think," I said, "that we are attaching perhaps undue importance to the fact that some kind of fittings have been removed from

the doors? They may have been removed by the late occupier, and the call to the police depot may have been made with the idea of securing a witness, and a credible one, to the presence of the crate here on the night of the murder."

"At the moment," replied Gatton, musingly, "I cannot see that this would have served any useful purpose; but nevertheless you may be right. I am going to assume, however, that you are wrong, and that the object of sending Bolton here last night was to open and shut these doors. I propose now to return again to the scene of the interrupted supper."

Leaving the garage not very much wiser than when we had entered it, we paced once more up the drive in the shade of the big trees and were greeted again by the malarious smell of rotting leaves. Entering the Red House, Gatton and I proceeded first to that incredible oasis in the desert of empty rooms and my companion made a detailed examination of everything in the place, even sounding the walls, examining the fittings of the door, and finally proceeding through the hall in the direction of the south wing of the house—that nearest to the garage.

What he expected to find I had no idea, but his attention seemed to be more particularly directed towards the wainscot and the picture-rails of the empty and uncarpeted rooms which we entered. Whatever he had sought he failed to find, and at last we stood in a desolate apartment looking out into the tangled shrubbery before the windows. The back of the garage was visible from there and I viewed it dully, wondering what evil secret it held, and marveling at the trick of fate which had made me witness of an act in this gruesome drama.

"Of course, Gatton," I said, "we are all along assuming that Sir Marcus actually met his death in this house. We must remember that he may merely have been brought here after the crime."

"Such a short period elapsed," replied the Inspector, "between his leaving the New Avenue Theater and the approximate time of his death that it seems unlikely that he visited any intermediate spot."

"But he may not have been in the crate when Bolton and I saw it."

"I don't believe he was in the crate then," replied Gatton, "but I think he was at the Red House nevertheless."

I stared at him with curiosity.

"You mean that he was in the house at the time that the constable and I opened the garage?"

"I do. I think he was in that room where supper was laid for two."

"Good God!" I exclaimed; for there was something horrible in the idea of the man who now lay murdered having been in the house presumably alive, whilst Bolton and I had stood within forty yards of him; in the idea that it had lain in our power, except for those human limitations which rendered us ignorant of his presence, to have averted his fate, perhaps to have checked the remorseless movement of this elaborate murder machine which seemingly had been set up in the Red House.

"Some one was here last night," declared Gatton suddenly, as we turned to leave the deserted room, "after you and Bolton had gone. Everything incriminating the assassin has been removed. Looking at the matter judicially, it becomes quite evident that any one clever enough to have planned this crime could not possibly have been guilty of an act of such glaring stupidity as that of accidentally leaving a photograph planted upon the mantelpiece."

That this fact had presented itself to the Inspector with such a force of conviction raised a great load from my mind. It had all along been evident to me, but I had feared that to the official outlook of my companion, and the official outlook is always peculiar, it might have seemed otherwise.

"The clever and cunning villain who planned this thing," I said, "has overstepped himself, as you say, Gatton. If the murder was planned artistically, in his attempt to throw the onus of the crime upon innocent shoulders he has been guilty of a piece of very mediocre work. It would not deceive a child."

"No, I agree with you there. The discovery of that photograph has done more to convince me of the innocence of Miss Merlin than any amount of testimonials to her good character could ever have done. You see," he added, smiling whimsically, "all sorts of people hitherto unsuspected by their closest friends of criminal tendency, develop that taint, so that I am never surprised to find a convicted thief or assassin possessed of credentials which would do justice to an Archbishop. But when I see an obviously artificial clew I recognize it a mile off. Real clews never stare you in the face like that."

Coming out of the front door, we walked down the leaf-strewn drive to find that the constable on duty at the gate had been joined by a plain-clothes man who was evidently waiting to speak to the Inspector.

"Yes?" said Gatton eagerly, at sight of the newcomer.

"We have her, sir," he reported tersely.

"Does he refer to Marie?" I asked.

Gatton nodded.

"I think, Mr. Addison," he said, "I will proceed immediately to Bow Street, where she has been taken to be interrogated. Will you come with me or are you otherwise engaged?"

I hesitated ere I replied:

"I do not particularly want to confront this woman, but I should be much indebted if you could let me know the result of your examination."

"I shall do that without fail," said Gatton, "and some time to-day I should be obliged if you could provide me with the facts concerning the little cat-images which you said you had in your possession."

"Certainly," I agreed. "You are still of the opinion that the mark upon the crate and the image of the cat-woman have an important bearing upon the crime?"

"I don't doubt it," was the reply. "If the photograph clew is a false one, the cat clew is a true one and one to be followed up. Perhaps," he added, "it would be as well if you returned now and looked out the points which you think would be of interest, as when I come I may not have long to stay."

"I will do so," I said, "although I think I can lay my hands upon the material almost immediately."

Accordingly Gatton set off with the detective who had brought the news of Marie's arrest and I, turning in the opposite direction, proceeded towards my cottage in such a state of mental tumult respecting what the end of all this would be and what it might mean for Isobel, that I found myself unable to think connectedly; and needless to say I failed to conjure up by any stretch of the imagination a theory which could cover this amazing and terrible sequence of events.

VII. The Cat of Bubastis

"She belongs to the innumerable family of cats which suddenly came forth from the ruins of Tell Bastah in 1878," I wrote, Sir Gaston Maspero's "Egyptian Art" lying before me on the table, "and were in a few years scattered over the whole world."

"She is Bâst, a goddess of good family, the worship of whom flourished especially in the east of the delta, and she is very often drawn or named on the monuments, although they do not tell us enough of her myths or her origin. She was allied or related to the Sun, and was now said to be his sister or wife, now his daughter. She sometimes filled a gracious and beneficent rôle, protecting men against contagious diseases or evil spirits, keeping them off by the music of her sistrum: she had also her hours of treacherous perversity, during which she played with her victim as with a mouse, before finishing him off with a blow of her claws. She dwelt by preference in the city that bore her name, Poubastit, the Bubastis of classical writers. Her temple, at which Cheops and Chephren had worked while building their pyramids, was rebuilt by the Pharaohs of the 22nd Dynasty, enlarged by those of the 26th; when Herodotus visited it in the middle of the fifth century B.C. he considered it one of the most remarkable he had seen in the parts of Egypt through which he had traveled.

"The fêtes of Bâst attracted pilgrims from all parts of Egypt, as at the present day those of Sidi Ahmed el-Bedawee draw people to the modern fair of Tantah. The people of each village crowded into large boats to get there, men and women pell-mell, with the fixed intention of enjoying themselves on the journey, a thing they never failed to do. They accompanied the slow progress of navigation with endless songs, love songs rather than sacred hymns, and there were also to be found among them flute-players and castanet-players to support or keep time to the voices. Whenever they passed by a town they approached the bank as near as they could without landing, and then, while the orchestra redoubled its noise, the passengers threw volleys of insults and coarse remarks at the women standing on the banks; they retorted, and when they had exhausted words…"

I finished my notes at this point; the improper behavior of the Ancient Egyptians mentioned by the great Egyptologist having no possible bearing

upon the matter in hand, I thought. I then proceeded to add some facts directly relating to the votive offerings laid at the feet of the goddess.

"The greater number of pilgrims, before returning home, left a souvenir of their visit at the feet of Bâst. It was a votive stele with a fine inscription, and a picture showing the donor worshiping his goddess; or a statuette in blue or green pottery, or if they were wealthy, in bronze, silver, or sometimes gold: the goddess would be standing, seated, crouching, with a woman's body and a cat's head, a sistrum or an ægis in her hand. During the Greek period the figures were in bronze or in painted or gilded wood surmounted by a cat's head in bronze, many were life-size and modeled with elaborate art; they had eyes of enamel and amulets on the forehead."

The learned authority went on to explain that these accumulated offerings were after a time stored by the priests in cellars or in pits dug expressly for them, "veritable *favissæ* similar to those of classical times." They accumulated in thousands, large and small, some intact and fresh as when just made, others already out of shape and of no value. The places of concealment were soon forgotten, and the stores hidden therein reposed beyond the reach of men until the day when the chances of excavation brought them to light.

My notes completed, I turned my attention to the little image of green enamel ware which Gatton had left with me for examination. It was not possible to determine the period at which it was buried, but judging from the contours and general forms, together with the aspect of the enamel, I thought I recognized the style of the second Saïte Period, and attributed the piece to the early Ptolemies, or the fourth century B.C. It was the time when the worship of Bâst and her subordinate forms, Pakh, Maît, was most popular, the period when the most extensive cemetery of cats was established in Egypt. The execution of the little figure was pure Egyptian, and in no way betrayed Greek influence.

So far had my studies proceeded when I heard the door-bell ring, and Coates entered the room.

"Detective-Inspector Gatton to see you, sir."

Gatton came in looking if anything more puzzled than when I had left him at the Red House; also I thought he looked tired, and:

"Mix yourself a drink, Inspector," I said, pointing to a side-table upon which refreshments were placed.

"Thanks," replied Gatton. "I have not had time to stop for a drink or even a smoke since I left you; but evidence is coming in quickly enough now."

He helped himself to a whisky and soda, being an old visitor and one used to the Bohemian ways of my household; then setting his glass upon a corner of my writing-table, he dropped into the armchair and began in leisurely fashion to fill his pipe.

Although the hour was growing late, sunset was still a long way off and the prospect visible through the window was bathed in golden light. From where I sat I could catch a glimpse of the tree-lined road, and for the first time since that strange experience had befallen me, I found myself wondering if the vaguely-perceived follower whom I had detected on the previous night and those blazing feline eyes which had looked out at me from beneath the shadow of the hedge could have had any possible connection with the tragedy which at about the same hour was being enacted in the Red House. I determined presently to confide the strange particulars to my friend, but first I was all anxiety to learn what evidence Marie had given; and that this evidence, to which he had referred had done little more than to increase Gatton's perplexity was clear enough from his expression. Therefore:

"Tell me about Marie," I said.

Gatton smiled grimly, took a drink from his glass, and then:

"She began of course as I had anticipated, by denying all knowledge of the matter, but recognizing that she was in a tight corner, she presently changed her tactics, and although every available plan was tried to induce her to change her ground, she afterwards stuck to the extraordinary story which we first extracted from her. Briefly it was this:

"The late Sir Marcus had been paying unwelcome attention to Miss Merlin for a long time, and Marie had instructions that he was to be discouraged as much as possible. In fact I am pleased to say that your theory of Miss Merlin's ignorance respecting the murder plot is borne out by the testimony of her maid. On several occasions, it appears, when he sent his card to the dressing-room, Marie returned equivocal messages and did not even inform her mistress of Sir Marcus's visit. This had been going on for some time when one night whilst Miss Merlin was on the stage a telephone call came for Marie and a certain proposal was made to her.

"It was this: if on the following night Sir Marcus should present himself she was to tell him that Miss Merlin would take supper in his company after the performance, but that he was to observe every possible precaution. Marie, according to her account, at first declined to entertain the proposal, but being informed that it was merely intended to play a practical joke upon the baronet, she ultimately consented. I may add that the promise of a ten-pound note undoubtedly hastened her decision and it was on her receipt of the amount by post on the following morning that she determined to carry out her part of the bargain.

"Her instructions had been explicit. She was to tell Sir Marcus that Miss Merlin would see him after the performance, then when he presented himself, to inform him that her mistress had decided it would be more prudent for him to proceed to the rendezvous alone, where she would join him in a quarter of an hour. She was to give him the door key (which had arrived with the money) and to direct him to enter and wait in the room on the right of the hall. A cabman who knew the address would be waiting at the stage door."

Gatton paused, puffing slowly at his pipe, then: "Unknown to Miss Merlin," he continued, "this scheme was carried out. Sir Marcus presented himself at ten o'clock and received Marie's message; he returned about eleven and she told him, as she had been instructed, that her mistress would join him in a quarter of an hour. Curiosity respecting the joke which she believed was being played upon the baronet prompted her to go outside the stage-door to see if there was actually a cab waiting. There was, and she heard Sir Marcus ask the man if he knew the address to which he was to drive.

"The cabman replied that he did, and Marie claims to know no more about the matter, except that Sir Marcus drove off in the cab, and that her mistress returned to her flat alone about a quarter of an hour later. Next point. Inquiries for the cabman have been made at all the ranks since early this morning, and he turned up at the Yard about a couple of hours ago. His story is simple enough; some one called up the rank where he chanced to be standing that evening, instructing him to call for Sir Marcus at the stage-door of the New Avenue Theater and to drive him to—"

He paused:

"Yes?"

"To the Red House!"

"At last we have it!" I cried excitedly.

"There is no doubt of it," answered Gatton; "the cabman drove him there, and it was certainly at the Red House that he met his death. Indeed the cabby appears to be the last witness who spoke to the murdered man. He inquired his way to the Red House from a chance pedestrian, a tramp, whom he met at the corner of College Road. He has even described this person to us, but I don't think his evidence of sufficient importance to justify our searching for him. On reaching the Red House the cabman and his fare found it to be vacant. Sir Marcus, however, who had a very brusk manner with his inferiors, having paid the cabman, curtly dismissed him, and the man, who admits having bargained for a double fare for the journey, because it was such an out-of-the-way spot, drove away vaguely curious, but not so curious as another might have been, since London cabmen are used to strange jobs."

"We are getting near the heart of the mystery."

"H'm," said Gatton, "I'm not so sure. The deeper we go the darker it gets. A man has been scouring the neighborhood all day in quest of the carter who delivered the crate to the docks, but so far without results. I consider it a very important point that we should learn not only how and when the crate was collected, but when and by whom it was delivered at the garage."

"Another question," I said: "although I believe I know the answer. Was it a man or a woman who ordered the cab?"

"Both in the case of Marie and in the case of the cab-rank," replied Gatton, "it was a woman's voice that spoke."

"Thank God, one doubt is resolved!" I said. "It cannot possibly have been Isobel in either of these cases!"

"Right!" agreed Gatton, promptly. "I am as glad as you are. There is clearly a second woman in the case; yet I can't bring myself to believe that this elaborate scheme was the work of a woman."

"Not of a *jealous* woman?" I suggested.

"Not of any woman," he replied. "Besides—who put the body into the crate? What kind of a woman would it be who could do a deed like that?"

"In other words," said I, "you are still without a ghost of a clew to the identity of the person who committed the murder, and to the means employed?"

Resting his pipe upon an ash-tray, the Inspector took up from my writing-table the little image of Bâst and held it up between finger and thumb.

"We always come back to the green cat," he said slowly. "I will trouble you now, Mr. Addison, for the history of such a little image as this."

"Yes," I replied abstractedly. "But there is a matter about which I have not spoken to you hitherto because quite frankly I had doubted if it had any existence outside my imagination; but every new development of the case is so utterly fantastic that I no longer regard my experience as being in the least degree outside the province of possibility. Before we go further, therefore, into the purely archæological side of the inquiry (and I have still serious doubt respecting the usefulness of such a quest) let me relate a peculiar experience which I had last night after I had left Bolton."

Gatton listened in silence whilst I gave him an account of that evasive shadow which I had perceived behind me, and then of the great cat's eyes which had looked in through the window.

His expression of naïve wonderment was almost funny; and when I had concluded:

"Well, Mr. Addison," said he, "if you had told me this story before I had taken up 'the *Oritoga* mystery,' for so I observe—" drawing an evening paper from his pocket—"the press has agreed to entitle the case, I should have suggested that your peculiar studies had begun to tell upon your nerves; but this voice on the 'phone and this empty house in which only one room was furnished, finally the green cat painted on the packing-case and the green cat which stands there upon the table have prepared me for even stranger things than your adventure of last night."

"Yet," I urged, "there is no visible connection between the episodes of the case and this strange apparition which I saw in the garden last night."

"There was no visible connection between Sir Marcus's body in a packing-case in the hold of the *Oritoga* and the garage of the house in College Road until we found one," retorted Gatton. "Anyway I am glad you mentioned the matter to me; I will take a note of it, for it may prove to provide a link in the chain. And now"—taking out a note-book and pencil —"for the history of these cat things."

I sighed rather wearily as I crossed the room to my bookcase and took down the volume of Gaston Maspero, the same which I had been reading but had returned to its shelf as Gatton had been admitted.

"We have it here in a nutshell," I said.

Gatton methodically noted the passages which I read to him. The task concluded:

"H'm," he muttered, scanning his notes, "very strange, very strange indeed. 'She had also her hours of treacherous perversity, during which she played with her victim as with a mouse, before finishing him off with a blow of her claws.'"

He raised his eyes and stared at me strangely.

"She played with her victim as with a mouse," he murmured, "before finishing him off with a blow—"

VIII. My Visitor

For long enough after Gatton's departure I sat thinking over our conversation. Despite the lateness of the hour at which he had departed, he had had no thought of rest and was setting out in quest of further evidence to point to the author of Sir Marcus's death. The room was laden with tobacco smoke, for our conference had lasted more than two hours, but dusk was very fully established and when presently as I sat there in the dark contemplating the horrible labyrinth into which my steps had drifted, Coates entered.

"Ah, Coates," I said, "light up."

He switched on the electric light and I saw layers of smoke—clouds drifting from the open window towards the newly opened door.

"Shall you be going out again to-night, sir?" asked Coates, standing rigidly to attention as was his custom when addressing me.

"I think not, Coates," I replied. "I have done enough for one day, but I should be glad if you would ring up the New Avenue Theater and inquire if Miss Merlin will speak to me. It will be about time now for the performance to have finished."

"Very good, sir," said Coates, and proceeded to make the call, whilst I sat listlessly smoking and listening to his voice. Presently:

"Miss Merlin did not appear to-night, sir," he announced: "she is indisposed."

"I thought as much," I muttered. "I could hardly have expected after such a day of horror and excitement that she would have been capable of appearing to-night. Ring up her flat, Coates," I added. "I should like to speak to her, for I know she is in great trouble."

"Indeed, sir," Coates permitted himself to remark. "Is it something to do with the discovery at the docks this morning, sir?"

"It is, Coates," I replied. "It is an utterly damnable business."

"Indeed, sir," said Coates again, and went to the telephone.

Three minutes later I was talking to Isobel.

"I find it utterly impossible to tell you what has happened," she declared, "since I saw you last. I feel incapable of thinking, and of course it was quite out of the question for me to go to the theater to-night. But it is not so bad as it might have been." She hesitated, then: "I was only able to give them very short notice unfortunately, but from a selfish point of view, as you know—I was leaving the stage—very shortly—"

"Yes," I answered dully, "I know; but have you seen the police?"

"I have seen Inspector Gatton," she replied; "but as he told me that he was coming along to you, no doubt you know what took place."

"No," I replied; "he did not mention the visit, but you quite recognize the fact, Isobel, that he does not regard you as being in any way concerned in this ghastly affair."

"He was awfully kind," she admitted; "in fact I quite changed my opinion regarding the methods of the police authorities after my interview with Inspector Gatton; but although he was so extremely tactful with me, I really cannot forgive him his suspicions, which he was at scarcely any pains to disguise, regarding Eric."

"Regarding Eric!" I exclaimed.

"Oh," continued Isobel, "he may have concealed his views from you, as he knows that you are—a friend of Eric's; but he was less careful about concealing them from me. To all intents and purposes Eric is under police surveillance!"

"But this is utterly incredible!" said I. "You don't mean to tell me, Isobel, that Coverly has persisted in his silence respecting his movements last night? If he has done so, in the circumstances he has only himself to thank. Social position and everything else counts for nothing when an inquiry concerning a murder is concerned. He knows that perfectly well."

I think I spoke hotly, and certainly I spoke with a certain indignation, for I very strongly resented Coverly's attitude in the case, which could only add to the difficulties and sorrows of Isobel's position.

Yet a moment afterwards I regretted that I had done so, for:

"Are *you* going to quarrel with me, too?" she asked pathetically.

"What do you mean? Who has been quarreling with you?"

"Eric quarreled with me fiercely at the solicitors' to-day, and when I begged of him to be frank respecting his movements last night, his attitude became"—she hesitated—"almost unbearable. He did not seem to realize that I was only thinking of him, nor did he seem to realize the construction which I might have placed upon his silence. I mean, Jack, what can he possibly have to conceal?"

Temporarily I felt myself to have become tongue-tied. What *could* it be that Coverly was concealing? The idea of complicity in the crime I scouted; nothing could have induced me to believe it. Only one explanation presented itself to my mind, as evidently it had presented itself to Isobel's—another woman. However:

"You may depend," I said, endeavoring to speak soothingly, "that he has some good and sufficient reason for this silence, and one which is not in any way discreditable. Nevertheless he will have to reconsider his attitude in the near future. Of course there are times when almost every one of us would be hard put to it to establish an alibi if we were called upon to do so—as regards witnesses of our movements, I mean; but at least we can state roughly where we were during any hour of the day, even if we have to trust to luck to find witnesses to prove the truth of words. His attitude of silence, Isobel, is ridiculous."

"Have you seen the evening papers?" she asked pathetically.

"Some of them," I replied.

"They have got my name in already," she continued, "and my photograph appears in one. It is outrageous how they leap at an opportunity for scandal."

"It will all be cleared up," I said, speaking with as much confidence as I had at my command. "You know and I know that Coverly is innocent and I don't believe that Gatton thinks him guilty."

A while longer we talked and then I returned rather wearily to my chair in the room where the air was still laden with tobacco fumes.

Without believing it to contain any very special significance as I had supposed, but merely attracted by the strangeness of the passage, I remembered how Gatton had harped upon Maspero's description of the attributes of Bâst. "Sometimes she plays with her victim as with a mouse," etc. The big book with its fine plates, several of them representing cats similar to that which Gatton had left behind for my more particular examination, still lay open upon the table, and I reread those passages appertaining to the character of the cat-goddess, which I had marked for Gatton's information. Scarce noting what I read—for all the time I was turning over in my mind the manifold problems of the case—I sat there for an hour perhaps, in fact until I was interrupted by the entrance of Coates.

"Shall you require me again to-night, sir?" he inquired.

"No," I replied; "you had better turn in now, as in all probability we shall be early afoot to-morrow, Coates. Inspector Gatton will probably be calling for me."

"Very good. Good-night, sir," said Coates; and performing a smart about-turn, he walked out of the room.

I went on reading, not in quest of any particular information, but in that idle mood when one reads anything, interesting or otherwise. For a time I heard my conscientious batman fastening doors and windows as was his nightly custom; then the door of his own room closed and I heard him no more.

When I first became aware of the howling of distant dogs I know not; but it was with a great start that I was aroused from my semi-reverie by the ringing of the door-bell. I realized that I had sat much longer than I had supposed. It was a quarter to one.

Gatton was my first thought; there must be an unexpected development in the case calling in some way for my services. Coates was a sound sleeper and evidently had not been awakened by the ringing of the bell; therefore, arrayed as I was in pajamas, slippers and bath-robe (for this, during the hot weather was my indoor costume) I walked out along the little corridor, unbolted the front door and opened it.

A woman stood there.

For a moment I thought foolishly that it was Isobel, and my heart gave a great leap. But the delusion was instantly dispelled when my visitor spoke.

Her voice had a totally different tone from that of Isobel—it was a low, almost caressing voice, with a vaguely husky note in it, fascinating in a way, yet although I found myself unable to account for the fact, vaguely uncanny—queer.

"Please excuse me," she said. "You will naturally wonder what has brought a visitor to your door at this hour of the night, and indeed my explanation is a strange one."

She glanced apprehensively over her shoulder as she spoke, out into the darkness of the roadway. I observed that she was apparently in evening dress and wore a very handsome cloak, having a thick silk scarf so draped about her head and shoulders that her face was quite concealed. Very clearly, now, I could hear the howling of dogs.

Instinct is a curious thing, and that which it prompted me to do at the moment when I found myself confronting this strange woman was promptly to awaken Coates! Honestly I was afraid of her and wished for nothing better than to have the closed door between us. This was all the more unaccountable as she had the appearance and manners of a cultured woman, presenting indeed a figure of great elegance as she stood there with her tall slender form outlined by the moonlight which slanted down through the trees to form a scimitar of light upon the path behind her.

Of course I could never have acted upon this singular instinct, but the decision was taken out of my hands; for suddenly my visitor uttered a low cry of fear, swayed dizzily and seemed about to fall.

Perforce I stepped forward to support her and before I knew what had happened, she had tottered into the passage, resting heavily upon my shoulder.

"Close the door!" she said in that low husky voice. "Quick! Quick! I have seen them again!"

An unpleasant chill communicated itself to me.

"The eyes!" she whispered. "Two great eyes have followed me! That was why I knocked at your door. I was afraid."

It was enough, the mention of two great eyes. Leaving my visitor temporarily to take care of herself, I sprang to the door and closed it hurriedly. As I turned, in the light from the partly open study door I saw the woman walking slowly ahead of me. I overtook her, holding the door fully open for her to pass in.

"Please sit down a while," I said. "You have evidently been seriously alarmed."

Still there was no sign from Coates, whose voice would have been welcome music to my ears, for I could not reconcile myself to this woman's presence, strive how I might, nor could I understand how she had come to be wandering alone in such a place at that hour. One bond of sympathy there was between us. I could forgive any one fearing those awful eyes, for I had feared them myself; and I could no longer doubt that some strange apparition was haunting the vicinity.

"Believe me, I quite understand," I said, turning to my visitor. "It is most extraordinary, but I believe there is some unusually large cat frequenting the neighborhood at present."

I stood by the side table and was on the point of pouring out a glass of water when the woman raised her white-gloved hand in a gesture of refusal.

"Thank you," she said, "thank you, but I am quite recovered, and indeed if the cause of my alarm is no more than a cat, as you say, I will proceed."

She laughed, and her laughter was low-pitched, but very musical. In the light of the shaded table-lamp I could see the gleam of white teeth through her veil, but I could not imagine why she swathed herself in that manner. Yet in spite of this enwrapping she could not disguise the fact that she possessed remarkably large and beautiful eyes. She seemed now to have recovered her composure, but I noted that she made no attempt to remove her veil.

"Are you quite sure that you will not be nervous on your way?" I asked.

"Oh, no. I am staying with some friends quite near," she explained, detecting my curiosity; "and I was indiscreet enough to wander out at this hour to post a letter."

Possibly this explanation might have satisfied me; it is even possible that I should have thought little more about the incident at that time when I lived in a constant turmoil of episodes even stranger, but by one of those accidents which sometimes seem to be directed by the hand of an impish fate, I was to learn who or what my visitor was. When I say I was to learn what she was, perhaps I err; more correctly I was to learn what she was not, namely, an ordinary human being.

It was as she rose to depart that the hand of fate intervened. I had only one lamp burning in the room, a table-lamp; and at this moment, preceded

by a sudden accession of light due to some flaw of the generating plant, the filament expired, plunging the room into darkness! I stood up with a startled cry. I do not deny that I felt ill at ease in the gloom with my strange visitor; but worse was to come. Looking across the darkened room to the chair upon which she was seated, I saw a pair of blazing eyes regarding me fixedly!

Something in their horrid, luminous watchfulness told me that my slightest movement was perceptible to my uncanny visitor of whom I could see nothing but those two fiery eyes.

What I did or what occurred within the next few seconds I am not prepared to state in detail. I know I uttered a hoarse cry and threw myself back from those dreadful eyes which seemed to be advancing upon me. The cry awakened Coates. I heard the pad of his bare feet upon the floor as he leaped out of bed, and an instant later his door was opened and he came blundering out into the darkened passage.

"Hello, sir!" he cried, in a half-dazed voice. "Here, Coates!" I replied, and my tones were far from normal.

Falling over a chair on his way, Coates came running into the study. An impression I had of a flying shape, and the dimly seen square of the open window (for that side of the cottage lay in shadow) seemed momentarily to become blackened.

"Bring a light, Coates!" I cried. "The lamp has gone out."

"Matches on the table, sir," said Coates.

Instantly I remembered that this was the case, that they lay in fact near to my hand. I struck one, and in its flickering light looked about the room. My visitor had gone—palpably through the window, for certainly the front door had not been opened.

"She has gone, Coates!" I exclaimed.

And on this occasion it was Coates who repeated in an amazed voice:

"*She*?"

But even as he spoke, my attention had become diverted.

I was staring at that portion of the table upon which Maspero's book lay. Beside it had stood the little Bubastis statuette… but the statuette was there no longer!

IX. The Velvet Curtain

"This gets me well out of my depth, Mr. Addison," said Inspector Gatton.

We were standing in the garden at a point near to my open study window. A small flower-bed intervened between the path and the high privet hedge. It lay much in shade, and Coates had set tobacco plants there. But the soil was softer here than elsewhere.

Clearly marked upon it were the imprints of little high-heeled shoes.

"It seems to take us back to the days of 'Spring-heeled Jack,'" my friend continued; "which was before my time! I don't think *that* mystery was ever cleared up?"

"No," I replied, meeting his questioning glance; "it never was, satisfactorily. Therefore the analogy is an unfortunate one. But as you say, it certainly looks as though my visitor had sprung across a six-foot hedge!"

"It's absolutely mad," said Gatton gloomily. "Far from helping us, it only plunges us deeper in the mire."

We returned to the study, and:

"You will have seen the daily papers?" asked the Inspector.

I nodded.

"Practically all of them. They give a hateful prominence to the name of Miss Merlin."

"And to that of the new baronet—Sir Eric," said Gatton significantly.

I stared at him straightly.

"Do you seriously believe," said I, "that Eric Coverly had anything whatever to do with the death of his cousin?"

Gatton stirred uneasily in his chair.

"Well," he answered, "ignoring everything else for the moment, who else benefits by Sir Marcus Coverly's death?"

It was a poser—a question which I had dreaded because I had known it to be unanswerable.

"He inherits the title," continued Gatton, "and on the death of Lady Burnham Coverly he inherits Friars' Park. There is some clause or entail, or legal hotchpotch whereby the estate and revenue remain hers during her lifetime."

"But I understand the estate is mortgaged?"

"That I have to confirm, Mr. Addison," replied Gatton. "Sir Eric's solicitor has no information on the point and that of Sir Marcus's man of business is inexact. But even supposing that only the title is concerned, many a man has lost his life for less. Then you have to consider—Miss Merlin."

"In what way?" I demanded

"In relation to the attitude of Sir Marcus. Jealousy makes men (and women) do strange and desperate things. The character of Eric Coverly, the new baronet, is a very odd one."

"He is headstrong and in some respects weak," I admitted. "But otherwise he is an ordinary English gentleman, with the traditions of an old name and a public school to back him up. I tell you, Gatton, it's nonsense. His army career alone shows him to be a sound man."

"Yes," murmured Gatton; "he was awarded a decoration for distinguished service in Egypt."

That seemingly simple remark struck me with all the force of a physical blow. Gatton began quietly to load his pipe, without even glancing in my direction; but the covert significance of his words was all too apparent:

"Gatton," I said—"what the devil are you driving at?"

He slightly shrugged his shoulders.

"What you may term the hocus-pocus side of the case," he replied, "turns on matters Egyptian, doesn't it? Very well. Who else, that we know about, is associated, or ever has been associated with Egypt?"

"But—the woman?"

"Ah!" said Gatton. "Now you are getting down to the depths. But assuming that the extraordinary characteristics of this visitor of yours can be explained in some way, by deliberate trickery, for example, might she not be a woman whom Eric Coverly met in Egypt?"

I stared silently a while, and then:

"In short, a rival of Miss Merlin's?" I suggested.

"Precisely. The trick with the photograph was just of the kind one would expect from a madly jealous woman. Everything planned with supreme cunning, but the scene at which the hated rival enters the scheme badly overdone."

"And you believe Coverly's silence to be due to the fact that he is shielding some one?"

"Well, that or shielding himself. What else can it mean? A man suspected of murder doesn't hesitate to establish an alibi unless he is in a desperately tight corner. The exact position of your strange-eyed acquaintance in the case is not apparent to me at the moment, I'll admit, but I seem to have heard that there have been rare instances of human beings with luminous eyes."

"Quite right, Inspector," I agreed; "I hope very shortly to have some further particulars for you bearing upon this point. I am endeavoring to obtain a work by Saint-Hilaire dealing with teratology."

"As to her extraordinary activity and agility," Gatton continued, "we must remember that a privet hedge is not like a stone wall. I mean she may not have actually cleared the whole six feet, and after all, this is the age of the athletic girl. There are women athletes who can perform some extraordinary feats of high-jumping. Of course, there are still a number of witnesses to be discovered and examined, but I know by now exactly what to expect. It's an ingenious idea, although not entirely new to me.

"The whole thing has been managed by means of the telephone—a powerful ally of the modern criminal. Briefly what happened was this: The Red House—selected because of its lonely position, but also because it was fairly accessible—was leased by our missing assassin without any personal interview taking place. We have to look then in the first instance for some one possessing considerable financial resources. It was by the effective substitution of a year's rent—in cash—for the more usual references, that our man—or woman—whom I will call 'A' secured possession of the keys and right of entry to the premises. A limited amount of furniture was obtained in the same manner. We haven't found the firm who supplied it, but I don't doubt that the business was done over the telephone, cash being paid as before. Duplicate keys must have been made for some of the doors, I think—a simple matter. We shall find that the furnishing people as well as the caterer who later on supplied the supper were admitted to the Red House by a district messenger or else had the keys posted to them for the purpose.

"The whole business was built up around a central idea, simple in itself: that of inveigling Sir Marcus into the prepared supper-room. His attendance at the New Avenue Theater last night was doubtless assured—although we may never prove it—by another of these mysterious telephone messages,

probably purporting to come from Miss Merlin. The cold-blooded thoroughness with which 'A' arranged for a crate to be delivered at the garage and for the body of the murdered man to be taken to the docks and shipped to the West Indies, illuminates the character of the person we have to seek.

"Discovery sooner or later was inevitable, of course. It came sooner because of the accident at the docks. Had it come later I don't doubt that 'A' would have dismantled the Red House again so that the investigation would have been severely handicapped. As it is, the only dismantling done was the most important of all."

"You mean?" I said with keen interest.

"The death-machine," answered Gatton. "The cunning device around which all these trappings were erected. We don't have to wait for the coroner's inquest nor the pathologists' report to know that Sir Marcus was asphyxiated."

"In that room where supper was laid for two?" I muttered.

"Can you doubt it?"

"No," I said, "and I don't."

"I have allowed nothing to be touched," continued Gatton, "and I am going around there now to make a final attempt to unravel the mystery of how Sir Marcus met his death."

"There is one detail," said I, "which it seems impossible to fit into its proper place in the scheme. The figure of Bâst painted upon the crate—you have that at Scotland Yard—and the little image of the goddess which was stolen from my table last night."

Gatton stood up, uttering a sigh.

"I have always found, Mr. Addison," he replied, "that it is these outstanding features of a case, these pieces which don't seem to fit, that are the most valuable clews. It's the apparently simple cases in which there is no outstanding point that are the most baffling."

I laughed shortly.

"One could not very well complain of the lack of such features in 'the *Oritoga* mystery,'" I said. "As a confrère of mine remarked when the body of Sir Marcus was discovered in the crate, the whole thing is as mad as 'Alice in Wonderland'!"

Gatton presently departed for the Red House and I accompanied him, for I was intensely curious to learn by what means the murder of Sir Marcus had been accomplished. As I proposed later in the morning to call on Isobel, Coates drove Gatton and myself as far as the Red House and I instructed the man to wait for me.

Although the morning was still young, the prominence given by the press to this sensational crime had resulted in the presence of quite a considerable group of pilgrims who even thus early had arrived to look upon the scene of the mysterious tragedy. London is a city of onlookers. The most trivial street accident never lacks its interested audience, and a house in which a murder is reputed to have taken place becomes a center upon which the idly curious focus from the four points of the compass.

Our arrival created a subdued excitement amongst the nondescript group gathered upon the pavement. Despite the efforts of a constable on duty, men, women and children persistently gathered before the gates of the drive peering up at the empty house as if they anticipated seeing the face of the murderer or an apparition of the victim appear behind one of the windows. A considerable group, too, was gathered before the garage, but as Gatton and I descended and began to walk up the drive there was a general movement in our direction.

"I wonder," said I, "if 'A,' the wanted man, is among the crowd? One reads that murderers are irresistibly drawn back to the scene of their crimes."

"He may be," replied Gatton; "anyway there are two C.I.D. men there for certain, so that 'A' will do well to be upon his guard."

A few moments later I found myself again in the lounge-hall of the Red House; and the place now seemed to me to have taken on an air of oppressive mystery. In the very deserted silence of the house I detected something sinister. Of course, no doubt this was merely an effect created upon my mind by the ghastly associations of the place; but I know that whereas on the previous day surprise and curiosity had been the most characteristic emotions aroused by our discoveries there, this morning something darker seemed to have taken their place; and I found myself listening for a sound that never came and wondering vaguely and vainly, what secret was hidden in this desolate mansion.

By Gatton's orders the room in which that gruesome supper was laid had been left undisturbed and once more we stood surveying the spotless napery and sparkling silver. I listened to the ticking of the clock upon the mantelpiece and stared dully at the wine resting in the ice-pail which now contained nothing but dirty water. A big dish of fruit stood upon the table, peaches and apricots and nectarines; and several large wasps had entered through one of the windows which some one had opened, and were buzzing sleepily around the dish. Lastly—there beside the clock stood Isobel's photograph.

For any evidence of a struggle I looked in vain, but the nature of my companion's investigation was more obscure. Again the whole of his attention seemed to be directed upon the wall, the window-ledges and the door-frame. Suddenly:

"Ah," I said, "I know what you are looking for! Some connection between this room and the garage?"

Gatton, who was kneeling examining a lower panel of the door, looked up with a grim smile.

"Perhaps I am," he replied.

By the tone of his voice I knew that whatever he had sought he had failed once more to find. Presently, desisting from this quest of his, he stood and stared curiously for some time at a recess immediately behind one of the high-backed chairs drawn up to the supper table. We had already explored this recess and had found it to be vacant. Gatton advanced towards it and drew aside the curtain which was draped in the opening.

It was a recess about four feet wide by three deep and it contained nothing in the nature of furniture or ornament.

"Does anything strike you as curious about this arrangement?" said my companion.

I looked for a long time, but failed to detect anything of a notable nature.

"Nothing," I said, "except that it seems a peculiar idea to drape a curtain before a recess in that way."

"And such a curtain!" said Gatton, fingering the texture.

I in turn touched the material with my fingers and found it to be an extremely heavy velvet. Looking upward, I noticed that it was attached to a rod set so high in the wall on either side that the top of the drapery actually touched the ceiling.

"Well," said Gatton, looking at me oddly, "in addition to the texture of the curtain do you notice anything else?"

"No," I confessed.

"Well," he continued, "you may remember that yesterday when I examined this place, I had to drape the curtain over a chair, which I moved here for the purpose, in order to see the recess."

"So you did," I said; "I remember."

"Well, doesn't it strike you as odd? If you'll notice the way it is fastened above, you will see that it is not upon rings. In other words it is not intended to be opened. You see that it is in one piece so that anybody having occasion to enter the recess would have to lift it aside and let it fall to behind him."

I studied the arrangement of the drapings more closely and saw that his statement was correct; also I saw something else, and:

"This room has been lighted by gas at some time!" I cried. "Here, up under the picture-rail, is a plug."

"Most houses are provided both with gas and electric light about here," replied Gatton abstractedly.

But even before he had finished speaking I saw his expression change, and in a moment he had dragged a chair into the recess.

"Hold the curtain back," he directed sharply.

Standing on the chair, he began to examine the little brass plug to which I had drawn his attention. For some time I watched him in silence, and then:

"What do you think you have found?" I inquired.

He glanced down over his shoulder.

"I think I have found a *clew*!" he replied.

X. "Hanging Evidence"

Isobel came into the room and approached the chair from which I had arisen. In her plain morning frock, with the sun bringing out those wonderful russet tints in her hair, but having that frightened look still in her eyes, she had never seemed more beautiful. Yet I saw as I rose to greet her that she was laboring under the influence of dangerous nervous excitement.

"You are worried about Eric?" I said, when we had exchanged those rather formal greetings in which I think we took mutual shelter. Certainly I did, and later I was to know that Isobel did so, too.

"Every day seems to make the case grow blacker against him," she replied, sinking down upon the settee beside me.

And indeed the shadow which had fallen upon all of us seemed at that moment almost palpable—a thing to be felt like the darkness of Egypt and not to be dispelled even by the brightness of the morning.

"When did you last see Coverly?"

Isobel raised her head wearily.

"Last night, and he seemed to think that some one was following him—a detective."

I noticed that Isobel spoke of Eric Coverly with a certain manner of restraint for which I could not account. Yet perhaps it was only natural that she should do so, but at the time I was foolishly blind to the opposing emotions which fought and conflicted within her.

"He still refused to explain his movements on the night of the murder?" I asked.

"Yes, he persisted in his extraordinary silence," said Isobel.

The look of trouble in her eyes grew more acute.

"What I cannot understand is a sort of attitude of resentment which he has lately adopted."

"Of resentment? Towards whom?"

"Towards *me*."

"But—"

"Oh, it's quite incomprehensible, Jack, and it is making me horribly unhappy. He complained so bitterly too about this police surveillance to which he is subjected. He realizes that the coroner is almost certain to put a wrong construction on his silence, but instead of being frank about it he adopts, even when alone with me, this incomprehensible attitude of resentment. In fact his behavior almost suggests that *I* am responsible for his present misfortunes."

"He must be mad," I said, and I expect I spoke bitterly, for Isobel lowered her eyes and her face flushed with embarrassment.

"Don't think that I condemn him," I added hastily, "but really in justice to you, if not in order to clear his own good name, he should speak out at

once. Are you expecting to see him to-day?"

Isobel nodded.

"I am expecting him at almost any moment," she replied; then glancing aside at a number of daily papers which lay littered upon the floor beside the settee: "Of course you have seen what the press has to say about it?" she added.

I nodded.

"What can you expect?" said I. "It is one of those cases in which practically all the evidence, although it is of a purely circumstantial nature, points to an innocent man as the culprit. I feel very keenly annoyed with Coverly, for not only is he involving both of you in a most unsavory case but he is also hindering the work of justice. In fact by his inexplicable silence he is, although no doubt unconsciously, affording the murderer time to elude the law."

Even as I spoke the words I heard a cab draw up in the street below, and glancing out of the window, I saw Coverly alight from the cab, pay the man and enter the doorway. His bearing was oddly furtive, that, as I thought with a sudden pang, of a fugitive. A few moments later he came into the room and his expression when he found me there was one of marked hostility.

Eric Coverly bore no resemblance whatever to the deceased baronet from whom he inherited the title, belonging as he did to quite another branch of the family. Whereas Sir Marcus had been of a dark and sallow type, Eric Coverly was one of those fair, fresh-colored, open-air English types, handsome in an undistinguished way, and as a rule of a light and careless disposition. There had never been any very close sympathy between us, for the studies to which I devoted so much time were by him regarded as frankly laughable absurdities. Although well enough informed, he was typical of his class, and no one could justly have catalogued him as an intellectual.

"Good morning, Addison," he said, having greeted Isobel in a perfunctory fashion which I assumed to be accounted for by my unwelcome presence. "The men of your Fleet Street tribe have conspired to hang me, I see."

"Don't talk nonsense, Coverly," I said bruskly; "this misapprehension is bound to arise if you decline to give any account of your movements."

"But it is an outrage!" cried Coverly hotly. "What the devil do *I* know about Marcus's death?"

"I am perfectly convinced that you know nothing whatever; but then I have known you for many years. The 'Fleet Street tribe' to whom you refer merely regard you as a unit of our rather large population. In a case of this kind, Coverly, all men are equal."

Whilst I had been delivering myself of this somewhat priggish speech—designed, I may add, in self-defense, to spur Coverly to a rejoinder which might throw some light upon the mystery—he had regarded me with an expression of ever increasing dislike. I noted that there were shadows under his eyes, and that he was in a highly nervous and excited condition. He had slept but little I judged during the last forty-eight hours and had possibly had recourse to stimulants to enable him to face the new trials which arose with every day.

"I don't feel called upon," he said angrily, "to give an account of my movements to every policeman who cares to inquire. I know nothing whatever about the matter. I have said so, and I am not accustomed to have my word doubted."

"My dear Coverly," said I, "you must be perfectly well aware that sooner or later you will have to relinquish this heroic pose. Will you allow no one to advise you? You will have to answer the coroner, and if you persist in this extraordinary refusal to give a simple answer to a simple question, surely you realize that the matter will be transferred to a higher tribunal?"

"Oh, I told you that they had hanged me in Fleet Street already, Isobel!" cried Coverly, with a burst of unmirthful laughter.

But (and no man could have construed the thing favorably to Coverly) to my anger and amazement he added:

"Let them do it! I'll speak if I choose, but not otherwise!"

That I was annoyed with the young fool already, my remarks to him, which had transgressed every code of good taste, must sufficiently have shown. But I had hoped to provoke him to a declaration which would clear his name from the shadow which was settling darkly upon it, and which would raise that shadow from the girl who stood beside him, watching me with a sort of reproachful look in her dark eyes.

Now I recognized that I could remain no longer and keep the peace, therefore:

"Perhaps it is time that I went about my own business," I said, conjuring up a smile, although it must have been a dreary one, "and ceased to interfere with the affairs of other people. Good-by, Isobel. Anything I can do, you know you may command. Good-by, Coverly. I am deeply sorry about this business."

He barely touched my extended hand, but instantly turned and walked to the bay window. Descending to the street, I had immediate confirmation of Coverly's statement that his movements were watched.

In the porch below a man stood talking to the hall-porter. As I appeared he immediately averted his face and began to light a cigarette. Nevertheless I had had time to recognize him as the man who had brought Gatton news of Marie's detention.

It was in a truly perturbed frame of mind that I proceeded on my way to the *Planet* offices. I would have sacrificed much to have been afforded means to comfort Isobel; a furious anger towards the man who thus deliberately had brought doubt and unhappiness upon her had taken up permanent quarters in my mind. I counted Coverly's declination to clear himself little better than the attitude of a cad.

I read religiously through a pile of cuttings bearing upon the case, and found the unmistakable trend of opinion to be directed towards Coverly as the culprit. The use made of Isobel's name enraged me to boiling point and I presently took up the entire bundle of cuttings and crammed them into a waste-paper basket. I was engaged in stamping them down with my foot when I was called to the telephone.

Inspector Gatton was speaking from New Scotland Yard; and his voice was very grave.

"Can you possibly come along at once?" he asked. "There is a new development; a most unpleasant one."

He would say no more over the telephone. Therefore I hurried out to where Coates was waiting, and in ten minutes found myself in one of those bare, comfortless apartments which characterize the headquarters of the Metropolitan Police Force.

With his hat off Gatton looked more like a seaman than ever, for he had short, crisply curly hair and that kind of bull-dog line of cranium which one associates with members of the senior service. Upon a chair set in a recess formed by one of the lofty windows a leather grip rested. It was wet and

stained, and had palpably been recovered but recently from the water. Seeing my glance straying towards this object at the moment of my entrance, the Inspector nodded.

"Yes," said he, "it has just come in."

"What is it?"

"Well," replied Gatton, sitting upon a corner of the table and folding his arms, "it is a piece of evidence sufficient to hang the most innocent man breathing."

He eyed me in a significant manner and I felt my heart beginning to beat more rapidly.

"May I know the particulars?"

"Certainly. I asked you to come along for the purpose of telling you. Sir Eric Coverly's refusal to answer the questions put to him had necessitated his being watched, as you know. I mean to say, it's sheerly automatic; the Commissioner himself couldn't make an exception. Well, last night he left his chambers and started for Miss Merlin's flat. He came out of a back door and went along a narrow passage, instead of going out at the front. He evidently thought he had got away unobserved. He was carrying—that."

"Good heavens!" I said. "The young fool seems determined to put a rope around his own neck."

"As a matter of fact," continued Gatton, "he was *not* unobserved. He was followed right across St. James's Park. By the lake he lingered for some time; and the man tracking him kept carefully out of sight, of course. There was nobody else about at the moment, and presently, thinking himself safe, Coverly dropped his bag in the water! Immediately he set off walking rapidly again, and he was followed right to Miss Merlin's door. But the spot where he had dropped the bag had been marked, of course, and when I came in here to-day it had been fished, up—and placed there for my inspection."

With ever-growing misgivings:

"What does it contain?" I asked.

Inspector Gatton walked across to the chair and threw the bag open. First he took out several lumps of wet coal.

"To weight it, of course," he said.

Then one by one he withdrew from the clammy interior a series of ragged garments, the garments of a tramp. A pair of heavy boots there were, a pair

of patched trousers and an old shabby coat, a greasy cap, and finally a threadbare red muffler!

Gatton looked hard at me.

"He will have to break his obstinate silence now," he said. "Failing our discovery of new clews pointing in another direction, this is hanging evidence!"

"It is maddening!" I cried. "Can nothing be done, Gatton? Is there no possible line of inquiry hitherto neglected which might lead to the discovery of the truth? For whatever your own ideas may be, personally I am certain that Coverly is innocent."

Gatton replaced the sodden garments one by one in the bag, frowning as he did so, and:

"It occurred to me this morning," he replied, "that there *is* one inquiry which in justice to the suspected man and in order to round off the investigation, should be instituted. I'm afraid Coverly will have a bad time in the Coroner's court, but it is even possible that something might be done before the inquest. Now—"

He looked at me quizzically, and:

"Knowing your keen personal interest in the case, I am going to make a suggestion. It is probably going outside the intentions of the chief in regard to your share of the inquiry, but I'll risk that. I stipulate, however, that anything you learn is to be communicated direct to me, not to the *Planet*. Is this arrangement consistent with your journalistic conscience?"

"Quite," I said eagerly; "my contributions to the *Planet* are always subject, of course, to your censorship. What is it that you propose I should do?"

"This," said Gatton tersely; "I should like to know under what circumstances Mr. Roger Coverly died."

"Roger Coverly?" I echoed.

"The son of Sir Burnham Coverly," continued Gatton, "and therefore the direct heir to the title. He died somewhere abroad about five or six years ago, and as a result the late Sir Marcus inherited the baronetcy on the death of his uncle, Sir Burnham. You will remember that the man, Morris, spoke of the ill-feeling existing between Lady Burnham Coverly and Sir Marcus, because of the premature death of her own son, of course."

"I follow you," I said eagerly. "You suggest that I should go down to Friar's Park and interview Lady Burnham Coverly?"

"Exactly," replied Gatton. "It's very irregular, of course, but I know you well enough to take my chance of a carpeting. I may send a C.I.D. man down as well. I've too much to do in town to think of going myself; but I will advise you of any such step."

The motive underlying Inspector Gatton's suggestion was perfectly evident to me and I experienced a feeling of gratitude for the humanity which directed it. I held out my hand, and:

"Thanks, Gatton," I said; "you can leave the matter in my care with every confidence. I will start for Friar's Park to-day."

"Good," replied Gatton. "Let me give you a hint. Take a good pistol with you!"

XI. The Scarred Man

It was towards the hour of seven in the evening that I reached the Abbey Inn at Upper Crossleys, itself among the most hoary buildings of the ancient village. It belonged to the days when white-clad brethren from the once great monastery of Croix-de-lis had labored in the abbey meadows and fished in the little stream which ran slowly through a neighboring valley. Time had scarred it deeply and the balcony overhanging the coachyard sagged in a rather alarming fashion as though about to drop down from sheer old age.

The surrounding country had impressed me at first sight. There were long billowing hills and vales, much of their surface densely wooded, but with wide spaces under cultivation and even greater tracts of a sort of heath-land very wild in aspect and conjuring up pictures of outlaws' camps and the clash of battling feudal days. Hard by had resided of old a warden of the marches, and the ruins of his stronghold might still be seen on the crest of a near-by hill.

From the room allotted to me I could look out over a varied prospect of farmland and heath, terminated by the woody slopes which everywhere

hemmed in the valley. Peeping above the outer fringe of trees showed a tower of some old house whereof the rest was hidden by verdure.

Having partaken of a typical country dinner, the small number of courses being amply compensated by their quantity, I lighted my pipe and went down to the bar-parlor, being minded to learn something of the neighborhood at first hand from any chance visitor who might serve my purpose.

The landlord, a somewhat taciturn member of his class, sat behind the bar, pipe in mouth, as I entered, and only one other man was in the room. This was a gipsy-looking fellow, with a very wild eye, attired in the manner of a game-keeper, and wearing leggings and a fur cap. A sporting rifle stood in the corner beside him. The landlord nodded, and the other gave me a "Good evening" as I entered, whereupon I determined to try the game-keeper as the more likely source of information, and:

"Is the shooting good hereabouts?" I asked, by way of opening a conversation.

My inquiry seemed hugely to amuse the man.

"None better," was the reply; "it's thick with game, sir, it is for sure—and nobody to profit, only"—he winked at the landlord—"young Jim Corder!"

The landlord emitted a deep grunt which was evidently recognized by the other as a laugh; for he himself laughed in a wild and not wholly pleasant manner, whereby I concluded that "young Jim Corder" was a standing joke in the neighborhood.

"You look as though you knew a hare from a partridge," said I, "so I'll take your word for it."

This remark provoked a second and deeper growl from the landlord and a further burst of outlandish laughter from my acquaintance, the game-keeper. Presently:

"Why, sir, if I tell you," declared the latter, "them birds all know me like I was their father, they do. I says, 'Good morning' regular and them birds all bows to me, they does."

When the laughter had subsided, scenting possible information:

"I gather," said I, "that you get few shooting-parties nowadays?"

Gloom descended upon both my gossips.

"You're right, you are, sir," replied the game-keeper. "He's right, ain't he, Martin?"

Martin, the landlord, growled. It occurred to me that he regarded the other with a certain disfavor.

"This 'ere country," continued the game-keeper, vaguely waving his arm around, "is a blighted spot. A blighted spot, ain't it, Martin?"

Martin growled, whilst the game-keeper studied him covertly.

"Since Sir Burnham went to his long rest these 'ere parts ain't knowed themselves. I'm tellin' you, sir. Ain't knowed 'emselves. It's all that quiet, winter and summer alike. The Park all shut up; and the Park *was* the Park in them days—warn't it, Martin?"

Martin achieved speech; he removed his pipe, and:

"It were, Hawkins," he concurred.

Silence fell for a minute or two. My new acquaintance, Hawkins, and Martin both seemed to be pondering upon the degeneracy of Upper Crossleys, and I could mot help thinking that Hawkins took a secret delight in it. Then:

"Surely the Park is still occupied by Lady Coverly?" I asked.

"Aye," Hawkins nodded. "She's kep' me on, me and the missus, she has, like the real lady she is. But things is different; things is wrong. Ain't they, Martin?" he asked, with a mischievous glance at the stolid host.

"Things is," agreed Martin.

"Best part of Park be shut up," declared Hawkins. "Horses gone, carriages gone, everybody gone; only me and my old woman."

"There must be house servants," I interjected.

"My old woman!" cried Hawkins triumphantly; "same as I'm tellin' you!"

"You mean that Lady Coverly lives alone in the place with only—er, Mrs. Hawkins to look after her?"

It was Martin the landlord who answered my question.

"Things ain't right," he observed, and returned to his mouth the pipe which he had removed for the purpose of addressing me.

"You don't know half of it," declared Hawkins. "What's *my* job, for instance? I ask you—what is it?"

Having thus spoken, he exchanged a significant look with the landlord and relapsed into silence. Even my offer to replenish his tankard, although it was accepted, did not result in any further confidences. Prospects of crops and fruit were briefly touched upon, but that exchange of glances between

mine host and Hawkins seemed to have been mutually understood to mean that the conversation touching Friar's Park had proceeded far enough.

It was very mystifying, and naturally it served only to pique my curiosity. A certain quality of loneliness which had seemed to belong to the village, even in the brightness of the summer evening, now asserted itself potently. Seated there in the quiet little inn parlor, I recalled that many of the old-world cottages to right and left of the Abbey Inn had exhibited every indication of being deserted, and the lack of patrons instanced by the emptiness of the bar-parlor was certainly not ascribable to the quality of the ale, which was excellent. A sort of blight it would seem had descended upon humanity in Upper Crossleys. It was all very curious.

Reflecting upon the matter, and sometimes interjecting a word or two into the purely technical and very desultory conversation proceeding between the landlord and Hawkins, I sat looking from one to the other, more than ever convinced that no friendship was lost between them. My position in the room was such that any one entering would not detect my presence until he was right up to the bar, and to this sheltered seat I was undoubtedly indebted for a very strange experience.

During a lull in the patently forced conversation I heard footsteps upon the cobbles outside. Hawkins and the landlord exchanged a swift glance, and then to my surprise they both stared at me questioningly. Before a word could be exchanged, however, and before I had time even to surmise what this covert uneasiness might portend, a young fellow entered whose carriage and dress immediately attracted my attention.

He was attired, then, in a sort of burlesque "fashionable" lounge suit and wore a straw hat set rakishly backward on his well-oiled dark hair. He carried gloves and a malacca cane, and his gait was one of assured superiority. He was a stoutly-built, muscular young fellow and might ordinarily have been good-looking after a rustic fashion, but what principally rendered him noticeable was the fact that he wore surgical bandages around his neck in lieu of a collar and that his face was literally a mosaic of sticking-plaster!

"Evening, Martin—evening, Hawkins," he said jauntily; and advancing to the bar, "The usual, Martin."

As he gave the order and as the landlord turned to execute it, exhibiting a sort of half-amused deference, the embarrassed glance of Hawkins, who

was watching me uncomfortably, drew the newcomer's attention to my presence. He turned in a flash and I saw those parts of his face which were visible between the pieces of strapping to turn fierily red. His brown eyes glared at me, and:

"Martin!" he cried, throwing out his hand in the landlord's direction, "Martin, damn you! There is a stranger here! Why the devil didn't you tell me?"

"Sorry, Mr. Edward," said the landlord, setting a glass of whisky before the excited man. "No time."

"It's a lie!" cried the other, with a wild fury which so trivial a matter did not seem to warrant, "a deliberate damned lie! You want to make me the laughing-stock of the place!"

Taking up the newly-filled glass, he dashed it violently to the sanded floor, so that it was shattered to bits. Then, snatching off his hat, he held it as a shield between my inquiring gaze and his plastered face, and ran out of the room. At the door:

"Damn you all!" he shouted back at us.

I heard his quick footsteps receding. Then, as he turned the corner the sound died away. I looked across at Hawkins. He was staring into his tankard with which he was describing slow circles as if to stir the contents. Martin, having raised the bar-flap was phlegmatically engaged in sweeping up the fragments of glass into a dustpan. It came to me all at once that these simple folk regarded the other's outburst as a personal matter; their attitude was that of the grieved elders of a family, some member of which has misbehaved himself. But assuredly I was not prepared to concur in this shielding silence; the pressman within me demanded an explanation.

"A strange young man," I said tentatively. "Very touchy, I should think?"

"Touchy?" repeated Hawkins, glancing up quickly. "I seen him take Tom Pike by the scruff of his neck and the seat of his pants and pitch him in the horse-trough for askin' of him who his tailor was, I have."

"Indeed," said I, "a local Carpentier, no doubt?"

"Ah," said Martin, glancing at me as he turned to his seat behind the bar. "Very 'andy with 'is 'ands."

"He is evidently acutely sensitive of his present disfigurement. Might I suggest that his most recent encounter was with a barbed-wire entanglement?"

But to my acute disappointment, Martin merely growled, shaking his head gloomily; and in this significant gesture he was closely imitated by Hawkins. Therefore:

"Is he badly disfigured?" I persisted.

"Only one is deep," replied Hawkins, glancing almost apologetically at the landlord. The unfortunate incident seemed to have drawn them more closely together. "The one on his neck. But he prides himself on his looks, don't he, Martin?"

"He do," agreed Martin.

I took the bull by the horns. I never neglect an opportunity of this nature, for however irrelevant to the matter in hand an episode may seem to be, not infrequently I have found that it is by the pursuit of such chance clews that one is led to the very piece of news that is sought.

"Drink up, gentlemen," I said, "and as the night draws on, we shall just have time for a peg of whisky before ten o'clock."

My effort proved successful, for whilst Martin prepared the ordered drinks, almost with alacrity, Hawkins became quite confidential.

"Young Mr. Edward Hines that was, sir," he confided, in a church whisper. "His father is the biggest farmer round these parts and young Mr. Edward is a terror with the gals, he is. Mind you, he's straight out about it. Comes in here, he do, and says straight out who he's after. And it's woe betide the one who takes him up on it. I'm glad my gal is up to London, with that Mr. Edward about, I am."

The drinks being placed upon the counter, he ceased, and:

"Good health!" said I; then: "Yes—about our mutilated young friend?" I prompted.

"Well," continued Hawkins—"it's kind o' funny, ain't it, Martin?"

The landlord growled.

"Mr. Edward he come in here three weeks back all puffed up with himself. Said he'd got an appointment with a lady down from London what was coming all the way from West Wingham to see him. Didn't he, Martin?"

Martin corroborated.

"He see her, too," declared Hawkins with a sort of schoolboy naïveté. "And he see her again four nights after. She give him a present—a keepsake. He showed us. Then he seen her a third time, and—"

Hawkins ceased speaking and looked at the landlord as if mutely appealing for his aid in making clear to me what occurred at this third tryst with the mysterious "lady from London."

"Go on," prompted Martin. "Tell him. He's stopping here; he's all right."

I keenly appreciated the compliment conveyed by this, the landlord's longest speech of the evening, and raised my glass to him. "Well, then," Hawkins resumed, "we didn't see him for a night or two, but on the Wednesday—"

"The Thursday," corrected Martin.

"Right you are, Martin," agreed Hawkins—"the Thursday it were. I met Farmer Hines comin' back from Wingham market as I came here mid-day. It were the Thursday. Well, then, on the Thursday young Mr. Edward he turns up after dark. Sort of slinked in he did. There was three or four of us here, there was that night, wasn't there, Martin? 'Course it were market day. Slinked in he did, and his face was like you see it to-night only worse. He never said a word to nobody and nobody never said nothin' to him, not likely. Just gulped down a double Scotch and slinked out. What do you think about that for a story, eh, sir?"

He looked at me triumphantly. For my own part I must confess I was disappointed. A cat-and-dog squabble between a rustic Lothario and some local virago did not excite me so intensely as it seemed to excite my companions.

"Is that all you know of the matter?" I asked.

"No," answered Martin, "it ain't. Tell him, Hawkins."

"Aye," resumed Hawkins, "he might as well know, as he's livin' here. Well, sir, young Mr. Edward he's very quiet about what happened to him. Maybe we shouldn't have thought so much about it like if it hadn't been that in this very bar, six months ago, he'd plagued the life out of young Harry Adams."

"For what reason?" I asked idly; the conversation was beginning to bore me. But:

"Young Harry Adams," explained Hawkins with gusto, and his former wicked look returning to his eyes, "at one time was Mr. Edward's only rival with the gals, he was. A good-lookin' young fellow; got a commission in the war he did. He's up to London now. Well, six months ago young Harry Adams come staggerin' in here one night with blood runnin' from his face

and neck. He fell down in that seat where you're sitting now and fainted right off, didn't he, Martin? We had to send young Jim Corder (what used to come here in them days) off runnin' all the way past Leeways for the doctor. Ah, that were a night."

"It were," agreed Martin.

"Same as Mr. Edward," continued the narrator, "young Harry Adams wouldn't say a word about what happened to him. But when Mr. Edward first see him, all over sticking-plaster, he laughed till the pots nearly fell off the hooks, he did. Little did he guess his own turn was to come!"

My interest revived.

"Then in the case of, er—Mr. Adams," I said, "you never had any particulars whatever?"

"Never," replied Martin. "Time, please, gentlemen."

"Aye," said Hawkins, rising. "Time it be. Well, good night, sir. Good night, Martin."

"Good night."

Hawkins moved towards the door, and indeed was on the point of going out when I remembered something which I had meant to ask earlier, but which, owing to lack of opportunity, I had postponed asking.

"You spoke of a gift or keepsake, which the lady from London gave to Mr. Hines," I said. "I think you mentioned that he had shown it to you. I am rather curious about this story. Might I ask the nature of the gift?"

"Aye, to be sure," answered Hawkins, standing half in shadow on the step of the bar-parlor, rifle on shoulder, where I thought he made a very wild figure. "Brought it here, he did. All of us see it. That stuck up about it, he was. Not as I should have thought much of it if a party had give it to me, I do say."

"Then what was it?"

"Why—it were a little figure like—gold *he* said it were, but brass I reckon. Ugly it were, but he says he's goin' to wear it on his watch-chain. Good night, sir."

He turned and departed, but:

"What kind of figure?" I called after him.

Out of the darkness his voice came back:

"A sort of a *cat*, sir."

And I heard his outlandish laughter dying away in the distance.

XII. I Dream of Green Eyes

It was long enough before sleep visited me that night. For nearly half an hour I stood at my open window looking across a moon-bathed slope to where a tower projected, ghostly, above the fringe of the woods. The landlord had informed me that it was Friar's Park which could thus be seen peeping out from the trees, and as I stood watching that sentinel tower a thousand strange ideas visited me.

The curious air of loneliness of which I had become conscious at the moment of my arrival, was emphasized now that the residents in the district had retired to their scattered habitations. No sound of bird or beast disturbed the silence. From the time that the footsteps of Martin the landlord had passed my door as he mounted heavily to his bed-chamber, no sound had reached me but the muffled ticking of a grandfather's clock upon the landing outside my room. And even this sound, the only one intruding upon the stillness, I weaved into my imaginings, so that presently it began to resemble the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece in that gruesome room at the Red House.

The view which I commanded was an extensive one and although in the clear country air I could quite easily discern the upstanding wing of Friar's Park, actually the house and the park were some two miles distant. Where the park ended and the woods began it was impossible to determine, yet such was my curious mood that I lingered there endeavoring to puzzle out those details which were veiled from me by distance.

To-morrow, I thought, I should be seeking admittance to that house among the trees. In fact so great was my anxiety to plumb the depths of the mystery in the hope of recovering some new fact which should exculpate Coverly, that nothing but the unseemly lateness of the hour had deterred me from presenting myself that very evening.

Yet, my night of idleness had not been altogether unfruitful. I had met the scarred man, and from Hawkins I had heard something of his singular story. Now as I stood there drinking in, as it were, the loneliness of the prospect, my thoughts turned for the hundredth time to the game-keeper's account of

what had befallen the two rustic rake-hells. I admit that the concluding part of Hawkins' story, quite evidently regarded by him as a detail of no importance, had re-awakened hope which had been at lowest ebb in the hour of my arrival.

Although it was possible that the gift of a "sort of cat" to young Edward Hines might prove on investigation to be not a clew but a will-o'-the-wisp, I preferred to think that fate or the acute reasoning of Inspector Gatton had sent me down to this quiet country for a good purpose; and I built great hopes around the figure of the "lady down from London." Indeed it appeared to me that there were more lines of investigation demanding attention than alone I could hope to deal with in the short time at my disposal. Except that I was determined to visit Friar's Park early on the following day, I scarcely knew in which direction next to prosecute my inquiries.

Determining that I should be well-advised to sleep on the problem, I presently turned in. And when I blew out the candle with which the chambermaid had provided me, I remember thinking that the moonlight was so bright that it would have been possible to read moderately large type without inconvenience.

I slept perhaps for two hours or more, an unrefreshing sleep disturbed by dreams of a wildly grotesque nature. Figures increasingly horrible and menacing crowded upon me; but that which proved the culminating horror and which finally awakened me, bathed in cold perspiration, was a dream of two huge green eyes regarding me with a fixed stare, fascinating and hypnotic, against which evil power I fought in my dream with all the strength of my will.

Vaguely defined as if in smoke I could perceive the body of the creature to which these incredible eyes belonged. It was slender and sinuous and sometimes I thought it to be that of a human being and sometimes that of an animal. For at one moment it possessed all the lines of a woman's form and in the next, with those terrible eyes regarding me from low down upon the ground, it had assumed the shape of a crouching beast of prey. This fearsome apparition seemed to be creeping towards me—nearer and nearer, and was about to spring, I thought, when I awakened as I have said and sat suddenly upright.

One thing I immediately perceived which may have accounted for my bad dreams; I had been sleeping with the moonlight shining directly upon my face. Another thing I thought I perceived, but endeavored to assure myself that it represented the aftermath of an unpleasant nightmare. This was a lithe shape streaking through my open window—a figment of the imagination, as I concluded at the time, the tail-end of a dream visibly retreating in the moment of awakening.

So self-assured of this did I become, that I did not get up to investigate the matter, nor was there any sound from the road below to suggest that the figure had been otherwise than imaginary, yet I found it difficult to woo slumber again, and for nearly an hour I lay tossing from side to side, listening to the ticking of the grandfather's clock and constantly seeing in my mind's eye that deserted supper-room at the Red House.

And presently as I lay thus, I became aware of two things: first of the howling of dogs, and, second, of a sort of muttered conversation which seemed to be taking place somewhere near me. Listening intently, I thought I could distinguish the voice of a man and that of a woman. Possibly I was not the only wakeful inhabitant of the Abbey Inn was my first and most natural idea; but it presently became apparent to me that the speakers were not in the inn, but outside in the road.

Curiosity at last overcame inclination. Of the exact time I was not aware, but I think dawn could not have been far off, and I naturally wondered who these might be that conversed beneath my window at such an hour. I rose quietly and crept across the room, endeavoring to avoid showing my head in the moonlight. By the exercise of a little ingenuity I obtained a view of the road before the inn doors.

At first I was unable to make out from whence this muttered conversation arose, until fixing my attention upon a patch of shadow underlying a tall tree which stood almost immediately opposite the window, I presently made out two figures there. Somewhere, a dog was howling mournfully.

For a long time I failed to distinguish any more than indefinite outlines, nor, throughout the murmured colloquy, did I once detect even so much as a phrase. The night remained perfect and the moon possessed a tropical brilliance, casting deep and sharply defined shadows, and lending to the whole visible landscape a quality of hardness which for some obscure reason set me thinking of a painting by Wiertz.

The low-pitched voices continued in what I thought was a dispute. Something in the voice of the woman, although I could only hear her occasionally, piqued yet eluded my memory. But it was the voice of a young woman, whilst that of the man suggested a foreigner of some sort and one past youth. Subconsciously pursuing the Wiertz idea, I know not why, I invested the dimly-visible speakers with distinct personalities. The man became Asmodeus, master of the revels at the Black Sabbath, and the young woman I cast for that "young witch" depicted in one of the canvasses of the weird Belgian genius.

Everything in the black and silver scene seemed to fit the picture. Here was the unholy tryst, and I pictured the distant woods "peopled with gray things, the branches burdened with winged creatures arisen from the pit; the darkness a curtain 'broidered with luminous eyes…"

And it was my recollection of that phrase, from a work on sorcery, which now set every nerve tingling. Closely I peered into the masking shadow, telling myself that I was the victim of a subjective hallucination. If this was indeed the case or if what I saw was actual, I must leave each who reads to determine for himself; and the episodes which follow and which I must presently relate will doubtless aid the decision.

But it seemed to me that for one fleeting moment "luminous eyes" indeed "'broidered the darkness!'" From out of the shade below the big tree they regarded me greenly—and I saw them no more.

A while longer I watched, but could not detect any evidence of movement in the shadow patch. The voices, too, had ceased; so that presently it occurred to me that the speakers must have withdrawn along a narrow lane which I had observed during the evening and which communicated with a footpath across the meadows.

I realized that my heart was beating with extraordinary rapidity. So powerful and so unpleasant was the impression made upon my mind by this possibly trivial incident and by the extraordinary dream which had preceded it, that on returning to bed (and despite the warmth of the night) I closed both lattices and drew the curtains.

Whether as a result of thus excluding the moonlight or because of some other reason I know not, but I soon fell into a sound sleep from which I did not awaken until the chambermaid knocked at the door at eight o'clock.

Neither did I experience any return of those terrifying nightmares which had disturbed my slumbers earlier in the night.

My breakfast despatched, I smoked a pipe on the bench in the porch, and Mr. Martin, who evidently had few visitors, became almost communicative. Undesirable patrons, he gave me to understand, had done his business much harm. By dint of growls and several winks he sought to enlighten me respecting the identity of these tradekillers. But I was no wiser on the point at the end of his exposition than I had been at the beginning.

"Things ain't right in these parts," he concluded, and thereupon retired within doors.

Certainly, whatever the reason might be, the village even in broad daylight retained that indefinable aspect of neglect, of loneliness. Many of the cottages were of very early date—and many were empty. A deserted mill stood at one end of the village street, having something very mournful and depressing about it, with its black, motionless wings outspread against the blue sky like those of a great bat transfixed.

There were rich-looking meadows no great way from the village, but these, I learned, formed part of the property of Farmer Hines, and Farmer Hines was counted an inhabitant of the next parish. It was, then, this particular country about Upper Crossleys over which the cloud hung; and I wondered if the district had been one of those—growing rare nowadays—which had flourished under the protection of the "big house" and had decayed with the decay of the latter. It had been a common enough happening in the old days, and I felt disposed to adopt this explanation.

My brief survey completed, then, I returned to the Abbey Inn for my stick and camera, and set out forthwith for Friar's Park.

From certain atmospherical indications which I had observed, I had anticipated a return of the electrical storm which a few days before had interrupted the extraordinary heat-wave. And now as I left the village behind and came out on the dusty highroad a faint breeze greeted me—and afar off I discerned a black cloud low down upon the distant hills.

XIII. Dr. Damar Greefe

As the crow flies Friar's Park was less than two miles from the Abbey Inn; but the road, which according to a sign-board led "to Hainingham," followed a tortuous course through the valley, and when at last I came to what I assumed to be the gate-lodge, a thunderous ebony cloud crested the hill-top above, and its edge, catching the burning rays of the sun, glowed fiercely like the pall of Avalon in the torchlight. Through the dense ranks of firs cloaking the slopes a breeze presaging the coming storm whispered evilly, and here in the hollow the birds were still.

I stared rather blankly at the ivy-covered lodge, which, if appearances were to be trusted, was unoccupied. But I pushed open the iron gate and tugged at a ring which was suspended from the wall. A discordant clangor rewarded my efforts, the cracked note of a bell which spoke from somewhere high up in the building, that seemed to be buffeted to and fro from fir to fir, until it died away, mournfully, in some place of shadows far up the slope.

In the voice of the bell there was something lonesome, something akin to the atmosphere of desertion which seemed to lie upon the whole neighborhood—something fearful, too, as though the bell would whisper: "Return! Beware of disturbing the dwellers in this place."

The house, one wing of which I have said was visible from the inn window, could not be seen at all from the gate. Indeed I had lost sight of it at the moment that I had set out and had never obtained a glimpse of it since.

Ten minutes before, I had inquired the way from a farm-laborer whom I had met on the road, and he had answered me with a curiosity but thinly veiled. His directions had been characterized by that rustic vagueness which assumes in the inquirer an intimate knowledge of local landmarks. But nevertheless I believed I had come aright. I gathered from its name that Friar's Park was in part at least a former monastic building, and certainly the cracked bell spoke with the voice of ancient monasteries, and had in it the hush of cloisters and the sigh of renunciation.

Although I had mentioned nothing of the purpose of my journey to mine host of the Abbey Inn or to any of his cronies—and these were few in number—I had hoped to find Hawkins at the lodge; and a second time I

awoke the ghostly bell-voice. But nothing responded to its call; man, bird and beast had seemingly deserted Friar's Park.

Faintly I detected the lowing of cattle in some distant pasture; the ranks of firs whispered secretly one to another; and the pall above the hills grew blacker and began to stretch out over the valley.

Amid this ominous stillness of nature I began to ascend the cone-strewn path. Evidently enough the extensive grounds had been neglected for years, and that few pedestrians and fewer vehicles ever sought Friar's Park was demonstrated by the presence of luxurious weeds in the carriage-way. Having proceeded for some distance, until the sheer hillside seemed to loom over me like the wall of a tower, I paused, peering about in the ever growing darkness. I was aware of a physical chill; certainly no ray of sunlight ever penetrated to this tunnel through the firs. Could I have mistaken the path and be proceeding, not towards the house, but away from it, and into the gloom of the woods? Or perhaps the deserted lodge was that of some other, empty establishment.

There was something uncomfortable in this reflection; momentarily I knew a childish fear of the dim groves. I thought of the "darkness 'broidered with luminous eyes," and I walked forward rapidly, self-assertively. Ten paces brought me to one of the many bends in the winding road—and there, far ahead, as though out of some cavern in the very hillside, a yellow light shone.

I pressed on with greater assurance, until the house became visible. Now I perceived that I had indeed strayed from the carriage sweep in some way, for the path that I was following terminated at the foot of a short flight of moss-covered steps. I mounted the steps and found myself at the bottom of a terrace. The main entrance was far to my left and separated from the terrace by a neglected lawn. That portion of the place was Hanoverian and ugly, whilst the wing nearest to me was Tudor and picturesque. Excepting the yellow light shining out from a window on the right of the porch, no illuminations were visible about the house, although the brewing storm had already plunged the hollow into premature night.

My conception of Friar's Park had been wide of the reality—and there was no sign of occupancy about this strange-looking mansion, which might have hidden forgotten for centuries in the horse-shoe of the hills. The stillness of the place was of that sort which almost seems to be palpable;

that can be seen and felt. A humid chill arose apparently from the terrace, with its stone pavings outlined in moss, and crept up from the wilderness below and down from the fir woods above.

I had crossed the terrace and the lawn, and now stood looking through the open French window from which light had proceeded into a room that evidently adjoined the hall. A great still darkness had come, and on a littered table in this room a reading-lamp was burning.

The room was furnished as a library. Every available foot of wall space was occupied by laden bookcases. The volumes were nearly all old and many of them were in strange, evidently foreign, bindings. Items of chemical apparatus and cases of specimens were visible also as well as an amazing collection of Egyptian relics strewn about the place in the utmost disorder.

At the table a man was seated, deep in study of a huge leather-bound volume. He was strangely gaunt, and apparently very tall. His clean-shaven face resembled that of Anubis, the hawk-headed god of Ancient Egypt, and his hair, which was growing white, he wore long and brushed back from his bony brow. His skin was of a dull, even yellow color, and his long thin brown hands betrayed to me the fact that the man was a Eurasian. The crunching of a piece of gravel under foot revealed my presence. The man looked up swiftly.

I started. Those widely-opened black eyes were truly hawk-like in their dark intensity of gaze, and the uncanny resemblance to Anubis was heightened by them. More than ever convinced that I had made a mistake:

"Forgive me for so rudely disturbing you," I said, "but I was under the impression that this was Friar's Park, whereas I fear I have trespassed."

The intense gaze never left my face for a moment, but:

"There is no trespass," answered the man at the table, speaking in a high harsh voice and with a marked but evasive accent. "All visitors are welcome—chance ones, or otherwise. But you have certainly lost your way; this is the Bell House."

"And am I far from Friar's Park?"

"No great distance. May I ask if Lady Coverly knew of your proposed visit?"

"She did not," I said with surprise.

"Then I fear your journey has been fruitless. She is an invalid and can receive no one."

There was something peremptory and imperious in his manner which I resented, and evidently perceiving this resentment:

"I am Lady Coverly's medical adviser," added the Eurasian. "Possibly I can afford you some assistance. In any event I fear you will have to accept my poor hospitality for the nonce. The alternative is a drenching."

Even as he spoke, the hollow was illuminated by a blinding flash of lightning, and indeed his last words were drowned in the thunder that boomed and crashed in deepening peals over the hills.

In a sudden tropical torrent the rain descended, and I stepped forward into the room. Its occupant rose to his great height to greet me.

"I am Dr. Damar Greefe," he said, and bowed formally.

I made myself known to him in turn, and with a sort of stately courtesy he set a high-backed chair for me and himself resumed his former seat.

"You are a stranger to this neighborhood, I gather?" he continued.

Now, in spite of his polished courtesy, there was that about Dr. Damar Greefe which I did not and could not like. The voice was the voice of a gentleman, but the face was a mask—a mask of Anubis; and seated there in that strange untidy apartment, amid varied relics of the past and obscure experiments possibly designed to pry into the future, whilst thunder boomed high over the Bell House, I determined to withhold from Dr. Damar Greefe the true nature of my mission. In fact already I regretted having told him my name—although to have given a fictitious one would have been a gross violation of hospitality unhesitatingly offered.

Even now I find it hard to explain the mingled sentiments which claimed me on the occasion of this my first meeting with a very singular man.

"I am taking a brief rest cure," I replied; "and as I am given to understand that Friar's Park is of much historical interest, I had purposed seeking permission to look over the place and if possible to take a few photographs."

Dr. Damar Greefe inclined his head gravely.

"A former monastic house, Mr. Addison," he replied. "And as you say, of great archaeological interest. But the regrettably poor health of Lady Coverly makes it impossible for her to entertain visitors."

Something in the tone of his voice, which now he had lowered so that some of its natural harshness was disguised, set me wondering where I had heard it before. It needed no further scrutiny of the hawk face to convince me that I had never hitherto met Dr. Damar Greefe; but I certainly believed that I had previously heard his voice, although I quite failed to recall where and under what circumstances.

"Sir Burnham has been dead for several years, I believe?" I asked tentatively.

"For several years, yes."

Without returning to the peremptory tone which had distinguished his earlier manner, Dr. Damar Greefe coldly but courteously blocked my path to discussion of the Coverly family; and after several abortive attempts to draw him out upon the point, I recognized this deliberate design and abandoned the matter.

The storm was moving westward, and although brilliant flashes of lightning several times lighted up the queer room, gleaming upon the gayly-painted lid of an Egyptian sarcophagus or throwing into horrid relief some anatomical specimen in one of the cases, the thunder crashed no more over the house. But its booming reached my ears from away upon a remote spur of the hills. I became aware of a growing uneasiness in the company of my chance host, who sat by the oddly littered table, watching me with those birdlike eyes.

"Surely," I said, "the rain has ceased?"

"Temporarily," he replied, glancing toward the terrace. "But I should advise you to delay a few minutes longer. There is every threat of a concluding downpour to come ere long."

"Many thanks," I returned; "I'll risk it. I have already trespassed unwarrantably upon your time, Dr. Greefe. It was good of you to give me shelter."

He rose, a tall thin figure, vaguely repellent, upon realizing that I was set on departure, and conducted me out by way of the front door. Standing in the porch:

"At any time that you chance to be again in my neighborhood, Mr. Addison," he said, "I beg of you to call. I have few visitors."

By what process, whether of reasoning or intuition, I came to the conclusion, I know not; but as I turned the bend of the tree-roofed drive and

saw the deserted lodge ahead, I knew beyond any possibility of doubt that Dr. Damar Greefe had not returned to his studies, but had swiftly passed along some path through the trees so as to head me off! His purpose in so doing I knew not, but that he had cherished this purpose and proposed to act upon it I had divined in some way at the moment that I had left him in the porch.

Now, hastening my steps, I began to wonder if his design was to intercept me or merely to watch which way I should turn on gaining the main road. That it was the latter I presently learned; for although my unpleasant imagination pictured the gaunt hawk-like figure lurking amid the shadows which hemmed me in, I played the part of innocence and never once looked back.

Coming out into the highroad, I turned sharply left, retracing the route by which I had come to the Eurasian doctor's abode. If he had suspected that I had intended to call at Friar's Park despite his assurance that such a visit would prove futile, then he was disappointed. A new and strange theory to account for "the *Oritoga* mystery" had presented itself to me—a horrible theory, yet, so far as my present data went, a feasible one. Above all, I realized that I had committed a strategical error in openly seeking an interview with Lady Coverly. But I had not, when I had formed that plan, known of the existence of Dr. Damar Greefe.

I uttered a sigh of relief upon emerging upon the highroad. The certainty that the white-haired Eurasian was dogging me through the trees was an unpleasant one. And now I perceived that several courses presented themselves; but first I must obtain more information. I perceived a mystery within a mystery; for I was not likely to forget that in Dr. Damar Greefe's collection I had noted a number of *Bubastite cats*.

XIV. The Black Doctor

My mail, neatly readdressed by Coates, was awaiting me when I returned to the Abbey Inn. The postal deliveries in Upper Crossleys were eccentric and unreliable, but having glanced through the cuttings enclosed, I partook of a hasty lunch and sat down to the task of preparing a column for the

Planet which should not deflect public interest from the known central figures in the tragedy but which at the same time should hint at new developments.

Many times in the intervals of writing I glanced through my open window across the valley to where the upstanding wing of Friar's Park jutted above the trees. Strange and terrible ideas flocked to my mind—ideas which must be carefully excluded from the *Planet* article. But at last the manuscript was completed and I determined to walk into the neighboring town, some miles distant, to post it and at the same time to despatch a code telegram to Inspector Gatton. The long walk did me good, helping me to clear my mind of morbid vapors; therefore, my business finished, and immune from suspicion in my character of a London pedestrian, I set out to obtain that vital information which I lacked.

A natural taciturnity rendered mine host of the Abbey Inn a difficult subject for interrogation. Moreover that patriarchal outlook which had been evidenced in his attitude towards the uncouth Edward Hines clearly enough deterred him from imparting to me any facts detrimental to the good name of Upper Crossleys. But on the highroad and just before entering the outskirts of the little country town, I had observed an inn which had seemed to be well patronized by the local folks, and since your typical country tap-room is a clearing-house for the gossip of the neighborhood, to "The Threshers" I made my way.

The doors had only just been opened; nevertheless as I set my foot upon the step I met the very gossip that I sought.

"Hope you wasn't caught in the shower, this morning, sir?" said an old man seated solitary in an armchair in the corner of the bar-parlor. "But the country'll be all the better for the rain." He eyed me, and: "There's many a fine walk hereabouts," he averred. "There's lots comes down from London, especially of a Sunday."

"No doubt," said I encouragingly, stepping up to the counter.

"There's Manton-on-the-Hill," continued the ancient. "You can see the sea from there in clear weather; and many's the time in the war I've heard the guns in France from Upper Crowbury of a still night. Then, four mile away, there's the old Friar's Park; though nobody's allowed past the gate. Not as nobody wants to be," he added reflectively.

"How is that? I understood that Friar's Park was of great interest."

"Oh, ah!" murmured my acquaintance. "Oh, ah! Maybe you was thinkin' of lookin' over it like?"

"I was—yes."

"Oh, ah! Well—there's some likes a bit o' danger."

"Danger?" I echoed. "To what danger do you refer?"

He surveyed me with cunning, old rheumy eyes, and:

"What about man-traps?" he inquired. "Ain't man-traps dangerous? And what about shot-guns? Shot-guns can make a party feel sick, can't they? Oh, ah!"

"But," I exclaimed, "you surely don't mean that there are traps laid in the grounds of the Park? It isn't legal. And why should any one shoot at visitors?"

"Maybe 'cause they're told to," he shouted. "Aye—that's the reason as like as not; 'cause they're told to."

"Who are 'they'?"

"Old Gipsy Hawkins as used to be Sir Burnham's under-keeper. What's he doin' of up there at Park all day? Layin' traps and such—that's what he's doin' of. My son Jim knows it, he do. My son Jim found one of 'em—and left best part of a pair of trousers in it, too!"

These statements if true would seem to cast an unpleasant sidelight upon the character of my acquaintance of the Abbey Inn. I wondered if the "Jim" referred to was that "young Jim Corder" whose name seemed to be a standing joke with the man Hawkins (I learned later that it was so). And I wondered if Martin's mysterious references to certain patrons, whose patronage had damaged his business, might not have referred to the game-keeper. Moreover I now put a new construction upon Hawkins' sly amusement when I had inquired about the "shooting" in the neighborhood.

I began to grow keenly interested, and:

"Surely you took some steps in the matter?" I asked.

"Oh, ah. My son Jim did. He lay for days for that there Gipsy Hawkins—but Hawkins was too wise for him."

"But," said I, "you could legally have claimed damages."

"Maybe," was the reply; "but I reckon they'd have asked what my son Jim was doing in the Park. Oh, ah, I reckon they would."

This point of view had not hitherto presented itself to me, but that it was a just one I did not doubt.

"What is the object of all this?" I asked. "Does Lady Coverly object to any one entering the grounds?"

"'Tain't Lady Coverly," confided the old man; "it's that there black doctor."

"What black doctor?" I exclaimed.

"Him they call Doctor Greefe."

"Oh," said I, "you call him the black doctor. Is he a negro?"

"He's black," was the reply, "black he is although his hair is white. Oh, ah, there's black blood in him all right."

"And what has he to do with the man-traps in the Park?"

"Has 'em put there—has 'em put there, he does."

"But what for? Surely the property belongs not to Dr. Greefe but to Lady Coverly."

"Belongs to her! Her own soul don't belong to her!"

I was conscious of a growing excitement. I thought that I was about to learn the very fact which I was seeking, and accordingly:

"What is the age of Lady Burnham Coverly?" I asked.

"Lady Burnham? Well, let me see; she were not more'n about twenty-five, I reckon, when Sir Burnham first brought her to the Park. Them was the days, them was. These parts 'as changed cruel since I was a young man. Then it was soon after as Sir Burnham went off to Egypt for government, and eleven years afore he come back again."

"Did Lady Burnham accompany him to Egypt?" I asked, interestedly.

"Oh, ah, for sure she did. Poor Mr. Roger was born in Egypt. It was eight years come October they returned home to Park, and six years come September poor young Mr. Roger died."

"Then Lady Coverly must be something over forty years of age," said I musingly.

One of my theories, a wild one, I must confess, was shattered by this piece of information. In short I had conceived the idea (and the news that Lady Coverly had resided for some years in Egypt had strengthened it) that the woman in the case was none other than the mistress of Friar's Park! Her antipathy towards the late baronet had seemed to suggest a motive for the crime. But it was impossible to reconcile the figure of this lonely and bereaved woman with that of the supernormally agile visitant to my cottage in London, in short, with the possessor of those dreadful green eyes. I

determined to try a new tack, and remembering that the real object of my journey to Upper Crossleys was to learn particulars respecting the early death of Roger Coverly:

"Did Mr. Roger Coverly die in England?" I inquired.

"Oh, no, sir; he died in foreign parts, but they brought him home to bury him, they did."

"Do you know of what he died?"

"Oh, ah. I have heard tell it was some foreign fever like—took him off sudden, and him only a lad. It killed poor Sir Burnham, it did."

"Then Sir Burnham died shortly afterwards?"

"Two years afterwards, and these parts has never been the same since."

"But what has Dr. Greefe to do with all this?"

"Ah, now you're asking. Seven years ago he settled here in the big house up by the Park; part of the Park estate it is; and there he's been ever since, him and his black servant."

"Black servant!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, ah, real black he is—not half-and-half like his master, but as black as a lump o' coal, an' ugly—oh, ah, he's ugly right enough. Goes up to the Abbey Inn of a night he do, him and that there Gipsy Hawkins, the prettiest pair o' rascals in Upper Crossleys. Drove all the decent folk away from the place, and Martin keeps the best beer about here, too. If I was Martin," continued the ancient, truculently, "I'd know what to say to them two, I would; aye, and what to do to 'em," he added with great ferocity.

"Oh," said I; for this unexpected clearing up of so many minor mysteries had rather taken me aback. "Then Dr. Greefe is not popular?"

"Popular!" echoed the old man.

He drained his tankard and set it down on the table with a bang.

"He's been the ruin o' these parts, he has. He's worse than the turnip-fly."

"But in what way is he responsible for these evils of which you complain?"

The old man peered into his empty mug with a glance of such eloquence that I could not mistake its import. Accordingly, I caused it to be refilled, thus preventing any check in the flow of his eloquence, and:

"In what way?" he asked, his voice raised in a high quavering note. He laughed, and his laughter was pitched in the same time-worn key. "That doctor is a blot on the country. When Sir Burnham was alive—and afore he

went to Egypt—it was different; although, mind you, it's my belief—oh, ah, it is indeed—that him coming here had as much to do with Sir Burnham's death as the loss of his son what I told you about. That's my belief."

I took a sip from my replenished mug, and:

"I cannot understand," I said, "why the presence of Dr. Greefe should have brought about the death of Sir Burnham or the death of anybody else."

"No," said the old man, cunningly; "you can't, eh? Well, there be things none of us can understand and things some of us can. If you ever clap eyes on that there black doctor, like enough this'll be one of the things you'll be able to understand."

With the idea of drawing yet more intimate confidences:

"You suggest that Dr. Greefe had some hold upon the late Sir Burnham?"

"I don't suggest nothing."

"Some hold upon Lady Burnham, then?"

"Oh, ah, like enough."

"Don't think," I added solicitously, "that I doubt the truth of your statements in any way, but what could this black doctor, as you call him, have to gain by persecuting these people?"

"There be things," replied my aged friend, "what none of us can understand, but there be things that all of us do. Oh, ah, there be; and all of us in these parts knows as Upper Crossleys ain't been the same since that black doctor settled here. Besides, first Mr. Roger went, then Sir Burnham went. Now I do read in this 'ere paper as another of 'em is gone."

He held up two gnarled and twitching fingers crossed before him.

"Did you ever hear tell of the evil eye?" he asked, and peered at me cunningly. He took a long drink from his mug. "But maybe you'll laugh at *that*," he added.

"I am in no way disposed to laugh at anything you have told me," I assured him; "and as to the evil eye, I have certainly heard of such a thing, although I must admit, and I am glad to admit, that I have never met with it."

"I do trust, sir," responded the ancient, "that such a kind-hearted gent may never meet with it. Ah, I do trust that you never may, which is to say, so to speak, as I do trust as you'll never meet that black doctor. If ever a man, had the evil eye, that black doctor's got it, and old Mother Shale what lives in the cottage on the heath down against the windmill, she warned me,

she did, three days after he come here. 'Mr. Corder,' she says, 'that black doctor has the evil eye!' And never was a truer word spoke. He's been the bane and blight of this 'ere place, he has."

He paused from sheer lack of breath, and having allowed him some little interval of repose:

"But what has the evil eye to do with the laying of man-traps and the shooting of visitors who may chance to cross the estate?" I inquired.

"Ah, that's it! But the evil eye, I'm told, goes with the evil heart, and that man's heart's as black as his face. Blacker," he added, on second thoughts.

"Yet you have no positive evidence that Dr. Greefe is responsible for the setting of these man-traps and the attitude of Hawkins?"

"Nobody has," declared my acquaintance earnestly. "If anybody had, we'd have had the law on him long ago."

"And is Lady Burnham often seen about?" I inquired.

"Never!" was the reply. "She ain't passed the gates of the Park this twelve months and more."

He looked about him covertly, and:

"It's my belief," he affirmed, lowering his quavering voice almost to a whisper, "that she'll never pass them gates again alive."

"Oh," said I. "This seems to be a very cheerful neighborhood. Yet in spite of your wishes on my behalf, I must confess I should like a glimpse of this black doctor. Does he practice about here?"

"Practice? Is it likely?"

"Then he has private means?"

"His house belongs to the estate," was the reply; "and you can't tell me he ever pays any rent. As to his means I don't know nothing about that."

I gathered little more of interest from my acquaintance of "The Threshers," but indeed I had gathered enough, and as I wended my way back to the Abbey Inn, I was turning over in my mind the extraordinary story that he had related to me concerning Dr. Damar Greefe.

Clearly the man lived the life of a pariah and I knew not whether to pity him or otherwise. In an ignorant community it is a dreadful thing to earn such a reputation as that which evidently attached to the Eurasian doctor; and this talk of the evil eye took me back automatically to the early days of this quaint spot, where, cut off from the larger things of life, the simple folk continued to hold the same beliefs which had stirred their forefathers. In

those remote times when the white brethren from the neighboring Abbey had held absolute sway in that country-side, the life history of one accused, as Dr. Damar Greefe was now accused, of possessing the evil eye, would very probably have terminated upon a pile of faggots, by order of Mother Church. It was all very strange, and apart from its importance in the eyes of the ignorant country folk, seemed to contain a nucleus of something more germane to the object of my mission than the imaginings of ancient sorcery which still lingered in the minds of the people of Upper Crossleys.

I thought how I had looked out of my window and had found in the moon-bathed landscape something which had translated my ideas to that strange picture of Wiertz. Then I had known nothing of this nebula of witchcraft which, according to popular tradition, rested upon the vicinity; yet I had pictured the night as "a curtain 'broidered with luminous eyes"—and I could only suppose that my mind had become impressed by a picture conjured up by this focusing of local thought. In short, the people of the neighborhood had created this atmosphere of desolation and of something more sinister, which I had observed in the very hour of my arrival at the little village.

So my thoughts ran as I proceeded back to the Abbey Inn; and as I had collected much new and valuable information, I determined to embody it in a long report to Gatton. Furthermore, I was doubtful as to my next step, the bold move which I made later not having yet presented itself to my mind.

Twice during the evening, however, I looked into the bar-parlor, but neither "Gipsy" Hawkins nor the black servant appeared. But when at last I turned in, I closed my windows and drew the curtains. I desired no repetition of the dreams which had made hideous my first night at the Abbey Inn.

XV. I Receive Visitors

Over my breakfast, on the following morning, I began to formulate that plan which was to lead to an extraordinary discovery. I breakfasted in my own room, and just as I had finished and was about to light my pipe, Mr. Martin, the landlord, knocked at the door.

"Come in," I cried.

He entered, and:

"A lady has called to see you, sir," he announced.

The manner in which he made the statement evidenced a curious mixture of disapproval and respect. For my own part it is perhaps unnecessary for me to say that my first thought, as always, was Isobel! In the very moment, however, that this idea visited me (the wish being father of the thought) I recognized its folly.

"A lady," I repeated; "but I know no one here. Are you certain that it was for me she asked?"

"Quite, sir," replied the landlord, who was evidently flurried out of his usual calm by what I gathered to be an episode unprecedented in his memories of the Abbey Inn. "Mr. Addison, she asked for. She is waiting in the coffee-room, sir."

Wholly at a loss to understand who my visitor could be, I made my way to the little apartment at the side of the bar-parlor which Mr. Martin had dignified with the title of coffee-room. I observed upon the bench before the door a shabby-looking fellow whom I might have taken to be some local tradesman except that he appeared to be a chance visitor and was evidently unacquainted with Martin. He was reading a newspaper and I saw a cup of coffee set upon the bench beside him.

This was a hazy morning, which I thought betokened another hot day, and as I entered the "coffee-room" I found it to be pervaded by a curious half-light, not unlike that of summer twilight. The glow of the sun peering redly through the mist added warmth to this soft illumination, but since the room boasted only one small window it was badly lighted even at noon.

From a little horse-hair-covered sofa set before this window my visitor rose to greet me, and with my hand upon the knob of the door I paused. For certainly this was a stranger who stood before me!

She was tall and very slender, attired with great elegance, and in her whole appearance there was something markedly foreign—or perhaps I should say exotic. She wore a small hat which I judged to be Parisian and expensive, and from its brim depended a figured veil which effectually disguised her features, without being able or perhaps without being intended to disguise her brilliant, almond-shaped eyes. For one moment, a dreadful idea presented itself to me; but the most appalling memory which I

retained of those other witch-eyes around which so much mystery clustered was their brilliant greenness. The eyes of my visitor, although unusually large and brilliant, were totally different in shape, being long and narrow, and apparently of a wonderful amber color.

When she spoke her voice was very cultured and soft; yet I started and I know I must have been staring very hard and very rudely. There was a faint huskiness in its tone, a caress in its accents, which irresistibly reminded me of the scene in my study which had resulted, in the loss of the image of Bâst.

I think I have already indicated that I am one of those who arrive at a decision somewhat laboriously; and now convinced that my memory of the luminous eyes was threatening to become an obsession, so that I looked to find them blazing out at me from the face of every stranger whom I encountered, I forced myself to believe that a chance resemblance in my visitor's voice to the voice of that other visitor had tricked me.

"Mr. Addison," she said, "I'm afraid you will think this call somewhat unconventional, but"—she paused almost imperceptibly—"I am staying at Friar's Park, and Lady Coverly has heard from Dr. Greefe that you wish to see the house."

"Really," I murmured, "it was good of you to take so much trouble, but __"

"It was no trouble at all," she declared. "I had occasion to come this way and Lady Coverly asked me to call and tell you that whilst she is not well enough to receive visitors, you are quite welcome to inspect the older parts of the house."

"I am much indebted," I said.

Having so spoken, I ceased and was aware of a kind of embarrassment. For whilst I was naturally anxious to avoid unpleasant suspicions regarding a lady who apparently had gone out of her way to perform an act of courtesy, yet I could not place this elegant figure in the household of Friar's Park as that household had been depicted by my old gossip of "The Threshers."

I mentally determined there and then to question Martin, and if possible Hawkins, upon the point, directly an opportunity arose, and the former immediately my visitor had departed. But she seemed to be in no hurry to depart.

"You have never visited this neighborhood before?" she continued, in the soft, caressing voice which persistently awakened memories of that evening in my cottage.

She re-seated herself upon the sofa, leaving me no alternative but to sit down in the only chair which the coffee-room boasted. I could not fail to notice, however, that although she addressed me as Mr. Addison, she did not volunteer her own name. Furthermore, she remained throughout with her back to the window.

"Never," I replied; "it is very interesting in many ways, I believe."

"You will find Friar's Park most fascinating," she assured me. "It stands upon the site of one of the oldest and largest monasteries in the south of England. Indeed, some parts of the house, notably the chapel and the west tower, which is visible from here, I think, are remains of the original building."

She was palpably trying to interest me; and conscious that my somewhat frigid attitude was churlish, if she was really what she professed to be—namely, a friend of Lady Coverly's—I endeavored in turn to display an intelligent interest in the history of the old monastic house.

I do not regret that I did so. I think that I have never heard the dry bones of history clothed so fascinatingly. The knowledge displayed by my unknown visitor of the history of that old monkish corner of England was truly amazing. The Coverlys, it appeared, had played their part in that history right back to the misty times of Saxon England. The scenes conjured up by my first sight of the curiously wild country which lay between the village and the distant parkland were presented now with all the color and truth of real life. This woman seemingly was acquainted with almost every act of importance of every Coverly since the days of Canute and with the doings of all the abbots who had ever ruled over Croix-de-Lis.

Finally, while I listened in ever growing wonder, fascinated by the extent of this strange woman's knowledge and in part, too, by the husky music of her voice, she seemed to become conscious of the passage of time and, rising suddenly, she laughed; and her laughter again awakened a memory.

"How perfectly absurd of me, Mr. Addison!" she said. "You will certainly think I am more than eccentric to sit here fulfilling the part of a local guide."

Even as she spoke the words, a sound intruded from the road outside. A heavy footstep came first, the footstep of one who approached the door of the inn; then:

"Martin!" I heard; "a moment, please."

It was Dr. Damar Greefe!

If the sound of his voice had startled me, its effect upon my visitor was truly singular. Taking a swift step towards me, she grasped my arm with her strangely slender gloved hand. Now that she stood so close to me, I realized that she was even taller than I had supposed, nearly as tall as myself, in fact. Her swift, lithe movements possessed an indescribable grace which, as I thought, and experienced a sudden revulsion, were oddly uncanny—cat-like.

"Oh, Mr. Addison," she said, and drew even nearer, so that I could feel her breath upon my cheek, "I fear that man as one fears a snake. I am going to ask a favor of you. I see that there is another door to this room, and I have a particular reason for wishing to avoid him. I don't know where that doorway leads to, but I can doubtless find my way out."

Her grasp upon my arm tightened.

"Dare I ask you," she added pleadingly, "to conceal from him if necessary the fact that I have been here?"

"But Martin knows that you have been here," I protested, my mind in a whirl at this sudden turn of affairs; "and the man sitting on the bench outside must have seen you come in also."

"He did not," she replied rapidly, "and Martin does not know who I am."

It was on the tip of my tongue to say, "Neither do I," but:

"Please," she pleaded; "it is not much to ask, but it means so much to me."

Thereupon, without waiting for my answer, she turned and ran out through the little doorway, which opened as a matter of fact into the larder of the inn, from which there was an exit into a kitchen-garden.

I could hear Martin, the landlord, talking to the Eurasian doctor in the passage outside the coffee-room, and before I had time to open the door, there came a peremptory rap, the door was opened from the outside and Dr. Damar Greefe entered.

In spite of the already great heat of the morning he wore a heavy black overcoat, and his white hair showed in startling relief beneath a wide-

brimmed black felt hat. If I had been surprised at the tallness of the woman who had so suddenly departed, the stature of the Eurasian was curiously illustrated by the fact that he had to lower his head in order to enter the little doorway.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, peering towards me where I stood in the badly lighted room—"Mr. Addison, I believe?"

"At your service, Dr. Greefe," I replied.

"I understood that my niece was here?"

"Your niece!" I exclaimed, and my astonishment was quite unfeigned.

"Precisely."

That peremptory manner which I had previously resented in him evinced itself now; and even had I lacked reasons other than personal for foiling him I should certainly have returned a reply far from pacific.

"I was not aware," he continued, his voice high-pitched and harsh, "that you were acquainted. Inform me."

All the time he was peering about the room suspiciously, and:

"I inform you that we are not!" I said. "But if we were, I cannot conceive that our acquaintance would concern you in any way."

"You are rude, sir!" he cried, and bent towards me so that I could see the fierce hawk face set in a vicious scowl.

"I should be sorry to think so," I said indifferently; for the Eurasian's behavior transcended the merely annoying and was that of a lunatic. "I would not willingly provoke a sick man, and the tone and manner of your address forcibly suggest to me that your temperature is not normal."

A moment he stood bending towards me, his pose that of one about to spring, then:

"Ah," he exclaimed, "yes, you are right, Mr. Addison. I live much alone and I fear my manner grows brusk. Overlook it. She has gone, then?"

"If you refer to a lady who called upon me half an hour ago—yes, she is gone."

He drew himself upright again and stood there, gigantic in the little room—a great, gaunt figure.

"Ah! And she was not my niece?"

"I lack the pleasure of your niece's acquaintance, Dr. Greefe."

"Yes. You said so. Good day, Mr. Addison."

He turned, lowered his head, and walked out of the room. When I, in turn, emerged into the passage, I saw him striding out of the inn. Martin was standing by the door of the bar-parlor looking very confused; and as I joined him, intent upon a chat, I observed that the shabby-looking stranger had departed.

"Hullo, Martin!" I exclaimed. "I thought I saw a customer here."

"When you came in there was. He went off with Cassim and Hawkins. They was goin' to show him the road to Manton."

"Cassim?"

"Aye."

Martin growled and walked behind the bar-counter.

"You have some curious residents in this neighborhood."

"Too curious by half."

"Cassim, for instance, is not an English name."

Martin indulged in that rumbling sound which was his only form of laughter.

"English!" he said. "He's as black as your hat!"

My hat chanced to be gray, but I followed the idea nevertheless, and:

"What!" I exclaimed, "a negro?"

"A blackamoor. That's all I know or care; and dumb!"

"Dumb! and a friend of Hawkins?"

"God knows. Things ain't right."

"Do you know if—a lady—resides with Dr. Greefe?"

"Maybe—maybe not. There *is* tales told."

Substantially this was all I learned from mine host; but, having lighted my pipe, I sat down on the bench before the door and set my mind to work in an endeavor to marshal all the facts into some sort of order.

The reputation locally enjoyed by Dr. Damar Greefe I could afford to ignore, I thought, but from my personal observation of the man I had come to the conclusion that there was much about him which I did not and could not understand. In the first place, for any man to choose to live, solitary, in such an abode as the Bell House was remarkable. Why had the masterful Eurasian retired to that retreat in company with his black servitor? I thought of my own case, but it did not seem to afford a strict analogy.

Then, who was the "niece" so closely guarded by Dr. Greefe? And if she was none other than my late elegant visitor why had she sought the

interview? Not even my natural modesty, which in such matters I have sometimes thought to be excessive, could conceal from me the fact that she had found my society pleasing. But, since I had never seen her before, did this theory account for her visit? Recalling again that huskily caressing voice, I asked myself the question: *Had* I seen her before?

Perhaps the apparition of green eyes looking up to my window from the lane below, which on the night of my arrival I had relegated to the limbo of dreamland, had been verity and not phantasm. If that were so, then the uncanny visitant to my cottage had pursued me to Upper Crossleys!

Or could it be the fact that she had preceded me? Perhaps Gatton had not confided the whole of his ideas to me—perhaps, as I had already suspected, the heart of "the *Oritoga* mystery" lay here and not in London.

The result of my meditations was that I determined, in pursuit of my original plan, first to call upon Mr. Edward Hines; and having inquired of Martin the way to Leeways Farm, I took my stick and set out.

XVI. The Golden Cat

It was a perfect morning and although the sun had not yet attained to its full power it had dispersed the early mist and I knew that in another hour or less the heat would once more have become tropical. During the first part of my walk, and whilst I remained in the neighborhood of Upper Crossleys, I met never a wayfarer, and memories of the green eyes followed me step by step so that I was often tempted to look back over my shoulder by the idea that I should detect, as I had detected once before, the presence of some follower. I resented this impulse, however. I felt that my imagination was adding horrors to those which already actually existed, so that I should presently find myself unable to distinguish the real from the imaginary.

At the end of half an hour's steady tramping I saw before me a place where a wood dipped down to the wayside so that its trees cast a broad shadow across the path. I knew that the entrance to the farm lay just beyond; and, pressing on past the trees, I saw many outbuildings having none of that deserted appearance which characterized the neighboring

homesteads of Upper Crossleys. Twenty yards beyond the farm itself appeared in view.

There was some sign of activity about the yard, and, walking briskly forward, I presently found myself looking into a stone-paved place containing numbers of milk-cans. Here a woman was engaged in sweeping the floor, and:

"I have called to see Mr. Edward Hines," I said. "Can you tell me where I shall find him?"

The woman stared at me in a strange and almost stupefied manner.

"Is he a friend of yours?" she inquired.

"He is not exactly a friend of mine," I continued; "but I have very particular business with him."

She continued to stare in that curious way and remained silent for so long that I began to think she was not going to reply, when:

"If Mr. Edward is not expecting you," she said, "I don't know that I should advise you to go in. He is not very well just now—and he is sometimes rather strange."

"I know," I said. "I quite understand; but he will be willing to see me when he knows what I have come about. Shall I find him yonder?"

I pointed towards an open door leading to which was a neat, graveled path lined by well-kept flower-beds, and which I took to be the main entrance to the farm.

"Well, sir," said the woman doubtfully, "they'll tell you there if Mr. Edward is to be seen; but I don't advise it"

"That's all right!" I cried, and proceeded in the direction of the doorway.

I presently obtained a view of a cozily furnished room, where a white-haired old lady was bustling about engaged in some domestic duties. I paused at the threshold.

"My name is Addison," I said. "Would it be possible for me to have a few minutes' conversation with Mr. Edward Hines?"

The old lady (whom I suspected to be the mother of the youth whom I was seeking) paused in the midst of her task and looked at me in a troubled way. It was evident enough that the reputation of Mr. Edward was the same in his home as elsewhere, and it occurred to me that his upbringing must have been a very bad one.

"Well," she replied, after this eloquent pause, "he's up in his room certainly, but he doesn't like to see visitors, I know."

"He will be perfectly willing to see *me*," I said, confidently. "I have news of importance for him"—and as she continued to look at me in that troubled way: "I know of his present disfigurement," I explained. "You need not be afraid of any unpleasant scenes."

"If I were sure of that," she said hesitatingly, and looked me over with a critical eye. "Does he know you, sir?"

"Oh, yes," I answered; "we have met before. I assure you it will be quite all right if you will just let me walk up and announce myself to him, Mrs. Hines."

If I had had any doubt upon the point I was soon to learn that she was indeed the mother of the notorious Mr. Edwards; for, ere she had time to reply, a high-pitched, querulous voice which I had heard before cried out from somewhere above:

"If that's any one for me, mother, tell him to go away! You know perfectly well I won't see any one."

"There you are, sir," said Mrs. Hines, unable to hide her embarrassment; "I told you he wouldn't see you."

"Please give me permission to go up," I said; "he will change his mind when he hears what I have to say."

"You hear, mother!" came the irritable voice; "I'll break his neck if he comes up here!"

Judging from the sound of the voice, I concluded that the excited young man was located in a room immediately above that at the door of which I stood.

"Don't be alarmed, madam," I said, and, stepping into the room, I placed my hand reassuringly upon the old lady's shoulder.

Without waiting for any further protest I advanced to an open staircase which I had already marked as leading to the apartment above and confidently mounted. The copy-hunting pressman is not readily excluded, and a few moments later I found myself in an extremely untidy bedroom, the walls of which were decorated with sporting prints, Kirchner drawings and photographs of many damsels.

The scarred young man, his face still a mass of sticking-plaster, stood with clenched fists facing me, and:

"Get out!" was his greeting—"before I throw you out."

"My dear sir," I said, "unless you particularly want to figure in a very undignified light as a witness in a trial for murder, sit down and listen to me."

Edward Hines hesitated, opening and closing his hands and glaring at me in a preposterous fury.

"What's the game?" he demanded. "What are you talking about?"

"I am talking of 'the *Oritoga* mystery,'" I replied.

"The *Oritoga* mystery?"

His expression changed, and he dropped down into an armchair from which he had evidently arisen upon hearing my voice below. I observed a copy of a daily paper lying upon the carpet, and the conspicuous headline was sufficient to show me that he had actually been reading the latest reports concerning the case at the time of my arrival. I had judged my man pretty accurately by this time, and drawing up another chair which stood near me I sat down facing him, holding out my open cigar-case.

"I quite understand your sensitiveness in the circumstances," I said soothingly; "but there is no occasion to suppose that I have come to remind you of your misfortune. Have a cigar. I want a chat with you."

He continued to watch me in a lowering way, but I was gradually getting him in hand. With very poor grace he accepted a cigar, lighted it, and threw the match away without offering to light mine. I did not appear to notice his churlishness, but immediately approached the matter about which I had come.

"Although I am not a member of the Criminal Investigation Department," I continued, "I am nevertheless in a sense an agent of Scotland Yard, and I must ask you to listen very seriously to what I have to say. You have in your possession a certain gold amulet—"

He was on his feet in a moment, the patches of skin visible between the strapping assuming a purple color. A more choleric young man I had never met.

"Damn you!" he cried. "What has it to do with you?"

"Sit down!" I said sternly. "I have given you one warning; I shall not give you another. You will either answer my questions civilly here and now or answer them in court, whichever you please. I shall not give you another

opportunity of choosing. I will repeat my remark: you have in your possession a certain gold amulet in the form, I believe, of a cat."

He was choking and muttering and glaring at me as I spoke, but I stared at him coolly, and finally he resumed his seat and reached out one hand towards a chest-of-drawers which stood beside his chair. Pulling one of the drawers open, he took out a little gold figure of Bâst, and holding it towards me:

"Is this the thing you mean?" he jerked uncivilly.

"It is," I replied; "allow me to examine it."

He seemed rather reluctant to do so, but nevertheless I took it from his hand and looked at it closely. Beyond doubt it was of Ancient Egyptian workmanship and probably a genuine Bubastite votive offering. Raising my eyes to him again:

"Without in any way desiring to pry into your affairs," I said, "would you be good enough to tell me how this came into your possession?"

The studied coolness of my manner was having its proper effect, and Edward Hines, although sulkily, replied at once:

"A woman gave it to me."

"What was her name?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know the name of a woman who gave you a costly trinket of this kind?"

A ridiculous look of vanity appeared in his eyes.

"Is it very valuable?" he inquired.

"It may be worth as much as £50," I answered quietly.

"Really!" said he, with something approaching geniality in his tones. "Well, it's an extraordinary thing, but I assure you I don't know her name."

"Of course," I said, with Machiavellian cunning, "I don't expect you to remember the name of every girl who has loved you, but this is an unusual present to receive even from an infatuated woman."

"It's an extraordinary thing, isn't it?" repeated Edward Hines, full of self-esteem. "I can't make out the women at all; they're always giving me presents. Look at that picture-frame. I got that from a girl I had only seen three times—and it's solid silver," he added.

I glanced at the memento indicated, and observed that it contained a photograph of Mr. Hines (without the sticking-plaster).

"An excellent likeness of yourself, too," I remarked.

"It's not bad," said he disparagingly; "it was done by one of the big people up in London. The girl paid for it."

"But even that," I pursued—"even that is not so remarkable a gift as this valuable piece of jewelry which I hold in my hand."

"No," said the youth, now restored to the utmost good-humor by my undisguised admiration of his Don Juan-like qualities. "But the fact remains that I don't know her name to this day. What did you mean," he continued, "when you said that I was concerned in some way in 'the *Oritoga* mystery'?"

"I meant," I explained, "that the police are looking for a woman who answers to the description of your friend."

"Really!" he cried. "A tall woman, very fine figure, beautifully dressed?"

"I think it is probably the same," I said. "Had she any peculiarities of appearance or manner by which you would recognize her again?"

"She had several peculiarities by which I should recognize her," he declared, a note of resentment now proclaiming itself in his voice.

"And they were?"

Mr. Hines leaned forward, tapping me on the knee confidentially.

"I met her by accident, you understand," he confided, "on the London Road one evening about sunset set. She asked me the way to Friar's Park and I could see that I had made an impression at once. It was just an excuse to speak to me of course. I offered to walk that far with her; she agreed, and to cut a long story short—the usual thing, of course; she wanted to meet me again.

"Well," he resumed complacently, "I met her on the following Thursday and we became very good friends, you understand, except that she always seemed particularly anxious to return home before dusk. All this time I never knew who she was, or even where she lived, but of course I could see how the land lay. She was some lady from London staying at one of the big houses about here and had to show up for dinner. That night when we parted she gave me this little gold thing and arranged to see me again."

He paused, knocking ash from his cigar and seemingly reflecting as to how he should word his next communication; but finally:

"The third time I saw her," he said, "I managed to arrange that she could not get in quite so early, you understand; and then—I don't know exactly

how to tell you. I am not a chap that gets in a panic very easily; but (I may mention that the scene took place in a wood) she gave me the biggest scare I have ever had in my life."

He bent forward and again tapped me on the knee.

"My dear—Mr. Addison, I think you said your name was?—her eyes lighted up in the dark like a cat's!"

He stared at me with some return of his old truculence as if anticipating ridicule and prepared to resent it, but I nodded sternly, watching him as if enthralled by his narrative, whereupon:

"Yes—like a cat's!" he repeated; "and I'll admit I got in a panic. I don't know if she thought from the way I yelled that I was going to attack her or what, but the next thing I knew she was at my throat."

He uttered a sort of choking sound, tenderly touched the bandages about his neck and fingered the plaster which ornamented his face.

"At your throat?" said I. "You mean she tried to throttle you?"

"Throttle me!" he exclaimed scornfully. "She seized me with her *teeth*!"

"But," I said, and hesitated, for I feared I might wound his curious susceptibility—"the damage to your face?"

"Damn her!" he cried. "Damn her! I had never seen her without her gloves, you understand, but she must have taken them off that night; for *this*"—he indicated his plastered countenance—"is what she did with her nails!"

He paused, staring at me dully, and then with a hint of the old ridiculous vanity entering his voice:

"But I scored after all," he said, tossing the little amulet into the drawer from which he had taken it. "If that's worth £50 it will more than pay the doctor's bill, I think!"

Following a brief interval:

"Of course," I said, "you would recognize the woman again?"

"I am not so certain," declared the scarred man. "She always wore some sort of veil; but you may be sure," he added in a tone of supreme condescension, "that she was a very pretty woman, or I shouldn't have been bothering with her."

"You are quite sure of that?" I ventured to remark.

"No doubt about it at all. Most extraordinary eyes—too damned extraordinary by half!"

"Well," I said, "I am much indebted to you for your statement, and you may be confident that it will materially assist the investigation now in progress."

"Don't mention it," said Hines, airily. "If I can ever do anything else for you, just let me know; but—I mean to say I rely upon you not to bring me into it. You understand what I mean?"

"You may be absolutely certain," I replied, "that no hint of this occurrence will ever be made public so far as I am concerned."

I took my departure from Leeways Farm fully satisfied with the result of the first move in the plan of campaign upon which I had decided. Returning to my quarters at the Abbey Inn, I spent the greater part of the afternoon in writing a detailed account of my interview with Edward Hines. Having completed this, I set out for the town, as by posting my report there and not in the wayside box at Upper Crossleys I knew that I could count upon its delivery at New Scotland Yard by the first mail in the morning.

In leisurely fashion I performed the journey, for my next move could not be made until after dusk.

XVII. The Nubian Mute

I returned from the little market town beneath a sky of tropical brilliance. The landscape was bathed in a radiance of perfect moonlight, and under the trees which thickly lined the way, the shadows had a velvet quality rarely met with in England, their edges showing more sharply defined than I ever remembered to have noticed them before. But ere long I grew oblivious even of the beauty of the night, becoming absorbed in reflections respecting this most extraordinary case.

Every new datum acquired, instead of serving to elucidate, seemed only more completely to obscure the issue. Mystery revealed itself within mystery, and this was indeed a labyrinth, to the heart of which I sometimes despaired of penetrating. Who was this woman whose elusive figure appeared at every turn in the case? Was she one and the same with the visitor to my cottage who had purloined the green enameled statuette—and

could it be that I had actually sat in conversation with her in the coffee-room of the Abbey Inn and had failed to recognize her for what she was?

Beyond doubt she had extraordinary cleverness and was a weaver of spells, so that in a sense she could temporarily disguise her personality. Whilst at one moment she was a repellent, half-animal creature, at another she was a fascinating woman of the world versed in strange lores and a most entertaining companion. What object underlay her diverse activities? Assuming that she was concerned in the murder of Sir Marcus Coverly, the purpose of her visit to my cottage was not far to seek; she had come to recover incriminating evidence and had been aided, it seemed, by the hand of fate.

But why had she come to visit me at the Abbey Inn and what had she gained by this interview? Perhaps—I reflected, as I plodded along the deserted country road—she had been interrupted on that occasion by the inopportune appearance of Dr. Damar Greefe. Again, why had he appeared there at that moment if not because he had suspected her presence at the Inn; and what was the relationship existing between these two singular people?

That the strange story related to me by the idiotic Edward Hines simply resolved itself into an idle adventure on the part of the mysterious woman, which she had been forced to terminate (somewhat ferociously, I admit) by the uncouth ardor of this rustic swain I seemed to perceive. But unless her visit to the Abbey Inn portended that she had selected me as Mr. Edward Hines' successor, I failed to fit it into the scheme.

I began to long for the presence of Inspector Gatton, for the assistance of his trained mind in plumbing these depths which defied my single efforts. Who this woman could be I failed to imagine; and assuming that she had been concerned in the death of the late baronet, in what way she stood to profit by it was utterly beyond my comprehension, as was the position of Dr. Damar Greefe in the matter.

On I walked and on, unconsciously increasing my pace as is my way when I am lost in abstraction; and, perhaps stimulated to greater mental clarity by the exercise, some of my doubts were dispersed and I became convinced at last that the shadowy figure which had dogged my footsteps on the night of the crime—the owner of those blazing eyes which had watched me from my garden—the woman who had stolen the amulet from

my writing-table, and the woman who had mutilated Edward Hines, were one and the same as my visitor at the Abbey Inn—and the unseen speaker who had conversed beneath my window on the night of my arrival at Upper Crossleys!

Here then was a definite chain linking the Red House with Friar's Park, or at least with its vicinity, and now so clearly did my ideas fit themselves each into its correct place, that I determined upon the identity of that other speaker who had stood in the shadows opposite the Inn when I had awakened in the night. Mentally I recaptured the high, rather coarse tones of his voice, and remembering how, touched by the spell which had seemed to lie upon the whole country-side, I had thought of him as Asmodeus, the master of the witches' revels, I determined that my judgment had been not inexact. For now I identified the speaker as Dr. Damar Greefe!

So far my meditations had proceeded and I suppose I was about half-way on my journey towards the Abbey Inn, when all at once I became aware again of that uncomfortable feeling of surveillance. As on that night when returning from the Red House to my cottage I had experienced a conviction that I was followed, so now a like conviction impressed itself upon my mind. But whereas on the former occasion I had been less fearful than curious, now I was aware of a positive dread of this follower whose presence I had detected, by what sense I know not, and of a certainty of a very grave menace.

Accordingly, I determined upon a certain plan which I proceeded to put into execution without delay. I was traversing a stretch of moon-bathed road at the moment that I first fell a victim to this unpleasant suspicion which indeed was more than a suspicion, when ahead of me I observed a patch, some twenty yards in extent, which was entirely overshadowed by trees. For at this point the woods, clothing a slope which ran right down to the road, closely impinged upon the highway; and I had noticed something at this spot, on my outward journey, which I now proposed to employ to my advantage.

Into this patch of darkness I walked then, my steps sounding crisply along the road. On I went for some twenty yards until I found the particular spot for which I was seeking. This was a sort of little bay or inlet where until quite recently a heap of stones used by roadmenders had lain, and into this I marched, never once altering my pace. But having gained it I

performed an about-turn and continued to mark time there, whilst surveying the moon-bathed road behind me.

The object of this trick will be evident enough; for whilst the sound of my footsteps would lead one in pursuit to suppose that I was proceeding upon my way through the shadows, actually I was staring intently back in quest of the pursuer of whose presence I had become assured.

Perhaps in spite of the cautious manner in which he had advanced, he had made some slight sound which, subconsciously detected, had nevertheless intruded upon my reverie and in this way had acquainted me with his presence. For now, continuing that steady beat, but watching intently, I saw him.

Taking every advantage of the shade cast by the hedge on the right of the road, a softly-moving figure was coming towards me!

That the tracker was desirous of avoiding observation the manner of his approach sufficiently proved; and if I had had any doubts respecting his purpose they would have been resolved in a manner painful to myself had I not had the good fortune to detect him in time.

A piece of road there was, which because of a gap in the hedge afforded no shadow, and as the gliding shape reached this point and passed it, I obtained a momentary but clear view of my pursuer.

I was being tracked by a Nubian mute!

That one glance was sufficient to convince me of the horrible truth. The man was stripped to the waist, in order no doubt that his movements might not be impeded, and I beheld a torso like that of some Milo wrought in ebony! The cruel, animal face, the blubber lips, the partly bared teeth—all spoke of the fate designed for me. I knew the type and knew what scant mercy I could look for at his hands. Indubitably this was a mute such as is sometimes attached to the harêms of great Eastern houses to this day; and even if I had known nothing of the functions of such a servitor, the fact that he carried something in his left hand would have enlightened me.

It was a *strangling-cord*!

I smiled grimly. Respecting the identity of my would-be assassin there was little room for doubt; he was the black servant of Dr. Damar Greefe. Now, as he passed the bright patch of roadway and began to glide silently nearer through the shadows, I marked time with a lighter step, the more deeply to confuse him. Of the strange Nubian dialect I knew nothing, but

taking it for granted that the man was familiar with Arabic, I raised my voice in a mournful cry, and (in the Arab tongue):

"Cassim! Cassim!" I wailed—"Satan is calling for you!"

I think I have never witnessed such an exhibition of panic fright as I now beheld. Cassim was less than ten yards away—and I could hear his teeth chattering!

"Cassim!" I cried again—"Fly! fly! Satan is here!"

A horrible tongueless babbling answered the cry. There came a scuffling—and I saw the Nubian's gleaming body leap out into the lighted roadway as he fled.

"Faster! faster! Cassim!" I wailed. "He is behind you! Ah! he is *in front*!"

Cassim staggered, turned and then stood still, looking this way and that in a perfect delirium of fear. Finally he whirled around to the right, shrieking wildly (I think some nocturnal insect had brushed against him), plunged babbling up the bank to the hedge and heedless of the fact that it contained many thorns which must have cruelly lacerated his bare body, scrambled half through it and half over it into the plowed field beyond!

Against such an enemy there is no more potent weapon than superstition. Nevertheless I kept my hand upon the pistol in my pocket and proceeded at an increased pace during the latter half of my journey; nor am I ashamed to admit that the lights of the Abbey Inn were a welcome sight, and it was with a feeling of relief that, leaving the highroad behind me, I found myself again in the village street of Upper Crossleys.

What to expect next, I knew not. The other party had made a false move, for I now had definite evidence of the antagonism of Dr. Damar Greefe and of his intent to cause my murder through the agency of his Nubian servant.

My plan of nocturnal operations, already sufficiently dangerous, now promised to lead me into extreme peril. I would have given much for the company of Gatton, but, if I must act alone—alone I would set out. If I am slow in planning, at least I can state with truth that I am tenacious in execution. But here, now, was open warfare: and I must look for an enemy prepared.

XVIII. The Secret of Friar's Park

Glancing into the bar-parlor as I entered, I observed that it was empty. Martin sat behind the counter, and he seemed to be immersed in the contents of a newspaper which was spread open before him. Going up to my room, I put on a pair of puttees—which, although useless and indeed injurious for general wear, are ideal for traversing bramble-land—took my thick stick, and further looked to the condition and readiness of my pistol. Finally, slipping an electric torch into my pocket, I set out.

The bar was closing when I came downstairs. Martin stared at me dully.

"I'm going for a moonlight ramble," I explained. "Will any one be up to let me in or should you prefer to give me the key of the side door?"

"Never locked," was the laconic reply; "come in when you like."

To a town-dweller, such a piece of information must have sounded alarming, but knowing something of the ways of these country communities, it did not greatly surprise me; and bidding the landlord "good night," I set out.

The false move made by Dr. Damar Greefe had advanced the inquiry further than any unaided endeavors of mine could well have done. Clearly enough, the Eurasian regarded my presence as inimical to his safety. In admitting so much he had admitted guilt of some kind. In fact I felt assured that he was determined at all costs to prevent my visiting Friar's Park.

Having failed in his unmistakable endeavor to remove me entirely—for so I construed the Nubian's instructions—he would undoubtedly recognize that the game was up. He was clearly a desperate man and I recognized that the only hope I had of foiling him lay in acting with despatch.

This was a perfect night with never a cloud to mar the blue serenity of the sky, but in spite of its beauty I was more than ever conscious of that sense of loneliness and desolateness which seemed to be the most marked characteristic of the country hereabouts. I met never a soul upon the highway, nor indeed did I encounter any evidence of life whatever, until, turning into a narrow lane which would bring me to that road in the valley upon which stood the deserted lodge belonging to the Bell House, an owl hooted in the trees above my head.

Keenly alert to the possibility that my movements might be watched, I paused, wondering if the sound—which had proceeded from a low bough directly above me—had really been made by an owl or by a human mimic.

For the hoot of an owl, being easy to imitate, is much favored for signaling purposes. Taking my electric torch from my pocket, I directed its ray upward into the close foliage of the oak tree; whereupon, with a ghostly fluttering of dark wings, an owl flew away.

I proceeded confidently down the sloping road amid a silence so intense that my steps seemed to create a positive clamor. Coming to the corner, I looked along to the left where the lane, alternate patches of silver and ebony, showed deserted as far as I could see. This was the direction of the gate of the Bell House, and the road, which sloped gently downwards on that side rose in a rather sharper activity on my right. It was at this point that I had mistaken the way on my first journey to Friar's Park.

Therefore I proceeded to the right, seeking the entrance, which I was convinced I should find somewhere within the next two hundred yards. The lane inclined gently leftward, and presently, as I had anticipated, I came upon a lodge, overgrown with ivy and but partly visible beyond the gates which barred the end of the drive.

That this was the entrance to Friar's Park I felt assured, but I had no intention of seeking admittance in the usual way. Pursuing a high wall, evidently of great age, which divided the grounds from the road, I walked on for fully three hundred yards. Here the wall, which enclosed what had once been the kitchen garden of the monastery, gave place to a lofty hedge in which I presently discovered a gap wide enough to allow of my making my way through.

Entering, I found myself in a sort of parkland, boasting many majestic and venerable trees, elms for the most part. Where the parkland ended and the woods began it was impossible to make out, but away to my left I could follow the high wall to where, clearly visible in the moonlight which at this point was unobstructed by trees, a gate appeared.

Towards this I made my way, keeping a sharp lookout for those man-traps of which I had heard, and equally on the alert for any hidden human presence. Without meeting with any obstacle, however, I reached the gate—only to find that it was closed and fastened with a stout padlock.

There was a dry ditch bordering the wall, and I followed this back towards the highroad, hoping that somewhere I might chance upon a means of scaling the wall. I made slow progress, for presently I came upon a quantity of undergrowth which I distrusted keenly as it would afford

admirable cover for traps. In this way I had come nearly back to the hedge lining the road before I discovered what I was looking for.

Here a fir-tree grew sufficiently close to the ditch to serve my purpose. Its lower branches were within easy reach whilst further up I espied one which stretched out across the top of the wall. Looping over my wrist the thong attached to my stick, I scrambled up into the tree and soon found myself astride the wall.

Beneath me was a neglected orchard and beyond to the right a wilderness which once had been an extensive kitchen-garden. Directly before me lay the lodge, but the house was invisible from where I sat, being evidently situated somewhere beyond a dense coppice into which I perceived the drive to lead, for patched here and there by the moonlight I could trace it running ribbon-like through the trees.

A vine grew upon the wall beneath me, its aged tendrils of the thickness of ropes, and it afforded a natural ladder whereby I made my descent. Arrived in the miniature jungle which at some period had been a flower-bed, I set out towards the lodge, prompted to do so by the presence of a light shining out from one of the windows through a network of leaves.

I knew not if I should look for man-traps within the place enclosed by the wall, but nevertheless I neglected no precaution, picking my way through the forest of weeds which had supplanted the vegetables and sweet herbs to which doubtless this land had once been sacred. Observing even greater precaution as I neared the building, I presently found myself looking in at the lighted window, and only concealed from the occupants of the room by the presence of a tangled bush which formed a sort of natural curtain.

The room into which I was peering presented a scene of great disorder. It was a poorly furnished apartment characteristic of the rustic workman's dwelling, and was evidently the living room of the lodge-keeper. It was in process of being dismantled; cupboards and chests stood open and my acquaintance Hawkins was engaged in packing various belongings into a large wooden box set in the center of the floor. Upon the bare wooden table stood the oil lamp whose light I had seen shining out of the window, and bending over a number of papers, apparently engaged in making up some sort of an account, was a gipsy-looking woman whom I took to be the wife of the game-keeper.

She had oily black hair and a very lowering and unpleasant cast of countenance; whilst the large earrings which she wore added to her gipsy appearance. An argument of some kind was in progress between the two, for ever and anon the woman would raise her eyes from her task and dart venomous glances at the man, who knelt upon the floor packing the big box. Fragments of the conversation reached me through the partly open window, and although it was difficult to follow I gathered that the woman was reproaching her husband with some alleged indiscretion which had necessitated the departure for which they were preparing. Hawkins retorted with a savage energy which displayed the darker side of the man's character and the one which I had suspected to lie beneath his rather sinister merriment.

Having satisfied myself that the pair were deeply occupied with their personal affairs, I crept out upon the drive and began to approach the house. I had formed a rough idea of the distance at which it lay from the road and this was proved to have been about correct. The drive swung round in a wide semi-circle and presently, majestic in the moonlight, with some of its mediæval charm restored by the magic of night, I saw Friar's Park before me.

It was a low, rambling building, bespeaking the monastery in some of its severe outlines and showing a succession of cloisteresque arches on the left, terminated by a chapel beyond which rose the ancient tower visible from the inn-window—a wonderful example of Saxon architecture, and closely resembling that at Earl's Barton. There was no light in any of the windows, and indeed as I peered more closely across the wide space intervening between the end of the drive and the main entrance of the house, it seemed to me that the place was more of a ruin than a habitable establishment.

Unaware of what eyes might be watching me from any one of the numerous windows, I stepped into the shrubbery beneath the trees bordering the drive, and set out to make a detour of the house without, if possible, revealing my presence to any one who might be watching from within.

In the prosecution of this plan, I met with not a little difficulty; several times, in fact, I had to show myself in the moonlight upon the edge of the unkempt lawns, but by this device and that, I finally achieved my purpose

and returned to the spot from whence I had set out, without having attracted any visible notice. Here I paused to consider what I had learned.

The most notable thing was this: only one wing of Friar's Park—that remote from the tower—exhibited any evidence of occupation, indeed of being habitable at all. In other words, the greater part of the building was no more than a majestic ruin. Eyeless windows there were and crumbling arches, whilst the chapel which had looked so picturesque from a distance proved on closer inspection to be a mere shell. A dense shrubbery grew right up to the walls of the east wing, that which was terminated by the tower, and I had been enabled to peer right in at the window of the chapel and out at a window at the other side; for the place was roofless and its floor carpeted with weeds. I could not help wondering how much of this decay dated from the days of Sir Burnham, for certainly I could not reconcile it with the character of the man as depicted by the local people.

My inquiry then was considerably narrowed down, for of the habitable apartments of Friar's Park I had only been enabled to count seven or eight, although two of these appeared to be of great extent, one of them, I fancy, being the old refectory of the monastery. My next discovery was this: that the likeliest point of entry to the house was afforded by either one of two French windows which opened upon a small lawn some twenty yards beyond the drive. But in order to approach them I should have to expose myself in the brilliant moonlight which bathed that side of the house.

I stood there listening intently, and wondering if I dared attempt the venture. Not a sound could I detect, however, and the night was so still that scarce a leaf stirred about me. I determined upon the plunge; and walking boldly forward, I approached the more easterly of the two windows.

Three stone steps led up to it and linen blinds were drawn down within, but strengthened by the memory of the inn door which was "never locked," and hoping that the same trustfulness prevailed in Friar's Park, I turned the handle whose brassy glitter I had previously perceived from the corner of the shrubbery.

It operated smoothly, and upon giving a gentle push the window opened and I found myself standing upon a polished oak floor. I stood stock-still, listening; but there was never a sound; and partly reclosing the window, I pressed the button of my electric torch and looked about me.

I stood in a long lofty room which I supposed to have been a drawing-room. It was empty, containing not a single item of furniture. From my pocket I took two pairs of thick woolen socks and drew them one over the other on to my boots to deaden my footfalls. The door of this empty and desolate room was open, and, stepping softly, I walked out into a wide corridor, my mind filled with terrifying recollections of the Red House.

Three other rooms I explored, and although in two of them some items of massive furniture remained, covered with dust-sheets, no sign of habitation did I come upon. The whole of the ground floor proved to be vacant and a broad uncarpeted stair suggested that the floors above were also deserted by their occupants.

I mounted softly, but the stairs creaked in a horrible fashion, so that I became hotly apprehensive before I gained the top. I had nothing to fear, however, for again empty rooms alone rewarded my search. My most significant discovery in the upper part of the house was that of a bedroom which was still almost completely furnished and in which even the bed-linen yet remained untidily strewn about the bed. But there were thick spiders' webs stretching from the coverlet to the canopy, and a coating of dust lay everywhere.

When I finally returned to the empty drawing-room, I had convinced myself of that which I had come to seek.

Friar's Park was uninhabited!

XIX. The Man On the Tower

I quitted Friar's Park unobserved—as I had entered it; walking quickly across to the shrubbery, I began to work my way back to the point at which I must strike westward in order to reach the weed-grown kitchen-garden. At the risk of encountering man-traps I gave the lodge a wide berth and came out in sight of the wall at a point much nearer the lawns of the house than that from which I had entered.

What it was that prompted me to turn and take a final look at the house I cannot say, but before commencing to make my way through the wilderness of the kitchen-garden, I know that I stood and looked back towards the

ancient Saxon tower which uprose, silvered by the moonlight, above the trees that obscured from my view all the rest of the house.

Right to the embrasured crest it was sharply outlined by the brilliant moon—and as I looked I felt my heart leap suddenly; and then, almost holding my breath, I crouched, distrusting the very shadows which afforded me shelter.

For leaning out through one of the embrasures at the top of the tower, I clearly saw the figure of a man!

At first so whitely was his face lighted up by the moon that I had no doubt of the figure being that of a man, but he remained so still, seeming always to look in a fixed way in the same direction, that now, momentarily I doubted, until a slight movement betrayed the fact that my first impression had been correct.

Who he was I could not possibly tell from that distance, but of his occupation I became assured at the moment that he moved; for the moonlight glittered brightly on the lenses of the binoculars through which he had been surveying some point visible only from that elevation.

Still I watched, and again I saw the man of the tower raise his glasses and resume his scrutiny of that distant object which so closely engaged his attention. Remembering that a patch of light touched the top of the wall, spearlike, at the point where I must cross it in order to reach the fir tree, I abandoned my former precautions and hurried through the tangled weeds towards the fir which was my sailing mark.

Hastily I scrambled up the natural ladder formed by the vine, and without pause climbed down again to the edge of the dry ditch beyond. To have looked back over the wall would have been useless, since from that point the tower would have been invisible. Nor indeed had I any desire to pause in my precarious journey.

That I had avoided man-traps in that hurried retreat through the weeds, I knew not whether to ascribe to good luck or to the fact that none were set there, but now in the more open ground, thickly bestrewn, however, with clumps of undergrowth, I resumed all my old vigilance, and carefully retraced the path, so well as I could remember it, by which I had first arrived at the friendly fir.

When at last I found myself once more upon the highroad and free of the ground of Friar's Park, I stood a while and wondered to find myself bathed

in perspiration.

There was something very eerie in the thought that I had explored those numerous rooms of the deserted house and had moreover encircled the entire building habitable and otherwise, whilst that mysterious watcher all the time had been lurking up there in the tower! I wondered what his survey portended. If it signified that he had detected my presence at the moment that I had left the house, why was his gaze focused upon the distance and not upon the surrounding grounds? If he had not seen or heard me, then I must compliment myself upon a very successful burglarious feat.

But assuming the latter explanation to be the correct one, how much darker became the mystery of the man's presence and purpose. Who was he? And what did he do at this hour in deserted Friar's Park?

Since I had left the game-keeper deeply engaged in his packing operations at the lodge, I dismissed the idea that the figure on the tower might have been that of Hawkins, nor was I in any way assisted in my attempts to solve the mystery by what I had seen of the man, for the distance had been too great to allow of my perceiving his face with anything like clearness.

Presently, then, I set out upon my return journey to the Abbey Inn, turning over in my mind this added perplexity which had entered the case. As Gatton had quite recently observed, every new piece of evidence which came to light in this most bewildering affair seemed merely to plunge the issue in greater obscurity than ever. My feet once set upon the slope which led to Upper Crossleys, I allowed this mood of abstraction to have its way, and the problem with which I found myself principally engaged was that of the disappearance of Lady Burnham Coverly.

As I remembered the suave assurances of Dr. Damar Greefe that the ill-health of Lady Burnham rendered it impossible for her to receive visitors, I wondered anew at the complex villainy of this formidable Eurasian. The state of the rooms in Friar's Park clearly demonstrated the fact that neither Lady Coverly nor any other had resided there for many months, perhaps many years. What then did it all mean? What was the purpose of the watch and ward kept by the gipsy game-keeper over the grounds and approaches to the house?

It could only mean that this was a device of Dr. Damar Greefe's to prevent any of the neighbors from seeking admittance to the house and thus

learning the strange secret which its emptiness revealed.

Here, in fact, in this old monastic establishment, would seem to reside the very genius of that spirit of desolation which had touched me unpleasantly in the hour of my arrival in Crossleys. I determined to ascertain by inquiries amongst the local tradespeople, none of whom I had hitherto met, by what means the fact that no one resided at Friar's Park was concealed from those whose ordinary business activities would demand their presenting themselves at the house for orders, etc. But even as the plan suggested itself to me, I thought I perceived an answer to my question; in all probability, I determined, Dr. Damar Greefe or the Hawkins's, who were palpably his creatures, acted as a barrier between the tradespeople and the missing lady of the Park.

But what it could all portend was a problem beyond the power of my imagination or deductive reasoning. If Lady Coverly had changed her residence for some reason, with what object did the Eurasian continue to lead every one in the neighborhood to suppose that she still resided at Friar's Park?

It was all a hopeless tangle, and the more I thought about it the more discouraged did I become. I seemed to get further, too, from that link for which I sought—the link connecting the mystery with that other which I always associated with the Red House. The luminous eyes afforded the visible link; this I could not doubt. But what relation to the death of Sir Marcus did the disappearance of Lady Burnham Coverly bear? Secondly, what was Dr. Damar Greefe's place in the scheme? And thirdly (the most appalling mystery of all) who or what was the woman with the cat's eyes?

At this point in my meditations I discovered that I had arrived before the Abbey Inn, now plunged in darkness, and believing that I detected the sound of footsteps behind me I became eventually the victim of a sort of panic which perhaps will be forgiven me under the circumstances. For emerging from these unpleasant reflections and hearing or believing that I heard sounds of pursuit from the lonely moon-patched road behind, I know that I hurried forward to the side door and silently prayed that I should find it unfastened as Martin had assured me that it would be.

In this particular I was speedily reassured, for the door opened to my touch—and I became conscious of a wish that there might be some means of fastening it from within. However, I could find none, but hurrying

upstairs, I determined to take a precaution which hitherto I had not adopted and that night to lock my bedroom door.

Entering the room, I fumbled for a box of matches in my pocket and presently discovering them struck one and looked about me for the candle which usually stood upon a little cabinet beside the bed. To-night, however, it had been moved for some reason, and put over by the window on the dressing-table. As I made this discovery the match smoldered out, and at the moment I was about to strike another the sound of footsteps which I had formerly detected grew louder and nearer, so that I could no longer doubt that some one was running along the road towards the Abbey Inn.

A great curiosity respecting this person seized me, and without striking a match as I had intended to do, I walked to the window and looked out into the road. Twenty yards away I saw the figure of a man who seemed to be come almost to the end of his resources; for I could hear him panting as he ran. Nor did my wonder decrease when, as he came nearer and stared up in my direction, I recognized him for the shabby-looking person whom I had observed that morning sitting on the bench before the inn door.

Wondering what his presence might portend—for clearly his business was with *me*—I leaned out of the window, and as he came up to the door of the inn I saw him stagger and clutch at the post which supported the sign-board, swaying dizzily. He was clearly almost exhausted, and his voice when he spoke was a husky whisper:

"Don't light your candle!" he said.

Now, this remark, coming at such a time and in these circumstances, struck me as so ludicrous that at first I was tempted to laugh; but the man's earnest sincerity, as evidenced by his exhausted condition and the urgency of his manner, did not fail to impress me, and:

"Why not?" I asked, still leaning out of the window and filled with a great wonderment.

"Never mind," he panted. "Don't! Can I come up?"

Something now in the breathless speech of the man below struck me as oddly familiar. But yet so dense was I that I failed to recognize the truth of the matter, and:

"Certainly," I said. "I will bring a light down to show you the way, if you have business with me."

"No light!" he cried hoarsely. "If you value your life, don't strike a match!"

By this time so bewildered had I become that I scarce knew whether to descend to meet this apparent madman or to remain where I was.

"Don't hesitate, Mr. Addison!" he cried, now beginning to recover his breath. "Do exactly as I tell you!"

"Good God!" I exclaimed.

I turned and ran to the door and on downstairs. For at last I had recognized the voice of this midnight runner. Throwing open the door, I held out my hand and the shabby-looking man extended his in return.

"*Gatton!"* I cried excitedly. "Gatton! What on earth does this mean? Why have you been masquerading in this fashion? I saw you here this morning and you never gave me the slightest sign of acknowledgment!"

"I never intended to!" panted the Inspector, staggering rather than walking up the stairs. "But I have performed one of the hardest tasks of my life to-night and have only succeeded by a few seconds!"

We were now at the door of my room, but:

"Don't go in!" said Gatton shortly. "Let me think what we must do."

"But I don't understand at all!"

"You will understand in a moment!" was the grim reply. "You would have understood already if you had lighted your candle."

Words failed me altogether. At that we stood in the passage for some moments in silence; then:

"We have got to risk it," said Gatton, "if my theory is to be put to the test"

"Risk it?"

"Oh! I can assure you of the risk," he declared. "It will be touch-and-go. Are you game?"

"Well," I said, laughing in a very forced fashion, "this has been a night of such intense surprises that I think I can survive one more."

"Very well," replied the Inspector; and there was something strange in hearing the familiar voice and dimly discerning in the reflected moonlight, which shone in at a window further along the passage, the unfamiliar figure before me.

"What have we to do?"

"We have to take a chance of sudden death!" he answered, "but we will minimize it as much as possible."

Seeing me about to give voice to one of the many questions which literally burned upon my tongue:

"Explanations can come later," said he. "Where can I find a candle?"

"There is one on the dressing-table just to the left of the window. I will get it—"

But he grasped my arm roughly, and:

"This is *my* business! Wait here for me," he rapped tersely.

He heard the rasp of the match upon the box, as I struck a light to guide him in his search. Whereupon:

"I thought I warned you!" he cried, and struck the match from my hand. "*No light*!"

With that he pushed open the door, and I saw his square figure outlined against the moon-bright open window as he crossed the room. Since he had referred to the peril which hung over us, it was with bated breath that I awaited his return, not in the least knowing what to expect. A few moments later he returned with the candlestick.

"Now," said he, carefully reclosing the door, "light the candle."

Awed by something in his voice and manner, I did as he directed without demur, noting with amazement, in the light thus created, how simple yet how effective was the disguise which my friend had adopted.

He gave me no time for comment, however, but:

"Listen," said he. "I'm going to put this candle in your room and then you and I are going to run."

"Run?" I cried.

"Exactly. Run for our lives! Preferably upstairs. Is there any vacant room above from which we can look out in the same direction as from your window?"

"The room above is vacant," I replied, "and probably we shall find the door unlocked."

"We'll risk that, then," said Gatton. "You might start and lead the way."

"Can I use my electric torch?" I asked.

"On the stairs," replied Gatton; "but you must extinguish it when we enter the room above."

With that he thrust open the door of my bedroom, ran in and ran out again, banging the door behind him as though pursued by devils!

Then the pair of us were racing up the stairs madly for the room above, I vaguely wondering if my companion had taken leave of his senses. Yet of the verity of the peril which he dreaded came speedy confirmation.

At the very moment that my hand touched the knob of the door above, and ere I could open it, the whole fabric of the Abbey Inn was convulsed—the floor rocked beneath my feet; and there ensued the sound of a deafening explosion from the room below! An echo, or what sounded like an echo, sharp and staccato, came from the distant hills!

XX. Gatton's Story

"It's no good going in now," said Gatton, in a weary voice; "in fact it might be dangerous. We have to consider the possibility of fire, however," he added.

Voices of sleepers awakened and cries of inquiry sounded now from all over the inn; for naturally the household had been aroused by the tremendous noise of the explosion. For my own part I was altogether too dazed to conjecture what had happened. But that Gatton had saved me from some deadly peril I was well convinced. Stirrings and the noise of footsteps came from an adjoining room, and presently in his night attire Martin appeared, very bemused.

"Mr. Addison," he began, and stared from me to my companion.

"Let no one leave their rooms," said Gatton decisively, "until I give them permission."

"Eh," began Martin heavily.

"I am a police officer," added Gatton; "and you will all do as I direct. Does any one sleep on the same floor as Mr. Addison?"

"No, sir," replied Martin, who was not yet more than half awake, but who nevertheless had been impressed by the Inspector's authoritative manner.

Sounds of footsteps from the floor above now became audible, whereupon:

"Order every one to remain in their rooms!" repeated Gatton.

Martin, raising his voice, obeyed him.

"What are your arrangements in the case of fire?" continued the Inspector.

Several betousled heads were peeping down from the landing above but no one spoke until Martin collected his ideas sufficiently to reply:

"There's buckets in the stables—and there's the well. Wilkins sleeps over the stables—"

"Can you make him hear without going downstairs?"

"I can try," was the answer.

Martin walked to a window which lighted the landing, and threw it widely open. Leaning out:

"Wilkins!" he roared—"Wilkins!"

"Aye, aye, boss!" came faintly from somewhere below.

"Tell him to stand by with fire-buckets, but not to leave the yard without orders from me," directed Gatton.

Martin issued these instructions in a voice which must have been audible at Leeways, and then stood scratching his head stupidly.

But indeed of all the bewildered company who gathered that night beneath the roof of the Abbey Inn, I think I was the most nonplused of all, and turning to Gatton:

"For God's sake tell me what it all means!" I said.

"It means," he answered, and even through his disguise I recognized the old grim smile, "that only a match stood between you and eternity! Even now, we cannot afford to sit down, but I am not anxious to pass your door for a few minutes. As we both have much to say, let us find a room where we can talk."

Accordingly we went up to a large empty room at the back of the inn. Through the open doorway I could hear the excited voices of the entire staff of the establishment, who had congregated in Martin's room across the landing. Never in the history of the Abbey Inn had such doings taken place.

"Perhaps," continued Gatton, "it will save time if you tell me exactly what you have done first."

"Very well," I said; "but before I begin—when did you arrive?"

"An hour and a half after receiving your code telegram! I came by car. The car is at Manton now."

"Why this disguise?"

"I will explain in a moment. But meanwhile—your own story."

At that, although consumed with impatience, I quickly outlined my movements from the time of my arrival at Upper Crossleys, the Inspector following me closely. The tale concluded:

"Now, Gatton!" I cried—"for heaven's sake tell me what it all means!"

"I will tell you all I know," he replied slowly, "In the first place I had two reasons for suggesting the visit to Friar's Park. I had formed an opinion that the 'cat-woman' was interested in *you*. Whether because she regarded you as dangerous or from some other cause I could not determine. And I thought of a plan for finding out if she was by any chance associated with Friar's Park. It was to send you down here (a) to make straightforward inquiries, and (b) to 'draw the cat'!"

"Very good of you!" I murmured.

"I warned you it was dangerous!" said Gatton grimly. "But I am pleased to say the plan worked to perfection. Your own inquiries have been highly satisfactory and you have also 'drawn the cat'! Now just to show you how dramatic your discoveries really were I will explain my second and more important reason and the one which primarily had prompted me to turn my attention to Friar's Park. A few hours before you came to the Yard the other morning—to see the bag dropped in the water by Eric Coverly—I had been in touch with the solicitors who had acted for the late Sir Burnham."

"Ah!" I exclaimed—"what had they to say?"

"I was seeking information of course respecting the entail; in short, trying to fathom the mystery of what Eric Coverly would have had to gain by getting his cousin out of the way. I learned that financially he gained nothing but a bundle of debts. Friar's Park was mortgaged to the hilt. Furthermore, Lady Burnham Coverly had a life interest in the property under the will of her husband.

"Next, from the senior partner, a solicitor of the old school who still retained pleasant memories of Sir Burnham's port, I learned a number of very significant details."

He paused, staring at me oddly; and the familiar expression beneath the unfamiliar disguise was very curious. Then:

"About seven or eight years ago," he resumed, "shortly after his return from *Egypt*, according to Mr. Hardacre, the solicitor, something occurred which made a changed man of his client, Sir Burnham. You will note, Mr. Addison, shortly after his return from *Egypt*. He realized upon quantities of

securities, and raised a big sum of ready money, which he disposed of in some way which has always remained a mystery to Mr. Hardacre. In short, within a period of three years or less, from being a wealthy man, he became a poor one.

"Next, he sent Mr. Roger Coverly, his only child, then a mere lad, abroad in care of a tutor; Mr. Hardacre never knew for what reason as there was apparently nothing wrong with the boy's health! He began to dismiss his servants. The greater part of Friar's Park was shut up and allowed to fall into decay. Finally, to Mr. Hardacre's surprise and grief, Sir Burnham mortgaged the property. But it was the terms of the mortgage—which I was privileged to inspect—which aroused my curiosity.

"In brief, the mortgagee agreed, in the event of Sir Burnham's death, to allow the widow to retain possession of the property for life, whether payments fell in arrears or otherwise!"

"But this—" I exclaimed.

"Is, as a friend of yours once remarked, as mad as 'Alice in Wonderland'! I agree. But to continue. At the time that this extraordinary agreement was drawn up, Mr. Hardacre went down to Friar's Park, of course; and he was a witness of several most singular and significant occurrences. For instance, on the evening of his arrival, whilst he was dressing for dinner, Sir Burnham came running to his room and begged of him to lock his door and to remain in his room until his host gave him permission to come out! He was particularly warned against admitting any one *who might knock* in the interval!"

"Good heavens!" I cried—"and did any one knock?"

"No one; but about half an hour later Sir Burnham came and released him. Mr. Hardacre was unspeakably distressed to observe that Sir Burnham looked white and ill; in fact, in Mr. Hardacre's own words, five years older! Again, quite by accident, on the same night, he came upon his host kneeling in the chapel—in those days it still boasted a roof—deep in prayer. An atmosphere of indescribable horror, he declared, had settled upon Friar's Park, and although, as he confessed, he had no evidence to prove the correctness of his theory, he nevertheless traced this to the person of the mortgagee. For it seemed to correspond roughly with the appearance in the neighborhood of this man—whom he now met for the first time."

Again Gatton paused, taking out his pipe and pouch, and:

"Who was this person?" I asked.

"A certain Dr. Damar Greefe!"

"Good God!" I cried—"where is all this leading us, Gatton?"

"It is leading us slowly to the truth, Mr. Addison, and that truth, when we come to it, is going to be more horrible than we even suspect. Passing over much of Mr. Hardacre's evidence, I come to the death, in Switzerland, of Mr. Roger Coverly, under circumstances so obscure that I fear we shall never know the particulars. Of one thing, however, I am assured: there was foul play."

"You mean that Roger Coverly was—murdered?"

"I really don't doubt it," replied Gatton, who, having filled his pipe, now lighted it. "I believe he was the first victim."

"The *first* victim?"

"Mr. Addison, I agree with the late Sir Burnham's solicitor, that the spider at the heart of this web is Dr. Damar Greefe. The shock of his son's premature death led to a collapse from which Sir Burnham never recovered, and Friar's Park entered upon the final phase during which it was occupied by Lady Burnham who seems to have been wholly under the influence of this Eurasian doctor."

"But, my dear Gatton!" I cried—"where *is* Lady Burnham?"

"In my opinion, dead!" he answered solemnly. "Oh, it sounds preposterous, but in the case of this lonely woman who had apparently no living relatives and who was estranged from Sir Marcus and the other members of her husband's family, it was no very difficult matter to hush up the fact of her death."

"But, Gatton, you don't mean that she, too, met with foul play?"

"Most certainly I don't! It is as clear as day that the whole object of this elaborate secrecy was to *hide* the fact of her death! She was infinitely more useful alive than dead, Mr. Addison; and they hoped to keep up the solemn farce until—"

"Yes?"

"Until Sir Eric was hanged for the murder of his cousin!"

"Gatton! What do you mean?"

"He is the last of the Coverlys!" answered Gatton simply. "There would be no further danger of any one paying off the mortgage."

"Danger?"

"Exactly. There is some secret at Friar's Park—or at the Bell House—which necessitates the property remaining in the possession of Dr. Damar Greefe—as it has virtually remained since Sir Burnham's death! So much is clear, and although Eric Coverly has persisted in his obstinate silence, one of my assistants who has been at work on the late Sir Marcus's papers made a discovery yesterday, which together with what I had learned from Mr. Hardacre and your code message, brought me down to Crossleys post haste."

"What was this discovery?"

"An invitation from Dr. Damar Greefe, dated only a short time after the death of Sir Burnham, to Sir Marcus, asking him to visit Friar's Park! The doctor explained that the state of Lady Coverly's health made it impossible for her to entertain, but he assured Sir Marcus that she was anxious to see him and to heal any breach which might exist between them. Most significant of all, the Eurasian proposed that Sir Marcus should put up *here*!"

"At the Abbey Inn?"

"Exactly. Now the 'best room' of the inn is that which you have been occupying—and it is that which Sir Marcus would have occupied had he accepted the doctor's invitation. Listen then: all these clews seemed to point to Friar's Park, but the receipt of your message mentioning one Damar Greefe as being a suspicious party, and asking me to look up his record, quite tipped the scales. I saw, frankly, that you had made a false move, but nevertheless it served my purpose, and I determined to look into the Crossleys end of the inquiry personally, without giving Dr. Damar Greefe reason to suspect that I was in any way associated with the matter.

"I picked up one or two hints from the county police as to the geography as well as the 'notables' of the neighborhood; and the plan which you put into execution to-night, I had adopted last night!"

"What! You visited Friar's Park?"

"I did. But I did not enter through the French window. It never occurred to me that it would be unfastened! I had come provided with a neat set of burglars' tools (*and* a warrant for use if necessary) and I broke into the kitchen! *I* found, as you afterwards found, that the place had obviously been deserted for a long time. I was badly puzzled. But my search was more detailed than yours. I climbed up to the top of the tower!"

"To the top of the tower!"

"Yes. I'll tell you what I found there in a minute. But, briefly, beyond learning that the story of the invalid Lady Coverly was a myth, I discovered nothing likely to help the inquiry. I seriously debated the idea of putting Dr. Damar Greefe under arrest; but finally I determined to watch him for a time without showing my hand. I had the good fortune to meet him this morning here at the Abbey Inn! Also, I saw your mysterious lady visitor! Lastly, I got into conversation with the man, Hawkins, who was accompanied by your friend, the mute!

"Leaving this dangerous pair, I made a rush for the Bell House, thinking I saw my opportunity to examine it unmolested. I was too late, though. One of my assistants warned me of the Eurasian's return just as I was about to enter.

"I watched the house all day. But it was not until some time after dusk that the Eurasian came out. He went to Friar's Park—and I followed him!"

"What! You were there to-night!"

"I was! I dogged Dr. Damar Greefe, determined to learn the nature of the business which brought him to Friar's Park at such an hour. I may add that it was only by the merest accident or good luck that I fathomed it after all. I had no idea into what part of the building he had gone, but, knowing that he was somewhere inside, I watched from the shrubbery. In fact, I was still in the grounds when *you* arrived!"

"Then it was you I saw on the tower!"

"Oh, no, it was not! I had thoroughly examined the tower on my previous visit, and what I found there had puzzled me badly. In fact it was not until your admirable withdrawal from Friar's Park to-night that the horrible explanation dawned upon me…and I realized that the object of inviting Sir Marcus to Upper Crossleys was to 'remove' him! The first plan failed, of course; he never came. He went back again on duty to Russia, I believe—for a time. But when he returned—a second was adopted, at the Red House. However—the murder-machine erected in accordance with the earlier plan was still there—"

"Where?" I cried in bewilderment.

"On the tower of Friar's Park! It was the appearance of *Damar Greefe* on the platform of the tower, armed with binoculars, which awakened me to the ghastly truth. The device, never used in the case of Sir Marcus, was not

to be wasted, but was to be employed to remove a dangerous obstacle from the conspirator's path! I had left the car near Crossleys, you see, and never in my life have I run as I ran after you to-night!"

"But, Gatton, *what* did you find on the tower—and what connection exists between the tower and the explosion which occurred here to-night?"

"This: a sort of small howitzer—I think of Krupp's manufacture, but you would be better able to judge than I—is mounted on the platform of the tower! I examined it, Mr. Addison, last night, and like a fool concluded that it had been used at some time for a local celebration and never dismounted! It was trained—as I remembered nearly too late—and laid at a certain elevation in such a way that it was evidently never meant to be moved. Yet at the time the significance of this did not strike me. How the range was found so exactly we shall probably never know; but the truth suddenly burst upon me as you made off through the bushes and as Dr. Damar Greefe came out and began to peer through his glasses—that it was mechanically set in such a manner that it could drop a projectile into the window above the porch of the Abbey Inn!"

"Good God! It's hardly credible!"

"It isn't, I admit. But weather conditions favored him; there wasn't a breath of wind. And that he succeeded is proved by the fact that at the present moment your room below is probably still full of poison gas! Of course, it *may* not have been a gas-shell; he may have relied, as well he might do, on the burst! But I'm taking no chances. You can well imagine that failing a knowledge of the arrangement on the tower, no explanation of the mystery would ever have been found! A thunder-bolt would be the popular theory, and if any fragments of shell were found who would ever know from where it had been fired?"

"Gatton," I said, "I owe you my life. But why did this fiend try to murder me?"

Gatton smiled.

"I have a theory, Mr. Addison," he replied, "and it is this: I believe he thought that the indiscretion of a certain mysterious lady would bring about his ruin. If I am not mistaken, she has already gone far to put his neck in a halter; and he was determined to nip this latest adventure in the bud by removing the object of her—"

I felt myself changing color, and:

"For heaven's sake say no more!" I interrupted. "It is a gruesome and horrible thought! Yet, perhaps you are right. What must we do, Gatton? These people have rendered the neighborhood uninhabitable for themselves, now, and—"

Dimly to my ears came the sound of a gun-shot.

"And have fled!" cried Gatton, springing up. "Quick! we must chance the gas!"

"Why? What was that shot?"

"A signal! Dr. Damar Greefe and 'the cat' have escaped!"

He raced out across the landing, amid a chorus of frightened inquiries from the inn staff. I followed him into a front room, and:

"This comes of turning my attention elsewhere for half an hour!" he cried angrily. "I seem to be cursed with fools for assistants!"

Throwing up the window, he leaned out. I stood at his elbow; and as I looked I saw a great red glow rising from the distant woods. The sound of a car approaching at headlong speed reached my ears, and at the same moment I saw the headlights.

"Hullo, there!" cried Gatton. "Blythe! Petersham!"

The car stopped, and a cry came back:

"We've lost him, sir!… and the Bell House is in flames!"

XXI. In London Again

"Then the sudden change in the police attitude towards Eric," said Isobel, "is not due to any discoveries which you or Inspector Gatton have made at Friar's Park?"

"That I cannot say," I replied. "We have made certain discoveries as I have already told you, but whilst they distinctly point to some criminal whose identity is not yet fully established, unfortunately I cannot say that in a legal sense they clear Coverly."

Isobel, as I had thought at the first moment of our meeting, looked very tired and had that pathetic expression of appeal in her eyes which had hurt me so much when first it had appeared there on the morning after the tragedy. She was palpably ill at ease, and I had small cause to wonder at

this. Although a veiled paragraph (in which I thought I could detect the hand of Gatton) had appeared in the press on the previous day, briefly stating that evidence had been volunteered by Sir Eric Coverly which had led to an entirely new line of police inquiry, the item of news—which had naturally excited wide-spread interest—had never been amplified. Amid the alarms and excursions which had terminated my visit to Upper Crossleys, Gatton I supposed had forgotten to refer to this matter; but I did not doubt that the paragraph was an inspired one issued from Scotland Yard.

My friend's object in circulating this statement was not by any means evident to me, but as I expected to see him later that day I hoped to be able to obtain from him some explanation of his new tactics.

Many hours had elapsed since, with the flames of the burning Bell House reddening the night behind me, and throwing into lurid relief the fir-groves surrounding Dr. Damar Greefe's mysterious stronghold, I had been borne along the road towards London. That Gatton had hoped for much from a detailed search of the Eurasian's establishment, I knew, for I had not forgotten his anger at the appearance of the flames above the tree tops which had told of the foiling of his plans.

Under cover of the conflagration the cunning Eurasian had escaped. Every possible means had been taken to intercept him, and whilst Gatton, inspired by I know not what hopes, had hastened to the burning Bell House, I had set out in the police car in pursuit of Dr. Damar Greefe accompanied by Detective-Sergeant Blythe—upon whom, apparently, the onus of the fiasco rested.

In despite of these measures, the hunted man had made good his retreat; and Blythe and I had entered the outskirts of London without once sighting the car in which Dannar Greefe had fled.

No communication reached me on the following morning, and I found myself, consumed with impatient curiosity, temporarily out of touch with Gatton. Then, shortly after mid-day, came a telegram:

"Endeavor induce Sir Eric come to your house eight to-night. Will meet him there. Gatton."

Welcoming any ground for action—since to remain passive at such a time was torture—I called at once at Coverly's chambers. He was out. But I left an urgent written message for him, and in the hope of finding him with Isobel, hurried to her flat. He had not been there that day, however; and now

I could only hope that he would return to his rooms in time to keep the appointment. For that Gatton had some good reason for suggesting the meeting I did not doubt.

Gatton and I were now agreed that Dr. Damar Greefe, if not directly responsible for the death of Sir Marcus, at least had been an accessory to his murder. At any rate he had shown his hand; firstly, in the attempted assault upon myself by his Nubian servant and secondly, by the devilish device whereby he had propelled some sort of gas projectile (for this we now knew it to have been) from the tower of Friar's Park into my room at the Abbey Inn. I had, then, become obnoxious to him; he evidently regarded my continued existence as a menace to his own.

Two explanations of his attitude presented themselves: one, that my inquiries had led me daily nearer to the heart of the mystery; or, two, that the doctor's mysterious associate, the possessor of the green eyes, had adopted an attitude towards myself which the Eurasian had counted sooner or later as certain to compromise him. In short, whilst it was sufficiently evident to me that these mysterious people residing at Upper Crossleys were the criminals for whom New Scotland Yard was searching, no definite link between their admittedly dangerous activities and the crime we sought to unravel, had yet been brought to light.

On the other hand, whilst it was not feasible to suppose that any relationship existed between Sir Eric, the new baronet, and the Eurasian, or the woman associated with the Eurasian, I was quite well aware that, equally, there was no evidence to show that such an association did not exist.

I longed to be able to offer some consolation to Isobel, who at this time was passing through days and nights of dreadful apprehension; but beyond imparting to her some of my own personal convictions, I was unable to say honestly that the complicity of Coverly in the murder was definitely and legally disproved.

"If only he would break his absurd silence," she said suddenly. "This ridiculous suspicion which still seems to be entertained in some quarters would be removed of course; but his every act since the night of the tragedy has only intensified it."

She sat facing me on the settee, her hands locked in her lap, and:

"Do you refer to any new act of his," I asked, "with which I am not at present acquainted?"

She nodded slowly.

"Yes," she said; "but I can only tell you in confidence, for it is something which Inspector Gatton does not know."

"Please tell me," I urged; "for you are aware that I have no other object but the clearing of Coverly in the eyes of the police and the public."

"Well," she continued, with hesitation, "last night he lodged with me a copy of a *declaration* which he assured me cleared him entirely. But he imposed an extraordinary condition."

"What was that?" I asked with interest.

"It was only to be used in the event of the worst happening!" she said.

"What do you mean? In the event of his being put on trial for murder?"

Isobel nodded.

"I suppose so," she said sadly; "it seems madness, doesn't it?"

"Absolute madness!" I agreed. "If he is in a position to establish an alibi why not do it now and be done with the whole unsavory business?"

"That is exactly what I pointed out to him, but he was adamant on the matter and became dreadfully irritable and excited. I did not dare to press the point, so of course—" She shrugged her shoulders resignedly.

Was it a selfish joy, I wonder, which possessed me as I noted the restrained impatience with which Isobel spoke of Coverly? I suppose it was, and perhaps it was even indefensible; yet I record it, desiring to be perfectly honest with myself and with others. Nevertheless, in the near future I was to regret the sentiments which at that moment I entertained towards Coverly. But how was I to know in my poor human blindness that his innocence would soon be established in the eyes of the world by other means than the publication of the statement which he had so strangely placed with Isobel?

Since, excepting the telegram, no communication had reached me from Gatton, I could only assume that he had discovered nothing in the ruins of the Bell House of sufficient importance to justify a report. Doubtless he had reported to New Scotland Yard, but that his discoveries, if any, had not resulted in an arrest, was painfully evident.

My latest contribution to the *Planet* had been in the nature of a discursive essay rather than an informative article, although I had enlivened it with some account of my experiences at Upper Crossleys. But at the moment

that I had set pen to paper I had realized the difficulty of expressing, within the scope of a newspaper contribution, the peculiar conditions which ruled in that oddly deserted village. And at Gatton's request I had been most guarded in my treatment of the two abortive attempts made upon my own life by the Eurasian doctor.

The appeal in Isobel's eyes, as I have said, was very difficult to resist, but after all I had little substantial consolation to offer; and in the circumstances I shall be understood, I think, when I say that it was with an odd sense of relief that I finally took my departure from her flat. To long for the right to comfort a woman as only a lover may do, and to suspect that this sweet privilege might have been his for the asking, is a torture which no man can suffer unmoved.

Anticipating, almost hourly, a further message from Gatton, I went first to the *Planet* offices, but although I lunched at the club and returned later, no news reached me there; whereupon, I proceeded to my cottage. As I walked down the high-street of the onetime village, passing that police-box at which (so far as my part in it was concerned) the first scenes of the drama actually had been laid, I was seized with wonder on reflecting that all these episodes, strange and tragic, had been crowded into so short a space of time.

An officer was on duty there as on the night when I had first made acquaintance with the green eyes of the woman of mystery; but I did not know the man and I walked on deep in meditation, until, arriving at the Red House, other and dreadful reflections were aroused by the sight of that deserted building.

There were no spectators to-day, for the first excitement aroused by the crime had begun to subside, and I did not even notice a constable posted there. Whereby I concluded that the investigations at the Red House had been terminated and that no more was hoped for from an examination of those premises.

Coates was awaiting me as I entered my cottage with the news that Inspector Gatton had telephoned an hour before from Crossleys, confirming his telegram and stating that he would call immediately he arrived in London. This was stimulating, and I only regretted that I had not been at home personally to speak to him. Then:

"Sir Eric Coverly also rang up, sir," continued Coates, "at about three o'clock and said that he would be calling this evening at eight in accordance with your request."

I looked at the military figure standing bolt upright just within the doorway.

"Good. Is that all?" I asked.

"That was all the message, sir," he reported.

I walked into the study in a very thoughtful mood, and from the open window contemplated that prospect of tree-lined road, now for ever to be associated in my mind with the darkest places in the tragedy in which I had so strangely become involved.

Gatton, I knew, entertained a theory that the selection of the Red House for the dreadful purpose for which it had been employed, was not the result of any mere accident, but was ascribable to the fact that the place was conveniently situated from the point of view of the assassin. In short, he had an idea that the London headquarters of the wanted man, whom we had now definitely invested with the personality of Dr. Damar Greefe, was somewhere within my immediate neighborhood!

It was a startling conclusion and one which rested, as I thought, upon somewhat slender premises; but nevertheless I found it disquieting. And recognizing how the more sinister manifestations of that singular green-eyed creature (whom I could never think of as a woman, nor indeed regard as anything quite human) were associated with darkness—a significantly feline trait—I confess to a certain apprehension respecting the coming night. This apprehension was strengthened no doubt by my memories of Gatton's last words as I had been on the point of setting out from Upper Crossleys.

"With their Friar's Park base destroyed, Mr. Addison," he had said, "they will be forced to fly to that other abode, at present unknown, from which I believe they conducted the elaborate assassination of Sir Marcus. The only alternative is flight from the country, and the mechanism of the C.I.D. having been put into motion, this we may regard as almost impossible—especially in view of the marked personality of Dr. Damar Greefe. Of course," he had added, "they may have some other residence of which we know nothing but I incline to the idea that they will make for London."

That the published paragraph relating to Eric Coverly's alleged evidence was in some way associated with this theory of Gatton's I knew, but of the soundness of his theory I had yet to learn.

Since (as Isobel had that day informed me) the document lodged with her was a profound secret from all, Carton's inspired paragraph could have been no more than a shot in the dark; and the fact that it had hit the mark one of those seeming coincidences which sometimes rest upon mere chance, but which rested, in this case upon a process of careful reasoning. The Inspector was certain, as I was certain, of Coverly's innocence, and he had credited him with an alibi because he knew that if he would but consent to break his inexplicable silence, he was in a position to establish one. Why he had forestalled Coverly I knew not.

I made a poor and hasty dinner, for I was too excited to eat, and returning to the study, I crossed to the bookcase and took down Maspero's "Egyptian Art." I idly glanced again through those passages which Gatton had copied into his note-book—the passages relating to the attributes of Bâst, the cat-goddess. My mind rested particularly, I remember, upon the line, "she plays with her victim as with a mouse."

Stifling a somewhat weary sigh, I returned the book to its place and lingered looking out of the open window into the deepening dusk. Mentally my mood was a restless one, but it did not reflect itself physically; for I stood there leaning against the window whilst a procession of all the figures associated with the "*Oritoga* mystery" raced through my mind.

And presently as I stood there contemplating a mental image of the Eurasian doctor, I heard the telephone bell ring. The sound aroused me in a moment, and walking out into the little ante-room in which the instrument was placed, I took it up—anticipating Coates, who had immediately come in from the garden where he was engaged at the time.

"Hello!" I said.

A voice with which I was unfamiliar, a man's voice speaking rather thickly, replied:

"Is that Mr. Addison?"

"Yes."

"I have just arrived from Crossleys with Inspector Gatton. He requests me to ask you to meet him by the police-box at the corner of the high street immediately."

"Very good," I said. "I will come."

"And," continued the voice—"could you spare Coates with the car for an hour?"

"Certainly," I replied. "For what do you want him?"

"If he will take the car to Denmark Hill Station and be there by a quarter past eight," continued the voice, "Detective-Sergeant Blythe will meet him. There is a large box," he added, "which Inspector Gatton wishes to have taken to your house."

"Very well," I said. "Coates will start in ten minutes' time, and I will come along immediately to meet Inspector Gatton."

I replaced the telephone upon the little table and went out into the garden, whither my man had returned.

"Coates," I said, "get out the Rover."

Coates immediately ceased his gardening operations and stood upright in an attitude of attention.

"Very good, sir."

"You will just have time to get ready at the garage and return here to admit Sir Eric Coverly at eight o'clock. I am going out, now, to meet Inspector Gatton. But inform Sir Eric that I shall be back in a few minutes. Show him into the study and make him comfortable. You will then proceed in the Rover to Denmark Hill Station. You will meet there a man with a box —a detective from Scotland Yard who will make himself known to you. His name is Blythe. You have to bring the box back here."

"Very good, sir," repeated Coates.

And as he entered the house he was already stripping off the old shooting jacket which he wore in the garden. For my part I slipped a light top-coat over my somewhat untidy house attire, and taking my hat and a stick, stepped quickly out along the road in the direction of the village street. A brisk walk brought me to the little sentry-box under the trees. But Gatton was not to be seen. Indeed, with the exception of several ordinary pedestrians who were obviously returning from the city to their homes (all of whom I scrutinized, thinking that Coverly might come this way) and the constable on duty at the point, there was no one about who looked in the least like either of my expected visitors.

Having waited for some ten minutes unavailingly, I spoke to the man in the box.

"Good evening, constable," I said; "I expected to meet a friend here—Inspector Gatton, of Scotland Yard—you may know him?"

"I know of him quite well, sir," answered the constable, "and should recognize him if I saw him. But he has not been here this evening."

"You have seen no one hanging about who might have been sent by him?"

"No one, sir."

"Strange," I muttered; then: "My name is Addison, constable," I said, "and if any one should ask for me will you direct him to proceed to my house?" And I gave the man instructions respecting its whereabouts.

"I will," answered the constable; and wishing him "good night," I retraced my steps, curious respecting the matter, but not apprehensive as I well might have been—and with no glimmering of the ghastly truth penetrating to my mind.

XXII. The Gray Mist

I was about half-way on my return journey when I heard a car racing along the road behind me, and as it came nearer I detected the fact that it was slowing down. Ere I could turn:

"Hi! Mr. Addison!" hailed a voice.

I stopped, turned round, and there was Gatton leaning out of the car and staring towards me through the deepening dusk.

"Why, Gatton!" I said, walking up to him—"I waited more than ten minutes for you, and then gave it up."

"Waited for me?"

"Yes, by the police-box."

He stared in evident wonder at me and then at the police chauffeur who drove the car.

"Whatever prompted you to do that?" he said. "Coates must have given you the wrong message. I said I would come to the house for you, not meet you in the street."

Still I remained dense to the truth, and:

"I know you did," I replied. "I refer to the second message."

"I sent no second message."

"What!"

"Get in," cried Gatton shortly; "this wants explaining."

I stepped into the car, and as it moved onward again I explained to the Inspector what had taken place. As I talked I saw his expression grow darker and darker, until finally:

"There's something wrong!" he muttered.

"Then you did not inspire the message?"

"I know nothing whatever about it. At the time you received it I was on my way from Crossleys. I have been traveling for the last hour and a half."

I stared at him very blankly. The object of such a communication was difficult to imagine, and I knew of nothing incriminating in my possession, which might have tempted the assassin to lure me from the house whilst he obtained possession of it.

In ever-growing excitement I watched the houses slipping behind us as we swept along. Then we came to the tree-lined expanse of road immediately leading to the cottage. As the car stopped, I leaped out quickly, Gatton close upon my heels, and ran up the path to the door.

From certain indications with which I was familiar, I observed that Coates was out, whereby I concluded that he had set off to meet the mythical "man with a box." Not without apprehension I inserted the key in the lock and opened the door.

As I did so, I beheld a most singular spectacle.

The careful Coates had closed all the windows as usual before quitting the house, so that there was comparatively little draught along the corridor. But as the door swung open I perceived a sort of gray fog-like vapor floating over the carpet about a foot in depth and moving in slightly sinuous spirals upward towards the opened door!

At this phenomenon I stared in speechless astonishment; for whilst it resembled steam or the early morning mist which one sometimes sees upon the grass in hot weather, I was wholly at a loss to account for its presence inside my cottage!

"Good heavens!" cried Gatton, and grasped me by the arm with so strong a grip that I almost cried out. "*Look! Look!*"

"What the devil is it?" I muttered; and turning, I stared into his face. "What *can* it be?"

"Stand back," he said strangely, and pulled me out into the porch. "Do you notice a peculiar smell?"

"I do—a most foul and abominable smell."

Gatton nodded grimly.

"God knows what has happened here since you left," he said; "but of one thing I am sure—you must certainly bear a charmed life, Mr. Addison. There has been a third attempt at your removal!"

This choking smell which now rose to my nostrils had in it something vaguely familiar, yet something which at that place and that time I found myself unable to identify; but:

"We shall have to open the windows!" rapped Gatton.

Suiting the action to the word, he took out his handkerchief, and holding it to his nostrils went running along the corridor, his feet oddly enveloped in that mysterious mist. A moment later I heard the bang of a swiftly raised window, then another, and:

"Stand clear of the door!" called a muffled voice.

A moment later Gatton came racing back again, coughing and choking because of the fumes which arose from that supernatural fog carpeting the passages.

The chauffeur now appeared upon the path leading from the gate to the porch, but:

"Stay by the car!" ordered Gatton. "Don't move without instructions."

I scarcely noted his words. For I was watching the gray fog. In the dusk I could see it streaming out, that deathly mist, and creeping away across grass and flower-beds, right and left of the door.

"Give it a chance to clear," said Gatton; "I fancy one good whiff would finish any man!"

Even as he spoke the words the nature of this vapor suddenly occurred to me, and:

"The Abbey Inn!" I whispered. "The Abbey Inn!"

"Ah!" said he—"you've solved the mystery, have you? But can you explain how this stuff comes to be floating about the floor of your house?"

"I cannot," I confessed. "But at all costs we must go in. We must learn the worst!"

"Yes, we'll risk it now," said the Inspector.

Close together we entered and made our way towards the study. As we passed the door-way of the ante-room in which the telephone was placed. I glanced, aside, and thereupon:

"My God, Gatton!" I groaned. "Look!"

He pulled up and the two of us stood, horror-stricken, rooted to the spot, looking into the little room.

I have said that Coates invariably closed the windows before leaving the house, but here the window was open. Prone upon the floor was stretched the figure of a man!

He wore a light overcoat, and his hat lay under the telephone table—where it had evidently rolled at the moment of his fall. The poisonous smell was more apparent here than elsewhere; and looking down at the prone figure, the face of which was indiscernible because of the man's position:

"Why, Gatton!" I said in an awed whisper—"look!… he was speaking to some one!"

"I'm looking!" replied Gatton grimly.

Grasped rigidly in his left hand the fallen man held the telephone!

"We want gas-masks for this job," said the Inspector.

His words were true enough. I had already recognized the odor of the foul stuff. It was identical with that which, as we had come down from the upper floor of the Abbey Inn, had proceeded from the room wherein the mysterious shell had exploded. In a word my cottage was filled with some kind of poison-gas!

"We must risk it, anyway," said Gatton, "and find out who it is."

I nodded, sick with foreboding. Stooping swiftly, he succeeded in turning over the prone figure, whereupon I quite failed to restrain a hoarse cry of horror…

It was Eric Coverly!

The fume-laden room seemed to swim around me as I looked down at the dreadfully contorted features over which was creeping that greenish tint which had characterized the face of Sir Marcus as I had seen it on the morning of the body's recovery from the hold of the *Oritoga*.

"Drag him out," said Gatton huskily; "he may be alive."

But even as we bent to the attempt, both my companion and I were seized with violent nausea; for the wisps of gray mist which still floated in the air were nevertheless sufficiently deadly. However, we succeeded at last in

dragging Eric Coverly into the passage. Here it became necessary to detach the telephone from the death-grip in which he held it.

I turned my head aside whilst Gatton accomplished this task; then together we bore Coverly out into the porch. At this point we were both overcome again by the fumes. Gatton was the first to recover sufficiently to stoop and examine the victim of this fiendish outrage. I clutched dizzily at an upright of the porch, and:

"Don't tell me he's dead," I whispered.

But Gatton stood up and nodded sternly.

"He was the last!" he said strangely. "They have triumphed after all."

The man who had driven the car and who now stood in a state of evident stupefaction looking over the gate, where he had been warned to remain by the Inspector, came forward on seeing Gatton beckoning to him.

"Notify the local officer in charge and bring a doctor," said Gatton. He turned to me. "Which is the nearest?"

Rapidly I gave the man the necessary instructions and he went running out to the car and soon was speeding away towards the house of a local physician.

I find it difficult to recapture the peculiar horror of the next few minutes, during which, half-fearful of entering the cottage, Gatton and I stood in the little sheltered garden adjoining the porch looking down at the body of this man who had met his end under my roof, in circumstances at once dreadful and incomprehensible.

Tragically, Eric Coverly was vindicated; by his death he was proved innocent. And by the manner of his death we realized that he had fallen a victim to the same malign agency as his cousin.

I have explained that my cottage stood in a strangely secluded spot, although so near to the sleepless life of London; and I remember that throughout the period between the departure of the man with the car and his return with the doctor and two police officers whom he had brought from the local depot, only one pedestrian passed my door and he on the opposite side of the road.

How little that chance traveler suspected what a scene was concealed from his eyes by the tall hedges which divided the garden from the highroad! It was as the footsteps of this wayfarer became faint in the distance, that suddenly:

"Come along!" said Gatton. "We might chance it now. I want to get to the bottom of this telephone trick."

We returned to the door of the ante-room, and side by side stood looking down at the telephone which had only been extracted from the grip of the dead man with so much difficulty. The Inspector stooped and took it up from the floor. The deadly gray mist was all but dissipated now, and together we stood staring stupidly at the telephone which Gatton held in his hand.

To all outward seeming it was an ordinary instrument, and my number was written upon it in the space provided for the purpose. Then, all at once, as we stepped into the room, I observed something out of the ordinary.

I could see a length of green cable proceeding from the wall-plug *out* through the open window. The cable attached to the instrument which Gatton held did not come from the proper connection at all, but came *in* through the window, and was evidently connected with something outside in the garden!

"What does this mean, Gatton?" I cried.

Evidently as deeply mystified as I, Gatton placed the telephone on the little table and fully opening the window, leaned out.

"Hullo!" he cried. "The cable leads up to the roof of the tool-shed!"

"To the roof of the tool-shed!" I echoed incredulously.

But Gatton did not heed my words, for:

"What the devil have we here?" he continued.

He was hauling something up from the flower-bed below the window, and now, turning to me, he held out… a second telephone!

"Why, Gatton!" I cried, and took it from his hand, "*this* is the authentic instrument! See! It is connected in the proper way!"

"I see quite clearly," he replied. "It was simply placed outside, whilst a duplicate one was substituted for it. I observe a ladder against the shed. Let us trace the cable attached to the duplicate."

The ladder was one used by Coates about the garden; and now, climbing out of the window, Gatton mounted it and surveyed the roof of the lean-to which I used as a tool-shed.

"Ha!" he exclaimed. "A gas cylinder!"

"What!"

He fingered the green cable.

"This is not cable at all," he cried; "it's *covered tubing*! Do you see?"

He descended and rejoined me.

"You see?" he continued. "A call from the exchange would ring the bell in the ante-room here. This devilish contrivance"—he pointed to the false telephone—"is really hollow. The weight of the receiver hermetically closes the end of the tube, no doubt. But any one answering the call and taking up the duplicate instrument would receive the full benefit of the contents of the cylinder which lies up there on the roof!"

"My God, Gatton!" I muttered. "The fiends! But why was the contrivance not removed?"

"They hadn't time," he said grimly. "They had not counted on the death-grip of the victim!"

I heard a car come racing up to the gate, followed by the sound of many excited voices.

"At last we know where the gray mist came from," I said, as Gatton and I walked through the cottage to meet the new arrivals.

"We know more than that," he retorted. "We know how *Sir Marcus* died!"

"Gatton!" I cried excitedly, as we approached a group waiting in the porch—"do you mean—"

He looked at me grimly.

"I mean," he said slowly, "that I have not forgotten the *gas-plug* in the wall of that recess in the supper-room at the Red House! The only thing I was doubtful about (the means by which the victim was induced to admit the gas into the room) is now as clear as daylight."

"You are right, Gatton," I agreed. "The same trick has succeeded twice."

"The same trick, as you say, Mr. Addison; with one trifling variation, a device which would only suggest itself to such a brain as that of—"

"Dr. Damar Greefe!" I cried.

"I believe you are right."

And now fell an awesome silence; for whilst Gatton and I stood bare-headed, the unfortunate Eric Coverly was being carried out to the waiting car; and even as I turned my eyes away in horror from that spectacle, I was endeavoring to frame the words in which I should acquaint Isobel with this second ghastly tragedy.

Here, indeed, was a new development of "the *Oritoga* mystery"; and so queerly does the mind depart from the actualities at such a moment that I

found myself thinking, even whilst Gatton was talking to me, of the bold head-lines which would greet readers of the press in the morning—and of the renewed excitement which would sweep throughout the length and breadth of the land when this dreadful alibi was proven.

Over the details of that gruesome tragedy I feel myself compelled to pass lightly, for even now the horror of it remains with me. The fumes of the poisonous gray mist lingered for hours in the house; and there were official visitations, testimonies and attestations, and the hundred and one formalities which invariably accompany such a tragedy but which I need not deal with in detail here.

Coates returned with the Rover, just as the body of the victim was being removed, and his account of what had occurred was simple enough, and followed the lines which we had anticipated. He had locked up and then gone to the garage for the car as I had directed him to do, returning to the cottage in time to admit Eric Coverly, whom he showed into the study, having informed him that I should be back in less than ten minutes. He had then proceeded to Denmark Hill railway station only to find, as I had found, that the appointment was a hoax and "the man with a box" a myth.

"You see," said Gatton, "the scheme of the plotter was simply this: to get Coates out of the way for a long enough time to allow the substitution of the telephone to be accomplished. The fact that Coates had closed the windows before leaving the house didn't interfere very much with the scheme. It's an old-fashioned catch on the ante-room window, and I have seen the marks upon the brass-work where it was forced from the outside with the blade of a knife. For the person who opened the window to take out the real telephone and put the other in its place was easy; and all that remained was to lift the gas-cylinder on to the shed and partly reclose the window as we found it. Coates, even if he had troubled to look, would not have noticed any difference in the dusk. It is the next move, however, which *I* find most interesting."

Gatton spoke with repressed excitement, and:

"What do you mean by 'the next move'?" I asked.

"Well," he replied, "we have good evidence to show that the assassin possesses an almost Napoleonic capacity for working by the time-table. Witness the employment of Constable Bolton in the Red House affair—which showed that our man was perfectly acquainted with the movements

of the officer on that beat and timed his scheme accordingly. Very well… having laid the telephone trap in your ante-room—did our man hurry away and make the call *in person*, which brought Coverly to the 'phone?—or did he remain watching the house and give the signal to *some one else* to do it?"

"I cannot imagine, Gatton. Nor does the point strike me as important."

"No?" said Gatton, smiling triumphantly. "Then I must explain. Whereas, in the Red House, the scheme worked *automatically*—for the time of Sir Marcus's arrival was *fixed*—in the present instance, some one had to watch for *your* return from the mythical appointment!"

"For *my* return?"

"Unquestionably! This scheme was arranged for your benefit, Mr. Addison. Unknowingly, poor Coverly saved you from a dreadful fate at the price of his own life! You see, they did not know that Coverly was coming here! Now, it will not have escaped your attention that he wore a soft felt hat, a light overcoat, and carried a black cane. So did *you* when you went out to keep the appointment made by the assassin!"

He paused, staring at me hard, and:

"Whoever was watching for your return," he said solemnly, "mistook Coverly for you! The moment that Coates drove away, the signal was given. It *must* have been. We were back here a few minutes later, *Now* do you see?"

"I do not, Gatton! What are you driving at?"

"At this: The telephone call *must* have been made from somewhere in the immediate neighborhood! There wasn't time to do it otherwise. And there is no public call office within a mile *which is open after seven o'clock!"*

"Good heavens!" I cried. "At last I understand!"

Gatton looked at me, smiling in grim triumph; and:

"Dr. Damar Greefe has a residence somewhere within a quarter-mile radius of this house!" he declared. "He has betrayed himself! Then—look here."

Unscrewing the front of the mouthpiece of the false telephone, he took out the strip of cardboard upon which my number was written, turned it over… and there upon the back was another number!

"Just look up Dr. Brown-Edwards," he said. "He was the last occupant of the Red House, and may still be in the book."

Grasping the purpose of his inquiry, excitedly I did as he directed; and there sure enough the number appeared!

"The identical instrument that was used at the Red House!" cried Gatton. "Note the artistic finish with which even the *correct* exchange numbers are looked up!"

I sank back in my chair, silent, appalled at the perverted genius of this fiend whom we were pitted against in a life-or-death struggle. But presently:

"What was the object of the opening and closing of the garage doors at the Red House?" I asked, almost mechanically.

"Simple enough," Gatton replied. "Whereas here the telephone was installed, so that the bell could be rung by some one merely calling up your number—and the ringing stopped by the caller telling the exchange he had made a mistake—in the Red House, as I have discovered, the 'phone had been disconnected shortly after Dr. Brown-Edwards left the place."

"Then the opening and closing of the doors was merely a device for ringing the bell?"

"Yes. The opening of the first door set it ringing and the opening of the second probably stopped it. Mr. Addison," he stood up, resting his hands upon the table and regarding me fixedly—"we enter upon the final battle of wits: New Scotland Yard *versus* Dr. Damar Greefe and the green-eyed lady of Bâst. Regarding the latter—there is a very significant point."

"What is that?"

"The 'voice' on this last occasion was that, not of a woman, but of a man."

XXIII. The Inevitable

"I very much regret having to trouble you, Miss Merlin, at such a time," said Inspector Gatton, "but as the paper lodged with you by the late Sir Eric Coverly may throw some light upon a very dark matter, perhaps you will read it to us."

I watched the play of expression upon Isobel's face with a depth of sympathy which I cannot attempt to describe. The successive trials which

had been imposed upon her in so short a time had robbed her cheeks of their sweet color and there were dark shadows under her eyes. The tumult of my own feelings was such that I was scarcely capable of consistent thought nor had I the moral courage to examine those emotions which stirred so wildly within me.

Late on the previous night I had performed the unhappy duty of breaking to her the news of Coverly's dreadful death. I shall never forget that black hour. Her courage, however, under all these trials had been admirable, and although I well knew what it must have cost her, she replied now with perfect composure:

"Look—I took it out of my bureau when I heard that you were here, Inspector."

She took up from the table a foolscap envelope sealed and having her name written upon it in large and somewhat unsteady characters.

"I would suggest," said Gatton, with a delicacy which earned my gratitude, "that you read it yourself first, Miss Merlin. If there is anything helpful in it you can then communicate it to me."

I saw Isobel biting her lip hard, but she resolutely tore open the envelope; and leaving her to read the contents, I joined Gatton at the window. We both stood staring out for what seemed a very long time, then:

"It is rather long," said Isobel in a low voice.

Gatton and I turned together, and saw her, looking even more pale than before, seated by the table holding a sheet of notepaper in her hand. Without glancing at either of us, she began to read as follows, in an even and monotonous voice which I knew she had adopted to hide her emotion:

"This account of my movements on the night of August 6th will only be read in the event of my being falsely adjudged guilty of the murder of my cousin, Marcus Coverly, or in the event of my death. "On the afternoon of that date I was informed over the telephone that my fiancée, Isobel Merlin, was meeting Sir Marcus the same night at a place called the Red House. The address was given me and I was asked, in case I doubted the word of the speaker, to watch Miss Merlin's movements that evening. "I had already quarreled with my cousin respecting his unwelcome attentions and although the result did not confirm the promise of the informant, in part at least the information was accurate. I have no idea of the speaker's identity except that the voice was the voice of a woman. "Not desiring to trust any one in

such a matter I, myself, obtained in a remote district the dilapidated garments which are now in the possession of the police and respecting which they have subjected me to close examination. Attired in these and having my face and hands artificially dirtied as a further disguise, I left my chambers by a back entrance about nine o'clock, and not having sufficient confidence in my make-up to enter a public vehicle, walked the whole of the way to College Road. "I had little difficulty in finding the Red House, but on discovering that it was vacant, I immediately suspected a hoax. However, I determined to wait in the neighborhood until the time at which the voice had warned me the meeting was to take place. There were very few people about and a tremendous downfall of rain drenched me to the skin, for the only shelter afforded was that of the trees bordering the road unless I had been content to abandon my watch. "Just before the downpour ceased but after it had abated its first fury, I came out from my inadequate shelter and began to walk in the direction of the High Street. I had not gone more than twenty paces when I saw a cab approaching, and the man, seeing my bedraggled figure, slowed up, and to my astonishment asked me the way to the Red House. "I immediately peered into the cab—to find that the passenger was none other than Marcus Coverly. I had begun to doubt, but at this I doubted no longer. I gave the cabman the necessary directions and, slowly following on foot, I saw from the shelter of the trees on the opposite side of the road, Sir Marcus dismiss the cab and walk up the drive of the empty house. "He was alone, and since I knew that Miss Merlin had not preceded him, I could only conclude that she would be following later. Accordingly I walked slowly away from the Red House again in the direction of the High Street, and some five minutes later I passed a constable accompanied by a man wearing a light Burberry and a soft hat, whom I knew later (although I failed to recognize him at the time) to have been Mr. Jack Addison. "I stood at the corner by the High Street until long after midnight. Twice I returned to the Red House and once even penetrated as far as the porch; but although I thought I could detect a light shining out through the shutters of the room on the right of the door, I could not be sure of it and there was no sound of movement within. "These were my only discoveries, and very wretched and dissatisfied I tramped back to my chambers wondering what the visit of Marcus Coverly to this apparently empty house could mean and why he had remained there, but particularly

wondering why the voice had told me this part-truth which had turned me into a spy unavailingly. "The discovery made at the docks on the following day placed a new and dreadful construction upon the motives of the speaker, and I awakened to the fact that although entirely innocent of any complicity I had laid myself open to a charge of having been concerned in the murder of my cousin. "My ill-advised attempt to conceal the garments which I had used as a disguise, and of which I had not known how to dispose, was dictated by panic. I knew the police were watching me and I was fool enough to think that I could escape their vigilance. "This is all I have to say. It explains nothing and it does not exonerate me, I am aware, but I swear that it is the truth," "(Signed) ERIC COVERLY, Bart." Although she retained so brave a composure I recognized the strain which this new and cruel ordeal had imposed upon Isobel; and Gatton incurred a further debt of gratitude by his tactful behavior, for: "Miss Merlin," he said earnestly—"you are a very brave woman. Thank you. I only wish I could have spared you this."

Shaking me warmly by the hand, he bowed and departed, leaving me alone with Isobel.

As the sound of his footsteps died away Isobel returned again to the seat from which she had risen; and a silence fell between us. My own feelings I cannot attempt to depict, but I will confess that I was afraid of my humanity at that moment. Never had Isobel seemed more desirable; never had I longed as I longed now to take her in my arms.

The tension of that silence becoming insupportable:

"You will not stay here alone?" I asked in an unnatural voice.

Isobel, without looking up, shook her head.

"I am going to Mrs. Wentworth—my Aunt Alison," she replied.

"Good," I said. "I am glad to know that you will be in her cheery company."

Mrs. Wentworth was, indeed, a charming old lady, and so far as I knew, Isobel's only relation in London, if not in England. She occupied a house which, like herself, was small, scrupulously neat and old-worldly. One of those tiny residences which, once counted as being "in the country," had later become enmeshed in the ever-spreading tentacles of greater London.

It was situated on the northern outskirts of the county-city, and although rows of modern "villas" had grown up around it, within the walls of that

quaint little homestead one found oneself far enough removed from suburbia.

"When are you going, Isobel?" I asked.

"I think," she replied, "in the morning."

"Will you let me drive you in the Rover?—or are you taking too much baggage?"

"Oh, no," she said, smiling sadly—"I am going to live the simple life for a week. Going out shopping with Aunt Alison—and perhaps sometimes to the pictures!"

"Then I can drive you over?"

"Yes—if you would like to," she answered simply.

I took my leave shortly afterwards and proceeded to the *Planet* office. I had work to do, but I must admit that I little relished the idea of returning to my cottage. Diverted, now, from the notorious Red House, public interest had centered upon my residence, and the seclusion which I had gone so far to seek was disturbed almost hourly by impertinent callers who seemed to think that the scene of a sensational crime was public property.

Coates had effectually disillusioned several of them on this point, but, nevertheless, the cottage had become distasteful to me. I realized that I must seek a new residence without delay. Shall I add that the primary cause of my reclusion no longer operated so powerfully? Of my dreams at this time I will speak later; but here I may say that I knew, and accepted the knowledge with a fearful joy, that if my new house of hope was doomed to be shattered, no spot in broad England could offer me rest again.

It was not then, until late that night, that I returned to my once peaceful abode. Coates was waiting up for me, but he had nothing of importance to report, apparently, until, when I had dismissed him, he turned in the doorway, and:

"Excuse me, sir," he said—and cleared his throat.

"Yes, Coates?"

"About half an hour ago, sir, the dogs all around started howling, sir. I thought I'd better mention it, as Inspector Gatton asked me this morning if I had ever heard the dogs howling."

I looked at him straightly.

"Inspector Gatton asked you thus?"

"He did, sir. So I have reported the occurrence, Good night, sir."

"Good night, Coates," I replied.

But for long enough after his departure I sat there in the armchair in my study, thinking over this seemingly trivial occurrence. From where I sat I could see the light shining upon the gilt-lettered title of Maspero's "Egyptian Art"—and my thoughts promised to be ill bedfellows.

Contrary to custom, I slept that night with closed windows! And although I awakened twice, once at two o'clock and again at four, thinking that I had heard the mournful signal of the dogs, nothing but my own uneasy imagination disturbed my slumbers.

Breakfast despatched, and my correspondence dealt with, I sent Coates to the garage for my little car, and since I should have another companion, left him behind, and myself drove to Isobel's flat. Woman-like, she was not nearly ready, and there was much bustling on the part of the repentant Marie —who had been retained in spite of her share in the tragedy of Sir Marcus's death—before we finally set out for Mrs. Wentworth's.

Isobel was very silent on the way, but once I intercepted a sidelong glance and felt my heart leaping madly when she blushed.

Mrs. Wentworth made me very welcome as had ever been her way. She was an eccentric, but embarrassingly straightforward old lady; and if I had heeded her simple motherly counsel in the past all might have been different.

She bore Isobel off to her room, leaving me to my own devices, for she had never observed any ceremony towards me in all the years that I had known her, but had taught me to make myself at home beneath her hospitable roof. I knew, too, because she had never troubled to disguise the fact, that she regarded Isobel and me as made for one another. Isobel's engagement to poor Eric Coverly, Mrs. Wentworth had all along regarded as a ghastly farce, and I can never forget her reception of me on the occasion of my first visit after returning from Mesopotamia.

Half an hour or so elapsed, then, before Isobel returned; and, although she came into the room confidently enough, the old tension reasserted itself immediately. I felt that commonplaces would choke me. And although to this day I cannot condone my behavior, for the good of my soul I must confess the truth.

I took her in my arms, held her fast and kissed her.

An overwhelming consciousness of guilt came to me even as her lips met mine, and, releasing her, I turned aside, groaning.

"Isobel!" I said hoarsely—"Isobel, forgive me! I was a cad, a villain… to *him*. But—it was inevitable. Try to forget that I was so weak. But, Isobel—"

I felt her hand trembling on my arm.

"We must *both* try to forget, Jack," she whispered.

I grasped her hands and looked eagerly—indeed I think wildly—into her eyes.

"Because my life is over if I lose you," I said, "I suppose I was mad for a moment. Tell me that one day—when it is fit and proper that you should do so—you will give me a hearing, and I will perform any penance you choose. I acted like a blackguard."

"Stop!" she commanded softly.

She raised her eyes, and her grave, sweet glance cooled the fever which consumed me and brought a great and abiding peace to my heart.

"You were no more to blame than I!" she said. "And because—I understand, it is not hard to forgive. I don't try to excuse myself, but even if —*he*—had lived, I could never have gone on with it, after his… suspicions. Oh, Jack! why did you leave me to make that awful mistake?"

"My dearest," I replied, "God knows I have suffered for it."

"Please," she said, and her voice faltered, "help me to be fair to… *him*. Never—never—speak to me again—like that… until—"

But the sentence was never completed; for at this moment in bustled Aunt Alison—in appearance a white-haired, rosy-faced little matron, very brisk in her movements and very shrewd-eyed. A dear old lady, dearer than ever to me in that she had tried so hard to bring Isobel and my laggard self together. She had, as usual, more to say than could be said in the time at her disposal. As we proceeded to the dining-room:

"Now then, you boys and girls, I'm starving, if you're not. What a time I've had with cook, not knowing when you might be here. Cook's leaving to be married: I'm afraid she's neglected this sea-kale. Dear, dear! what love will do for people's minds, to be sure. Put your hair straight, Isobel, dear, or Mary will think Jack has been kissing you! I saw her kiss the postman yesterday. Mary, I mean! You're eating like a pigeon, Jack! Gracious me! Where's the pepper? Mary! Ring the bell, Isobel. I must speak to that

postman; he's made Mary forget to put any pepper in the cruet, and any one might have seen them. It isn't respectable!"

"Dear Aunt Alison!" I said, as the active old lady ran out (Mary not being promptly enough in attendance). "She loves to keep running in and out like a waiter! What a friend she has been to me, Isobel! You could not be in better company at such a time."

"She's a darling!" agreed Isobel, and when I met her glance across the table she blushed entrancingly.

Then, in a moment, tears were in her eyes; and knowing of whom she was thinking, I sat abashed—guilty and repentant. I had transgressed against the murdered man; and there and then I made a solemn, silent vow that no word of love again should pass my lips until the fit and proper time of mourning was over. Because I faithfully kept this vow, I dare to hope that my sin is forgiven me.

Luncheon at that homely house, with Isobel, was an unalloyed delight; and I regretted every passing minute which brought me nearer to the time when I must depart. But when at last I said good-by it was a new world upon which I looked—a new life upon which I entered. I have said that to-day I venture to hope my poor human transgression is forgiven me. Yet it did not go unpunished. Little did I dream, in my strange new happiness, how soon I was to return to that house—how soon I was to know the deadliest terror of my life.

XXIV. A Conference—Interrupted

"The case has narrowed down," said Gatton, "from my point of view, into the quest of one man—"

"Dr. Damar Greefe!"

"Precisely. You have asked me what I found at Friar's Park and the Bell House, and I can answer you very briefly. Nothing! The latter place, had quite obviously been fired in a systematic and deliberate way. I suspect that the contents of the rooms had been soaked with petrol. It burned to a shell and then collapsed. At the present moment it is merely a mound of smoking ashes.

"Of course, the local fire-brigade was hopelessly ill-equipped, but even with the most up-to-date appliances I doubt if the conflagration could have been extinguished. The men watching the house were thrown quite off their guard when flames began to leap out of the windows: hence, the escape of Damar Greefe."

"You are sure he *did* escape?"

Gatton stared at me grimly.

"To whom do you suppose you are indebted for the telephone trick?" he asked. "Besides—Blythe, the fool, actually heard the car at the moment that it came out on to the highroad! Oh, they bungled the thing villainously. My Marathon feat saved your life, Mr. Addison, but it looks like losing me the case! We have the Hawkins couple. But, although a graceless pair, they were more dupes than knaves. I am convinced, personally, that neither of them suspected that Lady Burnham Coverly was dead. Damar Greefe had represented to them that she had lost her reason."

"Good heavens! what a scheme!"

"What a scheme, indeed. Hawkins seems to have considered that his duty —which was merely to keep intruders out of the park—was dictated by necessity. He thought that if Lady Coverly's real condition became known she would be removed to a madhouse! He also thought that a *nurse* was in attendance."

"A nurse!"

"Yes. He assured me that he had heard and seen her! Mrs. Hawkins also was certain on the point. Neither of them were ever allowed in the house, by the way. But Damar Greefe paid them well—and they were satisfied. The identity of the 'nurse' is evident, I think?"

"Perfectly evident. But how was poor Lady Coverly disposed of—and why this elaborate secrecy?"

"Well," replied Gatton slowly—"out of the multitude of notes which I have compiled upon the case, I have worked out a sort of summary, and it amounts to this: The whole series of outrages turns upon something in the financial arrangements of the late Sir Burnham of benefit to the Eurasian doctor. It may be that Damar Greefe had some secret locked up in the Bell House which he could not very well remove, and that the greatest peril he feared was the taking over of the Park property by an heir. I assume he had complete authority over the late Lady Burnham; and his object in

concealing her death (for our investigations at Friar's Park have definitely established the fact that no one had resided there for twelve months at least) was clearly this: he hoped to carry on the pretense of attending upon the invalid until—"

"Until there was no heir to the property remaining alive!" I interrupted excitedly. "Exactly, Gatton! That is my own theory, too!

"We have now received," continued the Inspector, "some particulars concerning the circumstances of Roger Coverly's death in Basle. Whilst there was no direct evidence of foul play (and at that time at any rate no reason to suspect it) I am convinced that the local physician who attended him at the hotel and the specialist who was sent for post-haste from Zurich were by no means agreed as to the cause of death.

"The symptoms were apparently not unlike those which would be caused by a snake-bite, for instance; but naturally one does not look for poisonous snakes in Switzerland. There was some sort of inflammation of the skin apparently"—he consulted a page of his note-book—"which might have been eczema or something similar, of course, but which according to medical evidence had no apparent connection with the cause of his death. This was given in the certificate simply as syncope—although there did not appear to be any hereditary cardiac trouble or anything of the kind to account for a young fellow of that age dying suddenly of heart failure. And there had been nothing in his life during his sojourn at Basle which would help to clear up the mystery.

"However, no doubt seems to have arisen at the time, as you can well understand; nevertheless, I, personally, count the death of Roger Coverly as the first of the outrages to be laid to the credit of Dr. Damar Greefe!"

"The object of the whole thing is still completely dark to me," I declared.

"In a sense it is dark to *me*," replied Gatton; "but considering that the boy died at a time when the health of his father, Sir Burnham, was already giving cause for anxiety, I maintain that he was removed because his inheritance of Friar's Park was feared—by some one. The invitation from Dr. Damar Greefe to Sir Marcus is a very significant piece of evidence, of course; and when we consider that it reached Sir Marcus within a very short time of his return from Russia, the conclusion is obvious.

"He inherited the title on the death of Sir Burnham, whilst he was on service in Archangel. Being in Russia, I conclude that he was not accessible

from the Eurasian doctor's point of view. Directly he *became* accessible, this invitation arrived; and it is perfectly clear that the fate intended for him was that which so nearly befell yourself! Remember, I have seen the gun mounted on the tower of Friar's Park and I assure you it was not placed there yesterday. In short, I have no doubt that it was put there in anticipation of Sir Marcus's visit and only employed in your case as a sort of afterthought.

"The Red House plot was the next move on the part of the Eurasian, and it succeeded almost faultlessly. The accident at the docks prevented the scheme being carried out in all its details, but it did not entirely dislocate the murderer's arrangements, for it left us with no better clew to his identity than the statuette of the cat."

"The presence of that statuette calls for some explanation, Gatton," I said.

Gatton very carefully lighted his pipe.

"That is true," he admitted, "but I will come to this side of the case later; at present I am summing up the evidence against Damar Greefe—who is certainly the acting partner in this series of outrages against the members of the house of Coverly. Observe the ingenuity of the Red House plot.

"He hoped by this not only to bring about the death of Sir Marcus, but also, by conviction for his murder, the death of the next heir, Mr. Eric Coverly! In fact, so well was his plan conducted, that even now—although we know poor Sir Eric to have been innocent—you will note that he has been unable to establish an alibi even by a full confession of his movements on the night of the crime! In other words, if he had not fallen a victim to the precipitancy of his enemies, to-day his name would be under as black a cloud as ever. It was with the idea of clearing him that I caused those paragraphs to be distributed to the press, in which I anticipated the existence of such a confession as he had actually made—but, I may add, of one more convincing than that which we heard Miss Merlin read."

"Do you mean, Gatton," I said, looking hard at him, "that by professing to have established the innocence of Eric Coverly, you hoped to draw down upon him the renewed activities of his enemies?"

Gatton looked rather guilty, but:

"I do admit it!" he said. "Nevertheless he did not fall a victim to this trap which I had laid for him in his own best interests. After all, you must admit

that his death was an accident; for he suffered the penalty of your misdeeds."

"My misdeeds!" I cried.

Gatton smiled grimly.

"I say misdeeds," he continued—"although they were not conscious on your part. But it is fairly evident, I think, that whereas the unknown partner of Dr. Damar Greefe was an active enemy of the Coverlys (witness the evidence of 'the voice' and of the cat statuette), it is to Dr. Damar Greefe *himself* that you are indebted for the three attempts on your life; the first two at Upper Crossleys and the third here in your own home by the simple but deadly expedient of substituting for your own 'phone the duplicate one which previously had been employed so successfully at the Red House! He hoped to remove a dangerous obstacle from his path and a menace to this safety."

"But, my dear Gatton, why should he regard *me* as a menace more deadly than you, for instance?"

"The reason is very plain," answered Gatton. "I don't think he paid you the compliment of regarding your investigations as likely to prove more successful than my own, but I do think that he apprehended danger from the indiscretions of his lady accomplice."

"Do you refer to the woman who visited me at the Abbey Inn?"

"I do," said Gatton shortly, "and to the woman who visited you here and stole the statuette of Bâst! The history of Edward Hines and his predecessor, which you have so admirably summarized, points to the presence in the Upper Crossleys neighborhood of such a character as we have been seeking ever since your experience here (I refer to the cat-eyes which looked in through the window)."

"I begin to see, Gatton," I said slowly.

"With what object this unknown woman visited you at the Abbey Inn I cannot conjecture, but doubtless this would have been revealed had not her visit been interrupted and terminated by the appearance of the Eurasian doctor upon the scene. From your own account she recognized that she had committed an indiscretion by coming there, and of the doctor's anger—-which he was quite unable to conceal—you have told me. Note also that the next episode was your being followed by Cassim, the Nubian, undoubtedly with murderous intent. Then, recognizing that he had hopelessly

compromised himself, the Eurasian took desperate means to silence you for ever."

"He did," I said, "and came very near to succeeding. But to return, Gatton, to this problem of the image of Bâst. You see, the figure of a cat was painted upon the case in which Sir Marcus's body was found and the image of a cat was discovered inside the case. Then, you will not have overlooked the significance of the fact that Edward Hines was the recipient of a present from his unknown friend which also took the form of a gold figure of a cat, and which I found, when I examined it, to be of ancient Egyptian workmanship."

"Right!" said Gatton, and emphatically bringing his open hand down upon the table: "I said at the very beginning of the case, Mr. Addison, that it turned upon the history of this Egyptian goddess, and I think my theory has been substantiated at every point."

"It has, Inspector," I agreed; "but I don't know that the fact enlightens us very much; for it merely indicates that the man whom you declare to be the central figure of the conspiracy is only a secondary figure, and that all we know about the person whom we may regard as the prime mover is that she is a woman—apparently possessing supernormal eyes which glitter in the dark. She is also associated in some way with the figure of Bâst. What is her relation to Dr. Damar Greefe and in what way is she interested in the destruction of the Coverly family?"

Gatton smoked in silence for a while, staring at me reflectively, then:

"If we knew that, Mr. Addison," he said, "we should know all there is to know about 'the *Oritoga* mystery.' But I think we should have advanced a long step towards this information if we could apprehend the Eurasian. Of course we have gathered up all the ragged details of the Red House incident: I refer to the carter who delivered the crate and collected it in the morning, of the caterer who supplied the supper and so forth. As I had fully expected, none of the evidence helped us at all."

"'The voice,'" I began.

"Exactly! The same 'voice' beyond a doubt, and the whole thing worked through the means of district messengers and others, telephonically instructed. No one appeared throughout, Mr. Addison."

"Yet," I said deliberately, "there was one point at which some one *must* have appeared—"

"Yes," he interrupted, "some one dragged the body out of that supper-room, down to the garage, and packed it in the crate."

"You have definitely convinced yourself that the telephone device was practiced there?"

"Beyond question. Haven't you seen the exchange number? That plug where at some time a gas-fitting had been fixed up in the wall—you remember?—proved on investigation to communicate with an empty room adjoining. The gas cylinder was placed there of course, and the telephone in the recess of the supper-room, where, fastened in by the velvet curtain, any one using the poison installation would be suffocated almost immediately."

"Good God, Gatton!" I cried. "It's a horrible business, and for my own part I have no idea what the next step should be."

"I'm a bit doubtful, myself," admitted Gatton; "but you know the line of reasoning which has led me to the conclusion that these people possess a base of operations somewhere in this district. I am having the neighborhood scoured pretty thoroughly, and I think it is merely a question of time, now, for us to hem in the wanted man—"

"And the wanted woman!" I added.

We were interrupted by a knock at the study door, and Coates came in with the evening mail.

"Excuse me, Gatton," I said—for I had observed that one of the letters was from Isobel.

Eagerly I tore open the envelope… and what I read struck a sudden chill to my heart. Looking up:

"Gatton!" I cried—"Miss Merlin has received, by post, a small statuette of Bâst!"

"What!"

"From her brief description I am almost tempted to believe that it is the one which was stolen from here! She is dreadfully frightened, naturally."

The Inspector stood up.

"We must see it," he said rapidly, "at once; and we must see the wrapping it came in and the postmark. It is maddening," he burst out angrily, "to think that Dr. Damar Greefe may be somewhere within less than half a mile of us as we sit here now, that we could ring him up if we knew his number; but that even with all the resources of the Criminal Investigation Department at work we may yet be unable to find him! Even an outside suburb like this is

a very big place to search and the job is something like looking for a needle in a haystack!"

My own frame of mind was one of horrible doubt and indecision. I knew not what to do for the best; and Gatton had begun to pace up and down like a caged wild beast. Therefore:

"Fill your pipe," I said wearily. "A lot may depend upon our next move. To make a false one would perhaps be fatal."

Gatton stared at me almost savagely, then threw himself back into the armchair from which he had arisen, and was just reaching out for the tobacco-jar which I had pushed before him, when a bell rang. I heard Coates opening the front door, and wondering whom this late visitor could be, I stared questioningly at the Inspector.

Came a tap upon the door.

"Come in," I cried.

Coates entered, and standing stiffly in the doorway:

"*Dr. Damar Greefe*!" he announced.

Unmoved, he stood aside; and whilst Gatton and I slowly rose from our chairs in a state of utter stupefaction, the Eurasian doctor entered, and stood, a tall, gaunt figure, towering over the burly form of Coates in the doorway!

His hawk eyes blazed feverishly and his face was drawn and haggard, whilst I observed with a sort of horrified wonder that he seemed to be almost too weak to stand. For, as Gatton and I came finally to our feet, he clutched at the edge of a bookcase, but recovered himself, bowed in that stately fashion which immediately translated me in spirit to the strange library in the Bell House, and:

"Gentlemen," he said, and his harsh voice rose scarcely above a whisper —"pray resume your seats. I shall not detain you long."

XXV. Statement of Damar Greefe, M.D.

The speaker reeled and seemed about to fall. Whereupon Gatton sprang forward and placed an armchair, which he himself had occupied, for Dr.

Damar Greefe. The latter inclined his head in acknowledgment and sank down weakly, clutching at both arms of the chair.

For my own part, I had not yet recovered power of speech; but:

"Dr. Damar Greefe," said the Inspector, closely watching the man who sat there collapsed in the chair, "I arrest you on a charge of murder. I have to warn you that anything you now say will be used in evidence against you."

The Eurasian exerted a supreme effort, straightening his gaunt body, and fixing the gaze of those hawk eyes upon Inspector Gatton. When he spoke his harsh voice had gained strength and his manner was imperious.

"Detective-Inspector Gatton," he replied, "you do no more than your duty. I have come here only with the utmost difficulty in my weak state. Therefore, you need apprehend no attempt at escape on my part. I have come with a purpose. This purpose I shall fulfill; after which"—he shrugged his square shoulders—"I shall be at your service."

"Very good," said Gatton shortly, but I noted that his face was flushed in a way which betokened repressed excitement.

Giving me a significant glance, he went out to the ante-room, and:

"Sydenham 1448," I heard him call.

Damar Greefe closed his eyes and lay back in the chair; and a moment later:

"Hullo!" said Gatton. "Detective-Inspector Gatton, C.I.D., speaking from Willow Cottage, College Road. Send two men in a cab here at once to remove a prisoner… Right! Good-by."

He came in again, and closing the door behind him, stood staring at Damar Greefe in a sort of wonderment. The Eurasian wearily opened his eyes and looked slowly from side to side. Then:

"Pray be seated, Inspector Gatton," he said. "I have a communication to make."

Gatton, with never a word, drew up a chair and sat down.

"I do not desire to be interrupted," continued Damar Greefe, "until my communication is finished. You understand? It will not be repeated."

"I am afraid," murmured Gatton dryly, "it will have to be."

The Eurasian fully opened his glittering black eyes, and fixing them upon the speaker:

"It will not be repeated," he said harshly. "If I am misunderstood, inform me."

His peremptory manner in the circumstances was extraordinary—uncanny. As I had perceived in the first hour of our meeting, Dr. Damar Greefe was a man possessing tremendous force of character and a pride of intellect which clearly rendered him indifferent even of retribution.

"This point being settled," he continued, "be good enough, Inspector Gatton, and"—he turned his eyes in my direction—"Mr. Addison, to give me your undivided attention."

His manner was that of a lecturer—of a lecturer who takes it for granted that his discourse is above the heads of his audience; but when I say that the statement now made by this strange and terrible man held Gatton and me spellbound I say no more than the truth. Wearily, and more often than not having his eyes closed, Dr. Damar Greefe commenced to unfold a story of nameless horrors—and save that his harsh voice grew ever weaker and weaker, he displayed not the slightest trace of emotion throughout his appalling revelations.

"I am informing you," he said, "of these facts concerning my inquiries in the realm of teratology and the subjoined province of animism because I know that my life-work upon this subject can never now be completed. It having been necessary for me to destroy my papers and those specimens which, at hideous cost, I had accumulated during twenty years of travel through some of the most barbaric as well as the most civilized parts of the world, this present brief verbal account of the most important inquiry of all shall alone survive me. You are privileged. Therefore listen:

"Two important facts contributed to my choice of a special study: the social ostracism which very early in my professional career I found to be my lot; and the fact that in myself I afforded a living example of the *hybrid*. It has been said and not untruly that the Eurasian hates his father and scorns his mother. Certainly, this unnatural passion is reciprocated by the parent stock; for the Eurasian is barely acknowledged by his dark brethren and hardly tolerated by the white.

"In spite of my qualifications—I am a Doctor of Medicine, a Master of Arts, and hold other degrees of Leipzig, the Sorbonne, and elsewhere—I recognized very early in my career that ordinary practice was impossible for me. I therefore turned my attention to the special study of embryology, as I

fortunately possessed sufficient private means to enable me—by careful living—to dispense with the usual proceeds of my profession.

"In short, I hoped to triumph over my hereditary handicap and to build for myself a reputation which should rise above the petty disabilities of caste and place my name upon a level with those of Haeckel, Weismann, Wallace, Focke and the other great students who have helped to advance our knowledge of the science of evolution.

"I early turned my attention to the traditions associated with the *Cynocephalus hamadryas*, or Sacred Baboon of Abyssinia. I took up my quarters on the banks of the Hawash and succeeded in ingratiating myself with the Amharûn. The result of my sojourn amongst these strange people is embodied in my work 'The Ape-Men of Shoa.'

"This work is unpublished and may never see the light, but briefly I may state that the Amharûn are a Semitic tribe allied to the Falashas and have been settled for many generations in this southern province of Abyssinia. Claiming descent from Menelek, son of Suleiman and the Queen of Sheba, they have always been regarded as unclean pariahs. In part this is due to their bestial custom of eating meat cut from living animals, but it is more particularly attributable to the periodical appearance among them of these *cynocephalytes*, or man-apes, which form the subject of my work.

"My close inquiries into the physiological history of these monstrosities were only conducted with the utmost difficulty. In the first place I found that it was customary among the Amharûn to slay the creatures at birth, but in those rare cases of survival the *cynocephalytes* were banished from the community and were compelled to lead a wild life, subsisting as best they might in the foothills of the desolate mountain region.

"Thus, in the first place these creatures were difficult of access; in the second place, they readily contracted tuberculosis, even in that warm, dry climate; and in the third place their ferocity rendered them more formidable to approach than any tiger in its lair. I may add here that this predisposition to pulmonary disease is (and this I have definitely established) a characteristic of all mammalian hybrids.

"Nevertheless, my studies were by no means unfruitful, since they resulted in a triumphant vindication of my theory, which, contrary to that universally received and more closely allied to the 'exploded' Mendel's Law, ascribed the appearance of such monsters not to any strict physiological

process but to a hitherto unclassified law of embryology which I had hoped would one day take its place in science under my name.

"Armed with the results of my Abyssinian inquiry, I next proceeded to Syria; for among certain desert tribes I hoped to find further evidence to support my theory. In short, in the Arabic tradition of the jackal-man (which is allied to the medieval and universal belief in the were-wolf or *loup-garou*) and in the Indian myth of the woman who, possessing an ordinary human form by day, assumes that of a tigress by night, I thought I detected a profound truth.

"Since my life-work is destroyed, I am egotist enough to desire that credit for it should not accrue to another. I do not propose, therefore, more than lightly to touch upon the Damar Greefe Law, but I may say that in its essentials it is this:

"Such strange hybrids do actually occur periodically and in rare cases survive; but their animal proclivities which are physically demonstrable, and the possession of certain animal attributes (as the furry body of the *cynocephalyte*, the claws and teeth of the jackal-man, etc.), are *physical* reflections of a *mental* process taking place in the female parent."

He glared at me wildly, as if anticipating contradiction, but Gatton and I remaining silent:

"There is no physical association," he continued, "between the hybrid and that creature whose qualities and peculiarities he seemingly inherits. I have proved by a long series of elaborate experiments that a *true* hybrid of this description is a physiological impossibility. But that a *false* hybrid such as I have indicated may appear is a fact which does not rest solely upon my studies amongst the Amharûn, nor upon my subsequent inquiries throughout Assyria, Somaliland and the middle valleys of the Yellow River."

He paused, and suddenly turning a glance of the hawk-like eyes upon me:

"As an explorer of the Dark Continent, Mr. Addison," he said, "and also, if I mistake not, something of an Orientalist, the significance of this itinerary may possibly be apparent to you. But I waste time:

"The discovery which triumphantly crowned my life's work by what some may deem poetic justice was destined also to destroy it. This brings me to the matter which has led to my presence here to-night. My preceding remarks were a necessary foreword. I come to the year 1902, when I was

established in Cairo, whither I had conveyed the results of the labor of many years and where I had taken up my quarters in a large native house not twenty yards from the Bâb-es-Zuwêla."

Gatton stirred restlessly in his chair and my own curiosity knew no bounds.

"My inquiries at this time had nearly exhausted my always slender financial resources, and the proceeds of a small practice which I succeeded in establishing (exclusively amongst the extensive half-caste colony resident in this neighborhood) proved a welcome addition to my income. It was due to the fact that at this time I was an active practitioner that I came in touch with the most perfect and notable example of a *psycho-hybrid* which I had ever encountered, indeed which, so far as I am aware, has ever appeared."

He paused again, as if overcome with faintness, and in anticipation of what was to come I could scarcely contain myself, when:

"At this time," he resumed, in a yet lower voice, "and indeed until quite recently, there were but few reliable European medical men in Cairo, and during the summer of 1902 an outbreak of cholera temporarily depleted their already scanty ranks. It happened then that one night, whilst I sat in the huge, lofty room, once the principal harem apartment of the house, which I had appropriated as a study, Cassim, my Nubian servant, communicated to me (by means of a sign-language which I had taught him) some startling news. My immediate presence was desired at the residence of Sir Burnham Coverly, then newly appointed to a government office, and who with his wife had only arrived in the country some few months earlier.

"I thought I knew the nature of the services required of me, but my employment by this typical English aristocrat, hide-bound with caste traditions as he could not fail to be, since he had spent five years of his official life in India, surprised me very greatly. I was later to learn that the services of no other medical man (or of no medical man so highly qualified as myself) were available; but even had I known this at the time I should have put my pride in my pocket, and for this reason:

"I had learned from a native acquaintance of a certain occurrence which had taken place on the very day of the baronet's arrival in Egypt; and it led me to look for a particular manifestation, in fact, I will boldly declare, since science is admittedly a callous mistress, that it had led me to *hope* for this

manifestation, however unpleasant it might prove for those intimately concerned. Accordingly, having made suitable preparation I accompanied Sir Burnham's servant back to the residence of the baronet…"

I heard the door-bell ring, and I heard Coates's regular tread as he proceeded along the passage. There was a brief, muttered colloquy, a rap on the study-door, and Coates entered.

"A sergeant of police and a constable, sir, to see Inspector Gatton!"

Damar Greefe raised his thin, yellow hand. His voice, when next he spoke, exhibited no trace of emotion.

"Let them be told to wait," he said. "I have not finished."

It was wildly bizarre, that scene in my study, with the dignified white-haired Eurasian doctor, palpably laboring against some deathly sickness, sitting there unperturbed, his brilliant, perverted intellect holding him aloof from the ordinary things of life—whilst those who came to hale him to a felon's cell waited in the ante-room!

I glanced swiftly at Gatton, and he nodded impatiently.

"Let them stay in the dining-room, Coates," I said. "Make them comfortable."

"Very good, sir."

Unmoved, Coates withdrew—and I saw Gatton glance at his watch. Throughout the latter part of his strange narrative, neither Gatton nor I interrupted the narrator, therefore I give his story, so far as I remember it, in his own words. He no longer addressed either of us directly; he seemed, indeed, to be thinking aloud.

XXVI. Statement of Dr. Damar Greefe (Continued)

As I walked along through the deserted native streets, for the hour was late, I reviewed mentally the circumstances of that affair, already several months old, to which I have referred. Since it proved to have a very important bearing upon my own life and unfortunately the lives of many others, I will briefly recount it here.

Sir Burnham and Lady Coverly, having arrived at Port Said, were proceeding by rail to Cairo when an accident farther up the line necessitated

their breaking their journey at Zagazig.

Now, for a time in the spring of the previous year, I had devoted much labor to an inquiry in this place, which stands of course roughly upon the site of the ancient Egyptian city of *Bubastis*. In those myths, or so-called myths, of the Ancient Egyptian religion which represented the various attributes of man in the guises of animals, I had perceived a nucleus of wisdom pointing to the possibility that the law which I had so laboriously established might have been known to the early Egyptian priesthood. Indeed I was partly induced to inquire into the myths of Bâst, the cat-headed goddess to whom of old this town was dedicated, by the following two things: first, a chance reference in the pages of Herodotus; and, second, a persistent superstition that during a certain season of the year, *psycho-hybrids* occurred in this town.

By dint of close research I discovered that the date favored by the inhabitants of Zagazig, as that upon which such creatures were born there, corresponded very closely with the Sacred Sothic month, formerly sacred to Bâst, the titulary goddess of the place, corresponded in short with the ancient Feast of Bâst.

My inquiries at the time, however, proved futile, and beyond the fact that the town was remarkable for a singular number of semi-wild cats, I discovered nothing to support my theory. However, as I have already stated, a native acquaintance there, a very learned Moslem, to whom I had imparted during my residence some idea of the nature of my studies, sent me a long communication containing particulars of the event which had befallen Lady Coverly during her one-night's sojourn in Zagazig.

Briefly, she had learned from a native attached to the one possible hotel which the town boasted, of the tradition associated with the place. Some other member of the party (for quite a large company had been detained in Zagazig by the mishap) unwisely pointed out to her that the favored date was that upon which they had arrived in the town.

Nothing might have resulted from this; but by a strange fatality (or because of the operation of some unsuspected law understood by the ancients but misapprehended to-day) the matter was sealed in a very extraordinary fashion.

Lady Coverly's room opened upon a balcony, and during the night one of those huge cats of the kind which I had observed myself to infest the

neighborhood, gained access to this balcony. Since the appearance of the creature produced so singular and disastrous an effect, it must certainly have been an unusually large specimen of its kind. I may add that according to my Moslem friend—who, although a man of great culture, was soaked in the traditions of his religion—it was none other than a member of the *ginn*, an *efreet* or evil spirit, and not a cat of flesh and blood which appeared to Lady Coverly. I leave each to choose his own explanation, but let it suffice that Lady Coverly was awakened some time during the night by the appearance at her bedside of this gaunt and hungry-eyed creature. The result was an illness of a kind very dangerous to one in her delicate state of health.

Reflecting, then, upon these matters, I presently came to the official residence of Sir Burnham Coverly, and my expectations regarding the nature of the case were realized…[1]

My house in the narrow street so near to the Bâb-es-Zuwêla and the minarets of Muayyâd was admirably adapted for my new purpose. For here in the very heart of native Cairo, with my great house (which had been built, as are all Oriental houses, to guard secrets) I was as safe from unwelcome intrusion as one upon a desert island, whilst at the same time I was denied none of the conveniences and facilities of civilization.

Lady Coverly, then, never set eyes upon her firstborn, and Sir Burnham, who did, readily reconciled himself to the loss of such a daughter. The announcement which should have appeared joyfully under the press-heading "Births" was unobtrusively inserted under "Deaths," and Sir Burnham being fortunately far from the haunts of the social paragraph writers, this unfortunate event aroused comparatively little comment in the English journals; beyond one or two formal condolences it passed unnoticed.

The fever of research at last had led me into my first definite crime against society—if so it can be called. I had rescued alive the most perfect example of a *psycho-hybrid* with which throughout my extensive special inquiries, I had ever come in contact. Lady Coverly never knew her unnatural child, and Sir Burnham—as well as the old family nurse who had accompanied them out from England—never doubted that it had died in the hour of birth.

I set to work with enthusiasm upon my last and greatest experiment.

To a half-caste woman upon whom I knew I could rely—for she was deeply indebted to me—I entrusted the fostering of the infant hybrid. I personally supervised every detail of the secret nursery, Cassim procuring for me everything necessary for the rearing of this delicate and fragile creature.

Over the early years of her life I will hasten. On three occasions I despaired of preserving her existence, which, from the beginning, had hung by a thread. The first crisis came when she was only four months old, the second on the occasion of her fourth birthday, and the third (most serious of all) when she was eleven, at which age she had become a woman in the Oriental sense and was physically and mentally comparable with an ordinary European girl of nineteen or twenty.

With what scientific ardor did I study her development, noting how the *cat* traits at certain periods (corresponding to the Feast of Bâst) proclaimed themselves above the human traits, whilst at other times the psychic-felinism sank into a sort of sub-conscious quietude, leaving the subject almost a normal woman. Of the physical reflections which were the visible evidence of her hybrid mentality I have already spoken at length (*this refers to a portion of the statement which has been deleted*). She invariably wore gloves out of doors and a veil to conceal the chatoyant eyes. She could, as I have explained, see as well in the dark as in daylight, and her agility was phenomenal as was her power of climbing. Having her hands and feet bare I have repeatedly seen her climb to the top platform of the ivy-clad tower of Friar's Park.

At the age of eleven, then, I recognized that the balance of character was definitely established, and that the two outstanding characteristics of the subject were—firstly (a hereditary trait of the Coverlys) an intense pride of race and a fierce jealousy of any infringement upon what she regarded as prerogatives of birth; secondly, a susceptibility to sudden infatuations which invariably terminated in a mood of ferocious cruelty.

To one unacquainted with the Orient, thus to speak of this girl—in years a mere child—as one speaks of a mature woman, would seem strange, if not unnatural. But in the East, of course, at the age of ten a girl is counted marriageable; at the age of fourteen she is not infrequently the devoted mother of a family.

Significantly—from the point of view of the Damar Greefe Law—my ward had grown up, not as English girls grow, but, like the Easterners, as the hot-house flower grows. The point has intense interest for the scientist. At the age of twelve she was a tall, slender woman, beautifully formed and with a natural elegance and taste which came from the Coverly stock, or possibly from her mother's side.

During eleven months of every year it would have been possible—-although I considered it undesirable—for her to have appeared in public unveiled. She possessed features of perfect *Ancient Egyptian regularity*. I emphasize the point. Her eyes, during the day, were those of a handsome native woman—almond-shaped and of a wonderful amber color. At night they appeared green.

Of her fingers, toes, and the peculiar formation of certain teeth I have spoken at length (*another reference to a deleted passage*). I will deal, now, with those manifestations which proclaimed themselves during the Sothic month of each year formerly associated with the Feast of Bâst.

At such times, which I always dreaded, and with good cause, her innate love of admiration became so excessive as to approach nearly to mania. She hungered for homage, for praise—I had almost said for adoration.

What I may term, for convenience, the *psychic* side of her hybrid mentality at these periods undoubtedly bordered closely upon true insanity; and learning from the Eurasian nurse to whom I have referred the whole history of her birth, my charge, to whom I had given the name of Nahémah (students will recognize its significance), began to display even more marked evidence of a sort of monomania. Bâst, the cat-goddess, became an obsession with her, and she finally conceived the idea that the attributes of that mystical and partly-understood deity were active within her; that she was Bâst, re-born. And, certainly, during one month of every year, her condition closely resembled that which was termed in the Middle Ages "possession."

At such times, moreover (a phenomenon with which I have dealt at length in my work on the subject), she evinced an antipathy towards the whole of the *canine* species which was reciprocated in a singular way. Thus, when, contrary to my express orders, she has wandered abroad during the Sothic period, I have been enabled to trace her movements by the progressive howling of dogs.

Since I had enjoined the nurse to be silent upon all things bearing upon Nahémah's birth, I was enraged at this breach of faith and sent the woman away. But a new situation had been created which I found myself called upon immediately to face.

Nahémah demanded news of her family. As I have made sufficiently evident, it was often difficult, if not impossible, to thwart the desires of my protegée. To condense into a few words a matter which occasioned me long and anxious thought, I may say that I made the necessary arrangements for quitting the house near to the Mosque of Muayyâd which had been my home for fifteen years.

I recognized the danger of Nahémah's traveling in the ordinary way, and she performed the journey to England in the character of an invalid under my professional care. Equally, residence at any public establishment was out of the question, and although I found myself compelled for a time to court discovery by lodging Nahémah in a private suite in an obscure hotel, I hastened to seek a house in some quiet suburb which should reproduce as nearly as possible the advantages of my abode in Cairo.

Such a house I discovered after about a week of feverish questing (for apart from the ordinary dangers of discovery to which my protegée was subject, her proclivity for adventures at the most unseasonable times greatly enhanced the danger which I apprehended). Judge, then, of my satisfaction when I succeeded in obtaining the lease of a small villa—indeed I might almost term it a bungalow—in one of those odd survivals of less crowded days which are yet counted suburbs or parts of greater London.

This house stood alone in some two acres of ground, and because of its lack of modern conveniences and the comparative inaccessibility of its position, my application was eagerly entertained by the agent interested in the leasing of the property. One week later I entered into possession, Cassim, Nahémah and myself comprising the entire household. Much of my valuable—indeed I may say unique—collection, I had been compelled to store; for my new quarters lacked the necessary space for the purpose. But although I was unaware of the fact at the time, I was not destined to be long deprived of a suitable home for the records of my life's work.

Nahémah's demand for some understanding between herself and her family grew daily more insistent; but I might have continued to oppose her

wishes had it not been for the fact that by this time my slender resources were almost exhausted.

It suddenly became evident to me that I held in my hand an instrument whereby I might force Sir Burnham Coverly to finance the new experiments upon which I had entered at this time with all the enthusiasm that a love for science inspires in the student! You may judge me unscrupulous, but the wheel of progress is at least as unrelenting. It was not, however, without much searching self-analysis that one day I presented myself before Sir Burnham Coverly at Friar's Park.

If I had had any scruples prior to that visit they were instantly dispelled by the manner of my reception. Forgetful of the service which (as he believed) I had done him in the past, Sir Burnham allowed all the prejudice of the Anglo-Indian to reveal itself in his first greeting.

Because I am an Eurasian, the worst traits which attach to such a parentage—and of which I am only too painfully conscious—revealed themselves in me. My heart hardened towards this man whose treatment of an intellectual superior was so icily, so offensively condescending. Knowing that I had it in my power to deal him a blow from which he might never recover, I toyed with him for a time; and, his manner growing momentarily more objectionable, I rejoiced to know that his very life and career were in my keeping.

His son, Roger Coverly, at that time a boy only about nine years old, as the prospective heir to Friar's Park was cherished as an only child is always cherished in these circumstances. I pictured to myself the meeting of brother and sister! Yes! because of the refined and deliberate cruelty which Sir Burnham displayed towards myself, I retaliated with a poisoned blade. Having led the conversation in the direction of the heir, I threw away the scabbard of pretense—I launched my challenge.

Never shall I forget Sir Burnham's change of countenance. He tottered, a stricken man. With a sentence of ten words I had won my battle. Upon the details of the arrangement which presently was come to between us, I need not linger. For this statement is intended not as a defense—for what I have done I pay the price—but as a résumé of this crowning inquiry of my scientific career.

At this point the speaker was seized with an alarming spasm of pain. His black eyes opened widely and his face became contorted with agony.

I sprang to his assistance. For, villain self-confessed though he was, humanity would not allow of any man's witnessing unmoved such paroxysms in a fellow creature.

But, ere I could reach his side, Damar Greefe, clenching his teeth and clutching at the chair-arms so that his knuckles gleamed in the lamp-light like white marbles, turned his glance upon me, and:

"Be seated, sir," he whispered. "I desire you to be seated."

Something repellent, yet something powerful, there was in word and glance. Gatton, who also had sprung forward, hesitated. Damar Greefe raised one hand from the chair-arm and waved to us to return to our chairs. Exchanging wondering glances, we both obeyed.

Thereupon, the Eurasian doctor, whose high, bony forehead was dewed with a deathly perspiration and whose hawk-face had assumed an indescribable leaden hue, drew from his pocket a heavy gold watch (his every movement intently followed by the alert Inspector) and consulted it. His hand shook wildly as he returned the timepiece to its place. Then:

"I must hasten," he said hoarsely. "I have—only nineteen minutes…" Gatton looked at me questioningly, but I could only shake my head. The significance of the Eurasian's words escaped me entirely; but as Damar Greefe begun, slowly and with palpable effort, to speak again, I saw a queer expression stealing over the face of the watchful Gatton.

XXVII. Statement of Dr. Damar Greefe (Concluded)

A month later I found myself installed at the Bell House, a property belonging to the Friar's Park estate, and in the commodious apartments of this establishment I had ample room for the accommodation of my library and my priceless specimens. Nahémah was likewise an inmate of the Bell House; but recognizing the precarious nature of my tenure, I had taken the precaution of retaining the suburban villa to which I have already referred; its modest rental proving no tax upon my greatly increased resources.

Blackmail, I hear you exclaim! And, so, if you wish, you may construe my behavior, since I reply—"Science first, science last!" To have been deprived of the means to pursue my experiments at this time would have been, I believed, to impoverish the world. For not even science could reveal to me that my life's work was destined to perish amid the ashes of the Bell House.

My studies had temporarily led me into a by-path, and apprehending that a great international struggle was imminent, I had turned my investigations in a new direction. My great work, whose publication would have shattered so many scientific idols, was complete. The life history of Nahémah had crowned my inquiries into the embryology, physiology and psychology of *psycho-hybrids*. In fact, the presence of my strange protegée promised to become something of an incubus. Later, I was to realize that she was an ever-present means of renewing those funds which the costly character of my new studies absorbed at rather an alarming rate. Perhaps I neglected my self-imposed task of studying the mental and physical development of Nahémah; for, I must admit that lost in my new work I presently awakened to the fact that she had outgrown the control which I had formerly exercised over her.

There were unpleasant episodes. For example, in spite of those precautions which I adopted, and of the ceaseless vigilance of Cassim, the existence of a female inmate of the Bell House was soon a popular scandal throughout Upper Crossleys. For this I cared nothing; but far more perturbing was Nahémah's behavior on the occasion of a certain visit of Sir Burnham's legal adviser to Friar's Park.

In some way she secretly gained admission to the house (the episode occurred during that Sothic month whose annual coming I had learned to dread). Sir Burnham actually saw her in the chapel. He sent a messenger post-haste to the Bell-House, and I finally discovered Nahémah in hiding and insisted upon her immediate return. This was only one of several instances of her perverse behavior, which truly seemed to be inspired by some demon bent upon the destruction of both of us.

Her mental activity was extraordinary, and unknown to me she had followed my new researches with that intellectual ardor which she directly inherited from the Coverlys. Her ferocious jealousy of any infringement upon those family rights denied her by her father had also developed, it

seemed; and one night, shortly after the scene to which I have referred, entering my study she placed before me a proposal to which I listened with absolute horror.

I should explain that Sir Burnham, placing the repute of his house and that of his heir above all other considerations (with one possible exception: the necessity for concealing the appalling truth from his wife) had consented to make arrangements for the support of Nahémah on the understanding that her existence was to remain a profound secret from the world. It was upon this understanding that I leased the Bell House. And although, in certain wild indiscretions, I had recognized in Nahémah the symptoms of revolt against such a monastic existence, because of absorption in my new studies I had not realized how deep was her resentment of this enforced anonymity. Certainly I had never grasped the power and the depth of her hatred of her brother, Roger Coverly.

Now, on this fateful night, in one of the semi-insane outbursts which I had learned to dread, she poured out her loathing and detestation of her brother. She was a Coverly (such was the gist of her plaint) and the doors of Friar's Park were closed to her; the world knew nothing of her existence. In the event of the death of Sir Burnham, then Roger would inherit the property, and complete disaster would be our lot.

To condense the purport of her demand, it was this: that I should test the efficacy of my new discovery by removing this objectionable obstacle from her path!

Of my subsequent behavior I offer no defense. I am not prepared to admit that I was forced into action by the forceful personality of my protegée; in fact, I state emphatically that a chance interview with the heir during one of his visits to Friar's Park led me to regard the matter in a new light and from a standpoint almost identical with that of Nahémah.

How warning was conveyed to Sir Burnham I know not, unless by some indiscretion of Nahémah, but, instead of returning to the public school from which he had come to Friar's Park, Roger Coverly was sent abroad in haste, accompanied by a private tutor. The date of his departure corresponded with that which I associate with the beginning of my downfall.

Nahémah threatened to present herself to her mother, and painfully aware that such a course (which, nevertheless, I recognized her to be quite capable of adopting) would spell disaster, I fell in with her wishes. Two months later

we were established, Nahémah, Cassim and I, within two miles of the new residence of Roger Coverly and his tutor in Basle.

The circumstances attendant upon the death of Roger Coverly have hitherto been veiled in obscurity, and although Sir Burnham suspected the truth, in the first place he had no evidence, and in the second place, because of the existence of Nahémah, I knew that he dared not attempt to prove it.

Briefly, I had perfected that Chinese poison called in the northern provinces *hlangkûna*. By a series of dangerous experiments I had convinced myself that it was almost identical with *contarella*, the preparation made notorious by the Borgia family. Therefore I concluded that *contarella* came to Rome from the East, possibly via Palestine. Inoculating with *hlangkûna*, I found, produced death in two hours (*contarella*—one hour and forty-five minutes) leaving no trace by which the means employed could be discovered. Self-inoculation by the subject was the method which I adopted —and which Cæsar Borgia had adopted before me; so that no chain of evidence existed.

All that was necessary was for a scarf, a collar or other article of apparel coming in direct contact with the skin of the subject, to be placed in my possession. (A glove was the Borgia's favorite medium.) It was painted with *hlangkûna* and replaced. When worn, an intense irritation was produced and a cutaneous eruption which, if scratched even very lightly, resulted in a puncture of the skin sufficient to allow the inimical elements of the poison to obtain access to the system of the subject.

I do not propose to enter into details, but so it was that Roger Coverly died. Following a brief sojourn abroad, we presently returned again to the Bell House. This gratification of her bloodthirsty desires had done no more than to whet the feline appetite of Nahémah, and she forced me to impose new and almost insupportable conditions upon Sir Burnham, with the result, as is known, that from being a very wealthy man he became an impoverished one.

I even held a mortgage on Friar's Park on behalf of Nahémah; for by this time I had fully recognized the fact that like a second Frankenstein, I had raised up a monster which sooner or later must devour me.

Her indiscretions threatened daily to result in exposure; and after the death of Sir Burnham, which occurred a short time later, these increased in number and audacity. The dying baronet had impressed upon his wife the

necessity of following my guidance in all things. Undoubtedly he died hoping that Lady Coverly might live out her days in ignorance of the grim secret of the Bell House. This dying wish of his was gratified. The loss of her son, so closely followed by that of her husband, prostrated Lady Coverly in a mental illness from which she never recovered, although I exercised all my skill in an endeavor to restore her reason. She spent the remainder of her days in a semi-comatose state which so closely resembled death that to this present moment I do not know the exact hour at which dissolution took place.

In the man Hawkins, once a game-keeper of Sir Burnham's, I found an instrument ready to my hand. I closed the Park to the public and took all those precautions for preserving my secret which prudence dictated: this at the cost of a reputation in Upper Crossleys which few men would have survived, but which troubled me not at all, since it left me undisturbed to those studies which to me were everything.

The death of Sir Burnham, however, had raised a new danger; for in the person of Sir Marcus Coverly, the heir, I perceived a formidable enemy, who because of his wealth might redeem Friar's Park, and, because of the fact that he belonged to a cadet line, might care nothing for the skeleton in Sir Burnham's cupboard.

I have said that science is callous, and I admit that it needed little prompting from Nahémah to urge me to take the next step. It is worthy of note, however, from a scientific point of view, that whilst I was prompted by motives of expediency, she was actuated solely by a lust to destroy everything that bore the name of Coverly.

My experiments for some time past had been directed to the discovery of new instruments of warfare. Particularly I had addressed myself to the preparation of a *gas* which should possess the peculiar properties of *hlangkûna*, and by inhalation affect the lung tissues, thus producing instantaneous results. In this I had succeeded a short time prior to Sir Burnham's death, and one of the future belligerents had approached me.

For the purpose of carrying out experiments, a specially designed gun was brought from Essen and installed in a secluded part of the Park. Artillery specialists carried out a number of tests with shells of various patterns; but because I bluntly declined to divulge the formula for the making of "L.K. Vapor" (so I had named it) until substantial guarantees

were given, negotiations were broken off. I retained, however, the model howitzer as well as a number of special light shells. The gun was one of extraordinary accuracy, and it was possible, given suitable weather conditions, mechanically to train it upon a given target and without any preliminary "searching" to score a certain hit.

I caused the piece to be mounted on the top platform of the tower at Friar's Park, and having completed those mathematical calculations with the result of which Mr. Addison has since become familiar, I awaited the return of the new baronet from Russia. Shortly after his arrival, I invited him to visit Upper Crossleys.

He refused—in terms which provoked an outburst on Nahémah's part more violent than I had ever witnessed. But on his final return to England, she made it her business closely to study his habits and movements. She sought, feverishly, for some pregnable point of attack. *Hlangkûna* was tried three times—and three times failed. It was the distorted genius of Nahémah, however, which finally dictated a new line of action. She learned that Sir Marcus was paying attention to Isobel Merlin, the fiancée of Eric Coverly (who in the event of Sir Marcus's death would inherit the title).

Nahémah propounded to me a theory so strange and so novel that I was lost in admiration of that brilliant intellect which, partly inherited from her forebears, was stimulated and brightened by a cat-like cunning which belonged to the other side of her hybrid personality.

In that district where my suburban villa was situated there were several other isolated establishments which their owners experienced some difficulty in leasing; and one of these—namely the Red House—particularly suited the purpose which Nahémah had in view. The extensive resources now at my disposal enabled me to dispense with the usual formalities which beset the lessee and to obtain possession of the Red House without even appearing in person.

The deeper to complicate the issue, Nahémah carried out the whole of the negotiations over the telephone, and hers was the "voice" afterwards rendered notorious by the press, which issued the directions culminating in the death of Marcus Coverly.

I recognize that the inquiries of the police have placed in your possession many particulars respecting this matter, so that I will not repeat them here but will content myself with explaining the nature of the device employed.

In this case, for the removal of the subject, I had obtained possession of an old telephone and had adjusted it to meet my requirements.

In a recess of the room which I caused Sir Marcus Coverly to visit at the Red House, I placed this duplicate telephone; the false cable communicating with the instrument was attached to a plug in the wall above, but communicated with a gas cylinder in the adjoining room. In short, what appeared to be cable was in reality tubing and the act of taking the receiver from the hook released through the mouthpiece a sufficient quantity of L.K. Vapor to have asphyxiated a dozen men.

In order to insure the subject's receiving the benefit of the whole discharge, I had caused a very heavy curtain to be draped in this recess, which thus became a rough gas-chamber. Following the first discharge, the subject would fall to the floor and the gas being a heavy one he would there receive his *quietus*.

The only detail which occasioned much thought was that of the bell by which Sir Marcus should be summoned to this prepared telephone; for it formed no part of the plan for myself to appear anywhere in the neighborhood at the time of the experiment. I was of course compelled to pay a secret visit to the Red House for the purpose of installing the telephone device, and at the same time I installed the bell. This was worked from a small storage battery and I arranged that by the opening of the garage door the bell would be put in motion and by the closing of the door at the end of the same building the ringing would cease.

A simple contrivance screwed to both doors made this possible, but I know not by whose hand the ringing would have been accomplished if it had not been for one of those brilliant suggestions of Nahémah's, which hovered between the domain of genius and that of fiendishness.

She proposed that she should ring up the local police depot and ask the constable on that beat to lock the garage, thus making him the direct instrument for the removal of Sir Marcus!

I knew, since I myself had been a resident in this district, that a constable patrolled College Road at an hour roughly corresponding with that at which it was proposed to cause Sir Marcus to visit the Red House; and because all strategy is based upon the clock, a brief survey of the facts convinced me that Nahémah's plan was feasible.

Thus, it was Police-Constable Bolton, whose evidence has appeared in the press, who actually killed Sir Marcus Coverly! I come now to the dangerous attitude adopted by Nahémah immediately after the event.

We had had a case of suitable dimensions made for containing the body, and had had it delivered at the Red House garage, where it was received by a district messenger instructed for the purpose. Upon me devolved the task of carrying the body from the supper-room to the garage—a task which I performed shortly after the departure of Police-Constable Bolton. I packed the body, removed the telephone and also all traces of the bell-device.

The same carter had instructions to call for the case in the morning, and the garage door was left open to enable him to collect it. In short, except for these two essential visits, one before and one after the experiment, there was no occasion for myself or Nahémah to appear in the neighborhood of the Red House.

But that cat-like spirit of impish mischief which possessed her at this season (and especially at night) together with an almost insane joy which she took in gloating over the destruction of her cousin, had led her, contrary to my special injunctions, to haunt the vicinity on the evening of the experiment. Thus, she not only witnessed the arrival of the doomed man, but also saw the constable perform the duty imposed upon him. This might have mattered little, had it not been for the presence of Mr. Addison, whom an unkind fate at this juncture involved in the matter.

For Mr. Addison Nahémah conceived one of those sudden and violent infatuations which characterized the feline element of her complex mentality. Unknown to me, Nahémah followed Mr. Addison to his home in the neighborhood and indeed was actually seen by him, I believe, on two occasions. Thus far all might yet have been well; but when later I entered the Red House to carry out the only dangerous part of the scheme, to my consternation Nahémah insisted upon accompanying me.

Prompted by that destructive devil which sometimes possessed her she not only (unknown to me) painted a figure of a cat upon the crate, but also she placed an image of Bâst in the box with the dead man!

The premature discovery of Sir Marcus, owing to the accident at the docks, prevented the plan being carried out in all its details, but when, through certain rumors which began to creep into the press, I learned of the

presence of the statuette, I began to realize the dangerous position in which I was placed and the handicap of such an accomplice.

As a result of the scene which ensued, Nahémah, still under the worst influences of her hybrid disposition, openly visited Mr. Addison and recovered the image of Bâst! This she did in circumstances which hopelessly compromised both of us, since they revealed in a hitherto faultless plan the presence of an unsuspected party and directed the police inquiries into an entirely new channel.

I thought it expedient to retire immediately to the Bell House, which during my brief absence in London had been in charge of Cassim, all approaches to Friar's Park being carefully guarded by the man Hawkins.

At this point I may touch upon a previous danger which had been met and overcome. Provision had been made in the will of Sir Burnham for the retention by his widow of Friar's Park and the revenues thereof; but since in the event of her death I should have been compelled to appear in the character of the mortgagee, it was contrary to our interests that Lady Coverly should die whilst any heir to the estate remained alive.

Nevertheless, despite all my care, this stricken woman had died six months prior to the first return of Sir Marcus from Russia. Since she had been a helpless invalid during the last years of her life I experienced little difficulty in concealing the fact of her death. Cassim and I interred her by night in the family mausoleum where she lies beside her husband.

In these circumstances, judge of my feelings when, shortly after the premature discovery termed in the press "the *Oritoga* mystery," Mr. Addison one day presented himself at the Bell House! His avowed intention of calling upon Lady Coverly left me no alternative. Never in all his days, not even when he miraculously escaped the L.K. Vapor at the Abbey Inn, did Mr. Addison stand so near to death as there—in my study!

Let me explain the situation more fully. The fatal Sothic month which I have learned to regard with horror, commenced on the twenty-third ultimo and does not terminate for another five days. Nahémah was—and still remains—"possessed." You will understand my employment of the term.

On the night preceding this visit of Mr. Addison's, I had traced her nocturnal movements by the howling of many dogs, and fearful of some indiscretion which might place my neck in a noose, I had followed her. I found her in a narrow footpath which leads to the Abbey Inn!

Despite entreaties, threats, she declined to give any explanation of her behavior. But finally I prevailed upon her to return to the Bell House. The appearance of Mr. Addison on the following morning opened my eyes to the truth. With the scandal still attaching to the names of Edward Hines and another man, called, I believe, Adams, a subject for gossip throughout the neighborhood, I could not at so perilous a time risk the consequences of a third intrigue. I determined that Mr. Addison could better be spared by the community than I. Nahémah's next insanity—an open visit to the Abbey Inn—confirmed my opinion.

Thereupon I committed my first mistake. Cassim, the Nubian mute, who had been in my service for many years, was formerly attached to a great household in Stambûl. I shall probably be understood. I instructed him; and Mr. Addison very cleverly playing upon his superstitious nature, Cassim failed.

My time grows short. I will touch upon my second folly of that night. Long before, the possibility of firing a projectile from the tower of Friar's Park into the upper front of the Abbey Inn had presented itself to me in the light of a feasible experiment.

Unaware that Inspector Gatton was watching me—unaware that in my absence he had actually detected the presence of the gun upon the tower—I played my last card… and lost.

Cassim it was who detected the fact that police were watching the Bell House! Cassim had failed me once. I instructed him a second time.

I near the end of my statement. Destruction of all my effects, of all evidence of my work, and, crowning tragedy, of every trace of a life's research, was unavoidable. Knowing that every railway station and port would be watched and that my marked personality could not hope to escape the vigilance of the authorities, I determined to make a bid for freedom by seeking the shelter of my villa in London.

Cassim systematically fired the Bell House… and perished in the flames! Under cover of the confusion which the conflagration occasioned, Nahémah and I succeeded in making our retirement by the gate opening on the Hainingham road.

But, in my attempts upon the life of Mr. Addison, I had not counted with Nahémah. I had raised up a monster… that monster… has destroyed me…

XXVIII. The Claws of the Cat

The hoarse voice ceased. Neither Gatton nor I moved or spoke. Then:

"I have three minutes—or less," whispered Damar Greefe. "Question me. I am at your service."

"Where is your villa?" asked Gatton suddenly.

"It is called The Laurels—"

"The Laurels!" I cried incredulously.

"It is called so," whispered the Eurasian. "It is the last house but one in College Road! From there I conducted my last experiment with L.K. Vapor, which resulted not in the death of Mr. Addison, but in that of Eric Coverly —"

Gatton sprang to his feet.

"Come along, Mr. Addison!" he cried. But:

"The Laurels is empty," came, ever more faintly. "In her Sothic fury, Nahémah fled. The bloodlust is upon her. I warn you. She is more dangerous… than… any rabid dog… Tuberculosis will end her life… before the snows… come. But there is time for her to… Ah, God's mercy!"

He writhed. He was contorted. Foam appeared Upon his lips.

"*Hlangkûna!*" he moaned, "*hlangkûna! She*… touched me with a poisoned needle… *two hours*—ago…"

He rose to his full height, uttered a stifled scream, and crashed down upon the floor—dead!

In a species of consternation, Gatton and I stood looking at one another—standing rigidly like men of stone one on either side of that long, thin body stretched upon my study floor. The hawk face in profile was startlingly like that of Anubis as it lay against the red carpet.

Neither of us, I think, was capable of grasping the fact that the inquiry was all but ended and that the mysteries which had seemed so dark and insoluble were cleared up and the inner workings of this strange conspiracy laid bare before us. One thought, I believe, was uppermost in both our minds: that the man who now lay dead upon the floor, a victim of one of his own devilish inventions, was no more than a brilliant madman.

If his great work on the ape-men of Abyssinia and that greater one dealing with what he called "the *psycho-hybrids*" had ever had existence outside his own strange imagination no one was ever likely to know. But that Dr. Damar Greefe was a genius whom much learning had made mad, neither of us doubted.

The whole thing seemed the wildest phantasy, and, for a time, in doubting the reality of the Eurasian's work, I found myself doubting the evidence of my own senses and seriously wondering if this possessed witch-cat whose green eyes had moved like Satanic lanterns throughout the whole phantasmagoria, had any more palpable existence than the other strange things spoken of by the unscrupulous scientist.

That Gatton's thoughts had been running parallel with my own was presently made manifest, for:

"Without a moment's delay, Mr. Addison," he said, speaking like a man newly awakened from slumber, "we must proceed to The Laurels and test the truth of what we have heard."

He crossed to the door, threw it open, and:

"Sergeant!" he cried. "Come in! The prisoner is dead!"

As the sergeant and the constable who were waiting came into the study and stood looking in stupefaction at the body stretched on the floor, I heard the telephone bell ring. I started nervously. That sound awakened ghastly memories, and I thought of the man who only a few hours before had met his death in the room where now the bell was ringing its summons.

I doubted if I could ever spend another night beneath that roof, for here Dr. Damar Greefe, the arch-assassin, and one of his victims both had met their ends. I heard the voice of Coates speaking in the adjoining room, and presently, as Gatton went to the door:

"Miss Merlin wishes to speak to you, sir," said Coates.

I ran eagerly to the 'phone, and:

"Hello!" I cried. "Is that you, Isobel?"

"Yes!" came her reply, and I noted the agitation in her voice. "I am more dreadfully frightened than I have ever been in my life. If only you were here! Is it possible for you to come at once?"

"What has alarmed you?" I asked anxiously.

"I can't explain," she replied. "It is a dreadful sense of foreboding—and all the dogs in the neighborhood seem to have gone mad!"

"Dogs!" I cried, a numbing fear creeping over me. "You mean that they are howling?"

"Howling!" she answered. "I have never heard such a pandemonium at any time. In my present state of nerves, Jack, I did the wrong thing in coming to this funny lonely little house. I feel deserted and hopeless and, for some reason, in terrible danger."

"Are you *alone*, then?" I asked, in ever growing anxiety.

To my utter consternation:

"Yes!" she replied. "Aunt Alison was called away half an hour ago—to identify some one at a hospital who had asked for her—"

"What! an accident?"

"I suppose so."

"But the servants?"

"Cook left this morning. You remember Aunt told you she was leaving."

"There is the girl, Mary?"

"Aunt 'phoned for her to join her at the hospital!"

"What! I don't understand! *'Phoned*, you say? Was it Mrs. Wentworth *herself* who 'phoned?"

"No; I think not. One of the nurses, Mary said. But at any rate, she has gone, Jack, and I'm frightened to death! There's something else," she added.

"Yes?" I said eagerly.

She laughed in a way that sounded almost hysterical.

"Since Mary went I have thought once or twice that I have seen some one or something creeping around outside the house in the shadows amongst the trees! And just a while ago something happened which really prompted me to 'phone you."

"What was it?"

"I heard a sort of scratching at an upper window. It was just like—"

"Yes! Yes!"

"Like a great *cat* trying to gain admittance!"

"See that all the doors and windows are fastened!" I cried. "Whatever happens or whoever knocks don't open to any one, you understand? We will be with you in less than half an hour!"

Still in that frightened voice:

"For heaven's sake," she begged, "don't be long, Jack!…"

I became aware of a singular rasping sound on the wires, which rendered Isobel's words almost unintelligible. Then:

"Jack," I heard, in a faint whisper, "there is a strange noise… just outside the room…"

Silence came. But, vaguely, above that rasping sound, I had detected the words: "Cutting… telephone… wires…"

I replaced the receiver. My hand was shaking wildly.

"Gatton!" I said, "do you understand? *It* has turned its attention to Miss Merlin!" Then, raising my voice: "Coates!" I cried, "Coates! run for the car! Hurry, man! Some one's life depends on your speed!"

Inspector Gatton grabbed the telephone directory.

"I will instruct the local police," he muttered. "Give me the exact address, Mr. Addison, and go and see the cab that's outside. If it's a good one we'll take it instead of waiting."

Out I dashed, spurred by a sickly terror, crying Mrs. Wentworth's address as I ran. And of the ensuing five minutes I retain nothing but chaotic memories: the bewildered cabman; the police bending over the gaunt form on my study floor; Gatton's voice shouting orders. Then, we had jumped into the cab and enjoining the man to drive like fury, were speeding off through the busy London streets. Leaving the quietude of one suburb for the maelstrom of central London, we presently emerged into an equally quiet backwater upon the Northerly outskirts.

It was a nightmare journey, but when at last we approached the house for which we were bound my apprehension and excitement grew even keener. It was infinitely more isolated and lonely than I had ever realized, behind its high brick walls.

Of the local police there was no sign. And without hesitation we ran in at the open gate and up the path towards the porch. Every window in the house was brightly illuminated, testifying to the greatness of the occupant's fear. Gaining the porch, we stopped, as if prompted by some mutual thought, and listened.

There was the remote murmuring of busy London, but here surrounding us was a stillness as great as that which prevailed in my own neighborhood; and as we stood there, keenly alert—distinctly we both heard the howling of dogs!

"You hear it?" rapped Gatton.

"I do!" I replied.

Grasping the bell-knob, I executed a vigorous peal upon the bell. There was a light in the hallway but my ringing elicited no response, until:

"My God, look!" cried Gatton.

He pulled me backward out of the porch, looking upward to the window of a room on the first floor.

A silhouette appeared there—undoubtedly that of Isobel. She seemed to be endeavoring to pull the curtain aside… when the shadow of a long arm reached out to her, and she was plucked irresistibly back. The sound of a muffled scream reached my ears, and:

"Great heavens! *It* has got in!" whispered Gatton.

He raised his hand and the shrill note of a police whistle split the silence.

The closed door was obviously too strong to be forced without the aid of implements for the purpose, and we began to run around the house, looking for some means of entrance. Suddenly:

"There's the way!" said Gatton, and pointed up to where the branches of an old elm tree stretched out before a window. The glass of the window was entirely shattered except for some few points which glittered like daggers around the edges of the frame.

"Can you do it?"

"In the circumstances—yes!" I said.

Without more ado I began to climb the elm, stimulated by memories of how I had entered Friar's Park. It afforded little foothold for the first six feet and proved an even tougher job than I had anticipated, but at last I reached a projecting limb, the bulk of which had been sawn off. Gatton's agility was not so great as mine, but at the moment that I half staggered and half fell into the room, I heard him swinging himself onto the limb behind me so that as I leaped to the open door he came tumbling in through the window, and the pair of us raced side by side along the corridor towards an apartment facing front from which horrifying cries and sounds of conflict now arose.

Gaining the closed door of this room, I literally hurled myself upon it. It crashed open… and I beheld a dreadful spectacle.

Isobel lay forced back upon a settee which occupied the window recess—and bending over her, having her back turned towards me, was a tall, lithe, black-clad woman who, so far as I could see, was clutching Isobel's throat

and forcing her further backward—backward upon the cushions strewn upon the settee!

But instant upon the door's opening this horrible scene changed. With never a backward glance (so that neither Gatton nor I had even a momentary glimpse of her face) the black-robed woman sprang to the window, opened it in a moment, and to my dismay and astonishment sprang out into the darkness!

My first thought was for Isobel—but Gatton leaped across the room and craned out, peering on to the path below. Indeed, even as I dropped on my knees beside the swooning girl, I found myself listening for the thud of the falling body upon the gravel path. But no sound reached me. That uncanny creature must have alighted truly in the manner of a cat. Through the stillness of the house rang the flat note of a police-whistle. From some distant spot I heard a faint reply.

For long I failed to persuade myself that Isobel had not sustained some ghastly injury from the attack of the cat-woman. Memories uprose starkly before me of that *hlangkûna* and the other dreadful death-instruments of the mad Eurasian doctor. Not even the assurances of the local medical man who had been summoned in haste could convince me. For I recognized how petty was his knowledge in comparison with that of Dr. Damar Greefe. But although I trembled to think what her fate might have been if we had arrived a few minutes later, the fact remained (and I returned thanks to Heaven) that she had escaped serious physical injury at the hands of her assailant.

But, alas, to this very hour she sometimes awakes shrieking in the night. And her terrified cry is always the same: "The green eyes of Bâst!… the green-eyes of Bâst!"

XXIX. An Afterword

I wish it lay in my power to satisfy the curiosity in all quarters expressed respecting the identity of "Nahémah"—the cat-woman, or *psycho-hybrid*, who figured in Dr. Damar Greefe's statement. But it is my duty, as

chronicler of the strange and awful occurrences which at this period disturbed the even tenor of my existence, to state that from the moment in which she leaped from the window of Mrs. Wentworth's house to the path below, neither I nor any other witness who ever came forward *beheld her again*.

At the end of a quest which exercised the intricate machinery of New Scotland Yard throughout the length and breadth of the land, Inspector Gatton was compelled to admit himself defeated in this particular. And his explanation of the failure to apprehend the central figure of the tragedies which had exterminated the house of Coverly was a curious one.

"You know, Mr. Addison," he said to me one evening, "the more I think of this Nahémah the more I wonder if such a person ever really existed!"

"What do you mean, Gatton?" I asked.

"Well," he replied, "I mean that although you and I and others are prepared to testify to the existence of a woman in the case, what do we really know about her (leaving Damar Greefe's statement out of the question) except that she possessed very remarkable eyes?"

"And very remarkable agility," I interrupted.

"Yes, I'll grant you that," he said; "her agility was certainly phenomenal. But, still, as I was saying, except for this definite information we have no *proof* outside the statement of Dr. Damar Greefe that such a person as Nahémah ever existed or at any rate that there ever was a creature possessing the attributes which he ascribed to her. The Laurels is an ordinary suburban house, which has been leased for a number of years by a 'Mr. and Miss da Costa'—Damar Greefe, no doubt, and a female companion. But of his 'great work' and so forth there's not a trace. There are a lot of Egyptian antiquities, I'll admit, but not a scrap of evidence; and the rooms evidently used by the female inmate of the household are those of an ordinary cultured Englishwoman."

"But, good heavens, Gatton," I cried, "whatever explanation can you offer of a series of crimes which were palpably directed against the members of the Coverly family?"

"I don't say," continued Gatton, "that there wasn't a sort of feud or vendetta at the bottom of the business. I merely mention that we have no *evidence* to show that the person responsible for it was any other than this Eurasian doctor."

"But what could have been his object?"

"I could suggest several; but my point at the moment is this: although I am prepared to grant that he had a woman associate of some kind, I can't see that there is any evidence to prove that she was otherwise than an ordinary human being, except that I am disposed to think she was demented."

"You are probably right there, Gatton," I agreed; "and Dr. Damar Greefe was by no means normal; in fact I think he was a dangerous and very brilliant maniac."

"At any rate," added Gatton, "no trace of this Nahémah has been found—which, at the least, is very significant."

"Significant, if you like," I replied; "but for my own part I have no ambition whatever to see again those dreadful green eyes."

"I never did see them," said Gatton musingly; "therefore I can't speak upon the matter; but when we got Dr. Damar Greefe I think we had the head of the conspiracy. How much of his 'statement' is true and how much the product of a diseased mind is something we are never likely to know."

"Nor am I curious to know it," I assured him. "I only desire to forget the tragedies associated with the green eyes of Bâst and to leave the darkness of the past behind—"

"And," said Gatton, with a smile less grim than usual, "you have my best wishes for the future."

THE END

Footnotes

[1] Part of the statement which immediately followed, being of a purely technical nature, is omitted here.

Quest of the Sacred Slipper

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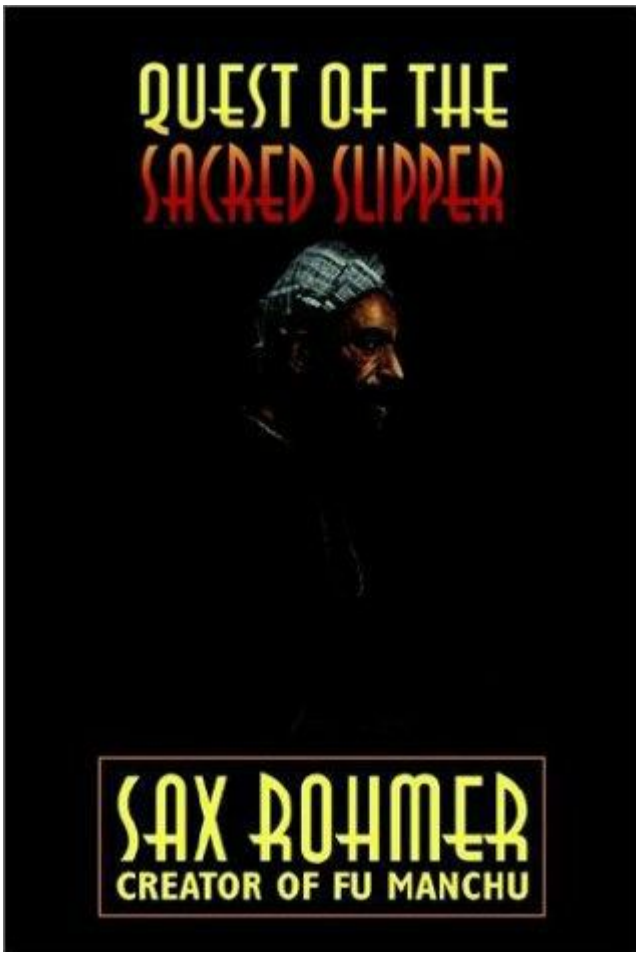


Contents

I. The Phantom Scimitar
II. The Girl With the Violet Eyes
III. "Hassan of Aleppo"
IV. The Oblong Box
V. The Occupant of the Box

VI. The Ring of the Prophet
VII. First Attempt on the Safe
VIII. The Violet Eyes Again
IX. Second Attempt on the Safe
X. At the British Antiquarian Museum
XI. The Hole in the Blind
XII. The Hashishin Watch
XIII. The White Beam
XIV. A Scream in the Night
XV. A Shrivelled Hand
XVI. The Dwarf
XVII. The Woman With the Basket
XVIII. What Came Through the Window
XIX. A Rapping at Midnight
XX. The Golden Pavilion
XXI. The Black Tube
XXII. The Light of El-Medineh
XXIII. The Three Messages
XXIV. I Keep the Appointment
XXV. The Watcher in Bank Chambers
XXVI. The Strong-Room
XXVII. The Slipper
XXVIII. Carneta
XXIX. We Meet Mr Isaacs
XXX. At the Gate House
XXXI. The Pool of Death
XXXII. Six Gray Patches
XXXIII. How We were Reenforced
XXXIV. My Last Meeting with Hassan of Aleppo

I. THE PHANTOM SCIMITAR

I was not the only passenger aboard the S.S. Mandalay who perceived the disturbance and wondered what it might portend and from whence proceed. A goodly number of passengers were joining the ship at Port Said. I was lounging against the rail, pipe in mouth, lazily wondering, with a large vagueness.

What a heterogeneous rabble it was!—a brightly coloured rabble, but the colours all were dirty, like the town and the canal. Only the sky was clean; the sky and the hard, merciless sunlight which spared nothing of the uncleanness, and defied one even to think of the term dear to tourists, "picturesque." I was in that kind of mood. All the natives appeared to be pockmarked; all the Europeans greasy with perspiration.

But what was the stir about?

I turned to the dark, bespectacled young man who leaned upon the rail beside me. From the first I had taken to Mr Ahmad Ahmadeen.

"There is some kind of undercurrent of excitement among the natives," I said, "a sort of subdued Greek chorus is audible. What's it all about?"

Mr Ahmadeen smiled. After a gaunt fashion, he was a handsome man and had a pleasant smile.

"Probably," he replied, "some local celebrity is joining the ship."

I stared at him curiously.

"Any idea who he is?" (The soul of the copyhunter is a restless soul.)

A group of men dressed in semi-European fashion—that is, in European fashion save for their turbans, which were green—passed close to us along the deck.

Ahmadeen appeared not to have heard the question.

The disturbance, which could only be defined as a subdued uproar, but could be traced to no particular individual or group, grew momentarily louder—and died away. It was only when it had completely ceased that one realized how pronounced it had been —how altogether peculiar, secret; like that incomprehensible murmuring in a bazaar when, unknown to the insular visitor, a reputed saint is present.

Then it happened; the inexplicable incident which, though I knew it not, heralded the coming of strange things, and the dawn of a new power; which should set up its secret standards in England, which should flood Europe and the civilized world with wonder.

A shrill scream marked the overture—a scream of fear and of pain, which dropped to a groan, and moaned out into the silence of which it was the cause.

"My God! what's that?"

I started forward. There was a general crowding rush, and a darkly tanned and bearded man came on board, carrying a brown leather case. Behind him surged those who bore the victim.

"It's one of the lascars!"

"No—an Egyptian!"

"It was a porter—?"

"What is it—?"

"Someone been stabbed!"

"Where's the doctor?"

"Stand away there, if you please!"

That was a ship's officer; and the voice of authority served to quell the disturbance. Through a lane walled with craning heads they bore the insensible man. Ahmadeen was at my elbow.

"A Copt," he said softly. "Poor devil!" I turned to him. There was a queer expression on his lean, clean-shaven, bronze face.

"Good God!" I said. "His hand has been cut off!"

That was the fact of the matter. And no one knew who was responsible for the atrocity. And no one knew what had become of the severed hand! I wasted not a moment in linking up the story. The pressman within me acted automatically.

"The gentleman just come aboard, sir," said a steward, "is Professor Deeping. The poor beggar who was assaulted was carrying some of the Professor's baggage." The whole incident struck me as most odd. There was an idea lurking in my mind that something else—something more—lay behind all this. With impatience I awaited the time when the injured man, having received medical attention, was conveyed ashore, and Professor Deeping reappeared. To the celebrated traveller and Oriental scholar I introduced myself.

He was singularly reticent.

"I was unable to see what took place, Mr Cavanagh," he said. "The poor fellow was behind me, for I had stepped from the boat ahead of him. I had just taken a bag from his hand, but he was carrying another, heavier one. It is a clean cut, like that of a scimitar. I have seen very similar wounds in the cases of men who have suffered the old Moslem penalty for theft."

Nothing further had come to light when the Mandalay left, but I found new matter for curiosity in the behaviour of the Moslem party who had come on board at Port Said.

In conversation with Mr Bell, the chief officer, I learned that the supposed leader of the party was one, Mr Azraeel. "Obviously," said Bell, "not his real name or not all it. I don't suppose they'll show themselves on deck; they've got their own servants with them, and seem to be people of consequence."

This conversation was interrupted, but I found my unseen fellow voyagers peculiarly interesting and pursued inquiries in other directions. I saw members of the distinguished travellers' retinue going about their duties, but never obtained a glimpse of Mr Azraeel nor of any of his green-turbaned companions.

"Who is Mr Azraeel?" I asked Ahmadeen.

"I cannot say," replied the Egyptian, and abruptly changed the subject.

Some curious aroma of mystery floated about the ship. Ahmadeen conveyed to me the idea that he was concealing something. Then, one night, Mr Bell invited me to step forward with him.

"Listen," he said.

From somewhere in the fo'c'sle proceeded low chanting.

"Hear it?"

"Yes. What the devil is it?"

"It's the lascars," said Bell. "They have been behaving in a most unusual manner ever since the mysterious Mr Azraeel joined us. I may be wrong in associating the two things, but I shan't be sorry to see the last of our mysterious passengers."

The next happening on board the Mandalay which I have to record was the attempt to break open the door of Professor Deeping's stateroom. Except when he was actually within, the Professor left his room door religiously locked.

He made light of the affair, but later took me aside and told me a curious story of an apparition which had appeared to him.

"It was a crescent of light," he said, "and it glittered through the darkness there to the left as I lay in my berth."

"A reflection from something on the deck?"

Deeping smiled, uneasily.

"Possibly," he replied; "but it was very sharply defined. Like the blade of a scimitar," he added.

I stared at him, my curiosity keenly aroused. "Does any explanation suggest itself to you?" I said.

"Well," he confessed, "I have a theory, I will admit; but it is rather going back to the Middle Ages. You see, I have lived in the East a lot; perhaps I have assimilated some of their superstitions."

He was oddly reticent, as ever. I felt convinced that he was keeping something back. I could not stifle the impression that the clue to these mysteries lay somewhere around the invisible Mohammedan party.

"Do you know," said Bell to me, one morning, "this trip's giving me the creeps. I believe the damned ship's haunted! Three bells in the middle watch last night, I'll swear I saw some black animal crawling along the deck, in the direction of the forward companion-way."

"Cat?" I suggested.

"Nothing like it," said Mr Bell. "Mr Cavanagh, it was some uncanny thing! I'm afraid I can't explain quite what I mean, but it was something I wanted to shoot!"

"Where did it go?"

The chief officer shrugged his shoulders. "Just vanished," he said. "I hope I don't see it again."

At Tilbury the Mohammedan party went ashore in a body. Among them were veiled women. They contrived so to surround a central figure that I entirely failed to get a glimpse of the mysterious Mr Azraeel. Ahmadeen was standing close by the companion-way, and I had a momentary impression that one of the women slipped something into his hand. Certainly, he started; and his dusky face seemed to pale.

Then a deck steward came out of Deeping's stateroom, carrying the brown bag which the Professor had brought aboard at Port Said. Deeping's voice came:

"Hi, my man! Let me take that bag!"

The bag changed hands. Five minutes later, as I was preparing to go ashore, arose a horrid scream above the berthing clamour. Those passengers yet aboard made in the direction from which the scream had proceeded.

A steward—the one to whom Professor Deeping had spoken—lay writhing at the foot of the stairs leading to the saloon-deck. His right hand had been severed above the wrist!

II. THE GIRL WITH THE VIOLET EYES

During the next day or two my mind constantly reverted to the incidents of the voyage home. I was perfectly convinced that the curtain had been partially raised upon some fantasy in which Professor Deeping figured.

But I had seen no more of Deeping nor had I heard from him, when abruptly I found myself plunged again into the very vortex of his troubled affairs. I was half way through a long article, I remember, upon the mystery of the outrage at the docks. The poor steward whose hand had been severed lay in a precarious condition, but the police had utterly failed to trace the culprit.

I had laid down my pen to relight my pipe (the hour was about ten at night) when a faint sound from the direction of the outside door attracted my attention. Something had been thrust through the letter-box.

"A circular," I thought, when the bell rang loudly, imperatively.

I went to the door. A square envelope lay upon the mat—a curious envelope, pale amethyst in colour. Picking it up, I found it to bear my name —written simply—

"Mr Cavanagh."

Tearing it open I glanced at the contents. I threw open the door. No one was visible upon the landing, but when I leaned over the banister a white-clad figure was crossing the hall, below.

Without hesitation, hatless, I raced down the stairs. As I crossed the dimly lighted hall and came out into the peaceful twilight of the court, my elusive visitor glided under the archway opposite.

Just where the dark and narrow passage opened on to Fleet Street I overtook her—a girl closely veiled and wrapped in a long coat of white ermine.

"Madam," I said.

She turned affrightedly.

"Please do not detain me!" Her accent was puzzling, but pleasing. She glanced apprehensively about her.

You have seen the moon through a mist? —and known it for what it was in spite of its veiling? So, now, through the cloudy folds of the veil, I saw the stranger's eyes, and knew them for the most beautiful eyes I had ever seen, had ever dreamt of.

"But you must explain the meaning of your note!"

"I cannot! I cannot! Please do not ask me!"

She was breathless from her flight and seemed to be trembling. From behind the cloud her eyes shone brilliantly, mysteriously.

I was sorely puzzled. The whole incident was bizarre—indeed, it had in it something of the uncanny. Yet I could not detain the girl against her will. That she went in apprehension of something, of someone, was evident.

Past the head of the passage surged the noisy realities of Fleet Street. There were men there in quest of news; men who would have given much for such a story as this in which I was becoming entangled. Yet a story more tantalizingly incomplete could not well be imagined.

I knew that I stood upon the margin of an arena wherein strange adversaries warred to a strange end. But a mist was over all. Here, beside me, was one who could disperse the mist—and would not. Her one anxiety seemed to be to escape.

Suddenly she raised her veil; and I looked fully into the only really violet eyes I had ever beheld. Mentally, I started. For the face framed in the snowy fur was the most bewitchingly lovely imaginable. One rebellious lock of wonderful hair swept across the white brow. It was brown hair, with an incomprehensible sheen in the high lights that suggested the heart of a blood-red rose.

"Oh," she cried, "promise me that you will never breathe a word to any one about my visit!"

"I promise willingly," I said; "but can you give me no hint?"

"Honestly, truly, I cannot, dare not, say more! Only promise that you will do as I ask!"

Since I could perceive no alternative—

"I will do so," I replied.

"Thank you—oh, thank you!" she said; and dropping her veil again she walked rapidly away from me, whispering, "I rely upon you. Do not fail me. Good-bye!"

Her conspicuous white figure joined the hurrying throngs upon the pavement beyond. My curiosity brooked no restraint. I hurried to the end of the courtway. She was crossing the road. From the shadows where he had lurked, a man came forward to meet her. A vehicle obstructed the view ere I could confirm my impression; and when it had passed, neither my lovely visitor nor her companion were anywhere in sight.

But, unless some accident of light and shade had deceived me, the man who had waited was Ahmad Ahmadeen!

It seemed that some astral sluice-gate was raised; a dreadful sense of foreboding for the first time flooded my mind. Whilst the girl had stood before me it had been different—the mysterious charm of her personality had swamped all else. But now, the messenger gone, it was the purport of her message which assumed supreme significance.

Written in odd, square handwriting upon the pale amethyst paper, this was the message—

Prevail upon Professor Deeping to place what he has in the brown
case in the porch of his house to-night. If he fails to do so,
no power on earth can save him from the Scimitar of Hassan.
A FRIEND.

III. "HASSAN OF ALEPPO"

Professor Deeping's number was in the telephone directory, therefore, on returning to my room, where there still lingered the faint perfume of my late visitor's presence, I asked for his number. He proved to be at home.

"Strange you should ring me up, Cavanagh," he said; "for I was about to ring you up."

"First," I replied, "listen to the contents of an anonymous letter which I have received."

(I remembered, and only just in time, my promise to the veiled messenger.)

"To me," I added, having read him the note, "it seems to mean nothing. I take it that you understand better than I do."

"I understand very well, Cavanagh!" he replied. "You will recall my story of the scimitar which flashed before me in the darkness of my stateroom on the Mandalay? Well, I have seen it again! I am not an imaginative man: I had always believed myself to possess the scientific mind; but I can no longer doubt that I am the object of a pursuit which commenced in Mecca! The happenings on the steamer prepared me for this, in a degree. When the man lost his hand at Port Said I doubted. I had supposed the days of such things past. The attempt to break into my stateroom even left me still uncertain. But the outrage upon the steward at the docks removed all further doubt. I perceived that the contents of a certain brown leather case were the objective of the crimes."

I listened in growing wonder.

"It was not necessary in order to further the plan of stealing the bag that the hands were severed," resumed the Professor. "In fact, as was rendered evident by the case of the steward, this was a penalty visited upon any one who touched it! You are thinking of my own immunity?"

"I am!"

"This is attributable to two things. Those who sought to recover what I had in the case feared that my death en route might result in its being lost to them for ever. They awaited a suitable opportunity. They had designed to take it at Port Said certainly, I think; but the bag was too large to be readily concealed, and, after the outrage, might have led to the discovery of the culprit. In the second place, they are uncertain of my faith. I have long passed for a true Believer in the East! As a Moslem I visited Mecca—"

"You visited Mecca!"

"I had just returned from the hadj when I joined the Mandalay at Port Said! My death, however, has been determined upon, whether I be Moslem or Christian!"

"Why?"

"Because," came the Professor's harsh voice over the telephone, "of the contents of the brown leather case! I will not divulge to you now the nature of these contents; to know might endanger you. But the case is locked in my safe here, and the key, together with a full statement of the true facts of the matter, is hidden behind the first edition copy of my book 'Assyrian Mythology,' in the smaller bookcase—"

"Why do you tell me all this?" I interrupted.

He laughed harshly.

"The identity of my pursuer has just dawned upon me," he said. "I know that my life is in real danger. I would give up what is demanded of me, but I believe its possession to be my strongest safeguard."

Mystery upon mystery! I seemed to be getting no nearer to the heart of this maze. What in heaven's name did it all mean? Suddenly an idea struck me.

"Is our late fellow passenger, Mr Ahmadeen, connected with the matter?" I asked.

"In no way," replied Deeping earnestly. "Mr Ahmadeen is, I believe, a person of some consequence in the Moslem world; but I have nothing to fear from him."

"What steps have you taken to protect yourself?"

Again the short laugh reached my ears.

"I'm afraid long residence in the East has rendered me something of a fatalist, Cavanagh! Beyond keeping my door locked, I have taken no steps whatever. I fear I am quite accessible!"

A while longer we talked; and with every word the conviction was more strongly borne in upon me that some uncanny menace threatened the peace, perhaps the life, of Professor Deeping.

I had hung up the receiver scarce a moment when, acting upon a sudden determination, I called up New Scotland Yard, and asked for Detective-Inspector Bristol, whom I knew well. A few words were sufficient keenly to arouse his curiosity, and he announced his intention of calling upon me immediately. He was in charge of the case of the severed hand.

I made no attempt to resume work in the interval preceding his arrival. I had not long to wait, however, ere Bristol was ringing my bell; and I hurried to the door, only too glad to confide in one so well equipped to analyze my

doubts and fears. For Bristol is no ordinary policeman, but a trained observer, who, when I first made his acquaintance, completely upset my ideas upon the mental limitations of the official detective force.

In appearance Bristol suggests an Anglo-Indian officer, and at the time of which I write he had recently returned from Jamaica and his face was as bronzed as a sailor's. One would never take Bristol for a detective. As he seated himself in the armchair, without preamble I plunged into my story. He listened gravely.

"What sort of house is Professor Deeping's?" he asked suddenly.

"I have no idea," I replied, "beyond the fact that it is somewhere in Dulwich."

"May I use your telephone?"

"Certainly."

Very quickly Bristol got into communication with the superintendent of P Division. A brief delay, and the man came to the telephone whose beat included the road wherein Professor Deeping's house was situated.

"Why!" said Bristol, hanging up the receiver after making a number of inquiries, "it's a sort of rambling cottage in extensive grounds. There's only one servant, a manservant, and he sleeps in a detached lodge. If the Professor is really in danger of attack he could not well have chosen a more likely residence for the purpose!"

"What shall you do? What do you make of it all?"

"As I see the case," he said slowly, "it stands something like this: Professor Deeping has . . . "

The telephone bell began to ring.

I took up the receiver.

"Hullo! Hullo."

"Cavanagh!—is that Cavanagh?"

"Yes! yes! who is that?"

"Deeping! I have rung up the police, and they are sending some one. But I wish . . . "

His voice trailed off. The sound of a confused and singular uproar came to me.

"Hullo!" I cried. "Hullo!"

A shriek—a deathful, horrifying cry—and a distant babbling alone answered me. There was a crash. Clearly, Deeping had dropped the

receiver. I suppose my face blanched.

"What is it?" asked Bristol anxiously.

"God knows what it is!" I said. "Deeping has met with some mishap—"

When, over the wires—

"Hassan of Aleppo!" came a dying whisper. "Hassan . . . of Aleppo . . . "

IV. THE OBLONG BOX

"You had better wait for us," said Bristol to the taxi-man.

"Very good, sir. But I shan't be able to take you further back than the Brixton Garage. You can get another cab there, though."

A clock chimed out—an old-world chime in keeping with the loneliness, the curiously remote loneliness, of the locality. Less than five miles from St. Paul's are spots whereto, with the persistence of Damascus attar, clings the aroma of former days. This iron gateway fronting the old chapel was such a spot.

Just within stood a plain-clothes man, who saluted my companion respectfully.

"Professor Deeping," I began.

The man, with a simple gesture, conveyed the dreadful news.

"Dead! dead!" I cried incredulously.

He glanced at Bristol.

"The most mysterious case I have ever had anything to do with, sir," he said.

The power of speech seemed to desert me. It was unthinkable that Deeping, with whom I had been speaking less than an hour ago, should now be no more; that some malign agency should thus murderously have thrust him into the great borderland.

In that kind of silence which seems to be peopled with whispering spirits we strode forward along the elm avenue. It was very dark where the moon failed to penetrate. The house, low and rambling, came into view, its facade bathed in silver light. Two of the visible windows were illuminated. A sort of loggia ran along one side.

On our left, as we made for this, lay a black ocean of shrubbery. It intruded, raggedly, upon the weed-grown path, for neglect was the keynote of the place.

We entered the cottage, crossed the tiny lobby, and came to the study. A man, evidently Deeping's servant, was sitting in a chair by the door, his head sunken in his hands. He looked up, haggard-faced.

"My God! my God!" he groaned. "He was locked in, gentlemen! He was locked in; and yet something murdered him!"

"What do you mean?" said Bristol. "Where were you?"

"I was away on an errand, sir. When I returned, the police were knocking the door down. He was locked in!"

We passed him, entering the study.

It was a museum-like room, lighted by a lamp on the littered table. At first glance it looked as though some wild thing had run amok there. The disorder was indescribable.

"Touched nothing, of course?" asked Bristol sharply of the officer on duty.

"Nothing, sir. It's just as we found it when we forced the door."

"Why did you force the door?"

"He rung us up at the station and said that something or somebody had got into the house. It was evident the poor gentleman's nerve had broken down, sir. He said he was locked in his study. When we arrived it was all in darkness—but we thought we heard sounds in here."

"What sort of sounds?"

"Something crawling about!"

Bristol turned.

"Key is in the lock on the inside of the door," he said. "Is that where you found it?"

"Yes, sir!"

He looked across to where the brass knob of a safe gleamed dully.

"Safe locked?"

"Yes, sir."

Professor Deeping lay half under the table, a spectacle so ghastly that I shall not attempt to describe it.

"Merciful heavens!" whispered Bristol. "He's nearly decapitated!"

I clutched dizzily at the mantelpiece. It was all so utterly, incredibly horrible. How had Deeping met his death? The windows both were latched and the door had been locked from within!

"You searched for the murderer, of course?" asked Bristol.

"You can see, sir," replied the officer, "that there isn't a spot in the room where a man could hide! And there was nobody in here when we forced the door!"

"Why!" cried my companion suddenly. "The Professor has a chisel in his hand!"

"Yes. I think he must have been trying to prise open that box yonder when he was attacked."

Bristol and I looked, together, at an oblong box which lay upon the floor near the murdered man. It was a kind of small packing case, addressed to Professor Deeping, and evidently had not been opened.

"When did this arrive?" asked Bristol. Lester, the Professor's man, who had entered the room, replied shakily—

"It came by carrier, sir, just before I went out."

"Was he expecting it?"

"I don't think so."

Inspector Bristol and the officer dragged the box fully into the light. It was some three feet long by one foot square, and solidly constructed.

"It is perfectly evident," remarked Bristol, "that the murderer stayed to search for—"

"The key of the safe!"

"Exactly. If the men really heard sounds here, it would appear that the assassin was still searching at that time."

"I assure you," the officer interrupted, "that there was no living thing in the room when we entered."

Bristol and I looked at one another in horrified wonder.

"It's incomprehensible!" he said.

"See if the key is in the place mentioned by the Professor, Mr Cavanagh, whilst I break the box."

I went to a great, open bookcase, which the frantic searcher seemed to have overlooked. Removing the bulky "Assyrian Mythology," there, behind the volume, lay an envelope, containing a key, and a short letter. Not caring to approach more closely to the table and to that which lay beneath it, I was

peering at the small writing, in the semi-gloom by the bookcase, when Bristol cried—

"This box is unopenable by ordinary means! I shall have to smash it!"

At his words, I joined him where he knelt on the floor. Mysteriously, the chest had defied all his efforts.

"There's a pick-axe in the garden," volunteered Lester. "Shall I bring it?"

"Yes."

The man ran off.

"I see the key is safe," said Bristol. "Possibly the letter may throw some light upon all this."

"Let us hope so," I replied. "You might read it."

He took the letter from my hand, stepped up to the table, and by the light of the lamp read as follows—

My Dear Cavanagh,—

It has now become apparent to me that my life is in imminent danger. You know of the inexplicable outrages which marked my homeward journey, and if this letter come to your hand it will be because these have culminated in my death.

The idea of a pursuing scimitar is not new to me. This phenomenon, which I have now witnessed three times, is fairly easy of explanation, but its significance is singular. It is said to be one of the devices whereby the Hashishin warn those whom they have marked down for destruction, and is called, in the East, "The Scimitar of Hassan."

The Hashishin were the members of a Moslem secret society, founded in 1090 by one Hassan of Khorassan. There is a persistent tradition in parts of the Orient that this sect still flourishes in Assyria, under the rule of a certain Hassan of Aleppo, the Sheikh-al-jebal, or supreme lord of the Hashishin. My careful inquiries, however, at the time that I was preparing matter for my "Assyrian Mythology," failed to discover any trace of such a person or such a group.

I accordingly assumed Hassan to be a myth—a first cousin to the ginn. I was wrong. He exists. And by my supremely rash act I have incurred his vengeance, for Hassan of Aleppo is the self-appointed guardian of the traditions and relics of Mohammed. And I have Stolen one of the holy slippers of the Prophet!

He, with some of his servants, has followed me from Mecca to England. My precautions have enabled me to retain the relic, but you have seen what fate befell all those others who even touched the receptacle containing it.

If I fall a victim to the Hashishin, I am uncertain how you, as my confidant, will fare. Therefore I have locked the slipper in my safe and to you entrust the key. I append particulars of the lock combination; but I warn you—do not open the safe. If their wrath be visited upon you, your possession of the key may prove a safeguard.

Take the copy of "Assyrian Mythology." You will find in it all that I learned respecting the Hashishin. If I am doomed to be assassinated, it may aid you; if not in avenging me, in saving others from my fate. I fear I shall never see you again. A cloud of horror settles upon me like a pall. Do not touch the slipper, nor the case containing it.

EDWARD DEEPING.

"It is almost incredible!" I said hoarsely.

Bristol returned the letter to me without a word, and turning to Lester, who had reentered carrying a heavy pick-axe, he attacked the oblong box with savage energy.

Through the house of death the sound of the blows echoed and rang with a sort of sacrilegious mockery. The box fell to pieces.

"My God! look, sir!"

Lester was the trembling speaker.

The box, I have said, was but three feet long by one foot square, and had clearly defied poor Deeping's efforts to open it. But a crescent-shaped knife, wet with blood, lay within!

V. THE OCCUPANT OF THE BOX

Dimly to my ears came the ceaseless murmur of London. The night now was far advanced, and not a sound disturbed the silence of the court below my windows.

Professor Deeping's "Assyrian Mythology" lay open before me, beside it my notebook. A coal dropped from the fire, and I half started up out of my

chair. My nerves were all awry, and I had more than my horrible memories of the murdered man to thank for it. Let me explain what I mean.

When, after assisting, or endeavouring to assist, Bristol at his elaborate inquiries, I had at last returned to my chambers, I had become the victim of a singular delusion—though one common enough in the case of persons whose nerves are overwrought. I had thought myself followed.

During the latter part of my journey I found myself constantly looking from the little window at the rear of the cab. I had an impression that some vehicle was tracking us. Then, when I discharged the man and walked up the narrow passage to the court, it was fear of a skulking form that dodged from shadow to shadow which obsessed me.

Finally, as I entered the hall and mounted the darkened stair, from the first landing I glanced down into the black well beneath. Blazing yellow eyes, I thought, looked up at me!

I will confess that I leapt up the remaining flight of stairs to my door, and, safely within, found myself trembling as if with a palsy.

When I sat down to write (for sleep was an impossible proposition) I placed my revolver upon the table beside me. I cannot say why. It afforded me some sense of protection, I suppose. My conclusions, thus far, amounted to the following—

The apparition of the phantom scimitar was due to the presence of someone who, by means of the moonlight, or of artificial light, cast a reflection of such a weapon as that found in the oblong chest upon the wall of a darkened apartment—as, Deeping's stateroom on the Mandalay, his study, etc.

A group of highly efficient assassins, evidently Moslem fanatics, who might or might not be of the ancient order of the Hashishin, had pursued the stolen slipper to England. They had severed any hand, other than that of a Believer, which had touched the case containing it. (The Coptic porter was a Christian.)

Uncertain, possibly, of Deeping's faith, or fearful of endangering the success of their efforts by an outrage upon him en route, they had refrained from this until his arrival at his house. He had been warned of his impending end by Ahmad Ahmadeen.

Who was Ahmadeen? And who was his beautiful associate? I found myself unable, at present, to answer either of those questions. In order to

gain access to Professor Deeping, who so carefully secluded himself, a box had been sent to him by ordinary carrier. (As I sat at my table, Scotland Yard was busy endeavouring to trace the sender.) Respecting this box we had made an extraordinary discovery.

It was of the kind used by Eastern conjurors for what is generally known as "the Box Trick." That is to say, it could only be opened (short of smashing it) from the inside! You will remember what we found within it? Consider this with the new fact, above, and to what conclusion do you come?

Something (it is not possible to speak of someone in connection with so small a box) had been concealed inside, and had killed Professor Deeping whilst he was actually engaged in endeavouring to force it open. This inconceivable creature had then searched the study for the slipper—or for the key of the safe. Interrupted and trapped by the arrival of the police, the creature had returned to the box, re-closed it, and had actually been there when the study was searched!

For a creature so small as the murderous thing in the box to slip out during the confusion, and at some time prior to Bristol's arrival, was no difficult matter. The inspector and I were certain that these were the facts.

But what was this creature?

I turned to the chapter in "Assyrian Mythology"—"The Tradition of the Hashishin."

The legends which the late Professor Deeping had collected relative to this sect of religious murderers were truly extraordinary. Of the cult's extinction at the time of writing he was clearly certain, but he referred to the popular belief, or Moslem legend, that, since Hassan of Khorassan, there had always been a Sheikh-al-jebal, and that a dreadful being known as Hassan of Aleppo was the present holder of the title.

He referred to the fact that De Sacy has shown the word Assassin to be derived from Hashishin, and quoted El-Idrisi to the same end. The Hashishin performed their murderous feats under the influence of hashish, or Indian hemp; and during the state of ecstasy so induced, according to Deeping, they acquired powers almost superhuman. I read how they could scale sheer precipices, pass fearlessly along narrow ledges which would scarce afford foothold for a rat, cast themselves from great heights unscathed, and track one marked for death in such a manner as to remain

unseen not only by the victim but by others about him. At this point of my studies I started, in a sudden nervous panic, and laid my hand upon my revolver.

I thought of the eyes which had seemed to look up from the black well of the staircase—I thought of the horrible end of this man whose book lay upon the table . . . and I thought I heard a faint sound outside my study door!

The key of Deeping's safe, and his letter to me, lay close by my hand. I slipped them into a drawer and locked it. With every nerve, it seemed, strung up almost to snapping point, I mechanically pursued my reading.

"At the time of the Crusades," wrote Deeping, "there was a story current of this awful Order which I propose to recount. It is one of the most persistent dealing with the Hashishin, and is related to-day of the apparently mythical Hassan of Aleppo. I am disposed to believe that at one time it had a solid foundation, for a similar practice was common in Ancient Egypt and is mentioned by Georg Ebers."

My door began very slowly to open!

Merciful God! What was coming into the room!

So very slowly, so gently, nay, all but imperceptibly, did it move, that had my nerves been less keenly attuned I doubt not I should have remained unaware of the happening. Frozen with horror, I sat and watched. Yet my mental condition was a singular one.

My direct gaze never quitted the door, but in some strange fashion I saw the words of the next paragraph upon the page before me!

"As making peculiarly efficient assassins, when under the influence of the drug, and as being capable of concealing themselves where a normal man could not fail to be detected—"

(At this moment I remembered that my bathroom window was open, and that the waste-pipe passed down the exterior wall.)

"—the Sheikh-al-jebal took young boys of a certain desert tribe, and for eight hours of every day, until their puberty, confined them in a wooden frame—"

What looked like a reed was slowly inserted through the opening between door and doorpost! It was brought gradually around . . . until it pointed directly toward me!

I seemed to put forth a mighty mental effort, shaking off the icy hand of fear which held me inactive in my chair. A saving instinct warned me—and I ducked my head.

Something whirred past me and struck the wall behind.

Revolver in hand, I leapt across the room, dashed the door open, and fired blindly—again—and again—and again—down the passage.

And in the brief gleams I saw it!

I cannot call it man, but I saw the thing which, I doubt not, had killed poor Deeping with the crescent-knife and had propelled a poison-dart at me.

It was a tiny dwarf! Neither within nor without a freak exhibition had I seen so small a human being! A kind of supernatural dread gripped me by the throat at sight of it. As it turned with animal activity and bounded into my bathroom, I caught a three-quarter view of the creature's swollen, incredible head—which was nearly as large as that of a normal man!

Never while my mind serves me can I forget that yellow, grinning face and those canine fangs—the tigerish, blazing eyes—set in the great, misshapen head upon the tiny, agile body.

Wildly, I fired again. I hurled myself forward and dashed into the room.

Like nothing so much as a cat, the gleaming body (the dwarf was but scantily clothed) streaked through the open window!

Certain death, I thought, must be his lot upon the stones of the court far below. I ran and looked down, shaking in every limb, my mind filled with a loathing terror unlike anything I had ever known.

Brilliant moonlight flooded the pavement beneath; for twenty yards to left and right every stone was visible.

The court was empty!

Human, homely London moved and wrought intimately about me; but there, at sight of the empty court below, a great loneliness swept down like a mantle—a clammy mantle of the fabric of dread. I stood remote from my fellows, in an evil world peopled with the creatures of Hassan of Aleppo.

Moved by some instinct, as that of a frightened child, I dropped to my knees and buried my face in trembling hands.

VI. THE RING OF THE PROPHET

"There is no doubt," said Mr Rawson, "that great personal danger attaches to any contact with this relic. It is the first time I have been concerned with anything of the kind."

Mr Bristol, of Scotland Yard, standing stiffly military by the window, looked across at the gray-haired solicitor. We were all silent for a few moments.

"My late client's wishes," continued Mr Rawson, "are explicit. His last instructions, evidently written but a short time prior to his death, advise me that the holy slipper of the Prophet is contained in the locked safe at his house in Dulwich. He was clearly of opinion that you, Mr Cavanagh, would incur risk—great risk—from your possession of the key. Since attempts have been made upon you, murderous attempts, the late Professor Deeping, my unfortunate client, evidently was not in error."

"Mysterious outrages," said Bristol, "have marked the progress of the stolen slipper from Mecca almost to London."

"I understand," interrupted the solicitor, "that a fanatic known as Hassan of Aleppo seeks to restore the relic to its former resting-place."

"That is so."

"Exactly; and it accounts for the Professor's wish that the safe should not be touched by any one but a Believer—and for his instructions that its removal to the Antiquarian Museum and the placing of the slipper within that institution be undertaken by a Moslem or Moslems."

Bristol frowned.

"Any one who has touched the receptacle containing the thing," he said, "has either been mutilated or murdered. I want to apprehend the authors of those outrages, but I fail to see why the slipper should be put on exhibition. Other crimes are sure to follow."

"I can only pursue my instructions," said Mr Rawson dryly. "They are, that the work be done in such a manner as to expose all concerned to a minimum of risk from these mysterious people; that if possible a Moslem be employed for the purpose; and that Mr Cavanagh, here, shall always hold the key or keys to the case in the museum containing the slipper. Will you undertake to look for some—Eastern workmen, Mr Bristol? In the course of your inquiries you may possibly come across such a person."

"I can try," replied Bristol. "Meanwhile, I take it, the safe must remain at Dulwich?"

"Certainly. It should be guarded."

"We are guarding it and shall guard it," Bristol assured him. "I only hope we catch someone trying to get at it!"

Shortly afterward Bristol and I left the office, and, his duties taking him to Scotland Yard, I returned to my chambers to survey the position in which I now found myself. Indeed, it was a strange one enough, showing how great things have small beginnings; for, as a result of a steamer acquaintance I found myself involved in a dark business worthy of the Middle Ages. That Professor Deeping should have stolen one of the holy slippers of Mohammed was no affair of mine, and that an awful being known as Hassan of Aleppo should have pursued it did not properly enter into my concerns; yet now, with a group of Eastern fanatics at large in England, I was become, in a sense, the custodian of the relic. Moreover, I perceived that I had been chosen that I might safeguard myself. What I knew of the matter might imperil me, but whilst I held the key to the reliquary, and held it fast, I might hope to remain immune though I must expect to be subjected to attempts. It would be my affair to come to terms.

Contemplating these things I sat, in a world of dark dreams, unconscious of the comings and goings in the court below, unconscious of the hum which told of busy Fleet Street so near to me. The weather, as is its uncomfortable habit in England, had suddenly grown tropically hot, plunging London into the vapours of an African spring, and the sun was streaming through my open window fully upon the table.

I mopped my clammy forehead, glancing with distaste at the pile of work which lay before me. Then my eyes turned to an open quarto book. It was the late Professor Deeping's "Assyrian Mythology," and embodied the result of his researches into the history of the Hashishin, the religious murderers of whose existence he had been so skeptical. To the Chief of the Order, the terrible Sheikh Hassan of Aleppo, he referred as a "fabled being"; yet it was at the hands of this "fabled being" that he had met his end! How incredible it all seemed. But I knew full well how worthy of credence it was.

Then upon my gloomy musings a sound intruded—the ringing of my door bell. I rose from my chair with a weary sigh, went to the door, and opened it. An aged Oriental stood without. He was tall and straight, had a

snow-white beard and clear-cut, handsome features. He wore well-cut European garments and a green turban. As I stood staring he saluted me gravely.

"Mr Cavanagh?" he asked, speaking in faultless English.

"I am he."

"I learn that the services of a Moslem workman are required."

"Quite correct, sir; but you should apply at the offices of Messrs. Rawson & Rawson, Chancery Lane."

The old man bowed, smiling.

"Many thanks; I understood so much. But, my position being a peculiar one, I wished to speak with you—as a friend of the late Professor."

I hesitated. The old man looked harmless enough, but there was an air of mystery about the matter which put me on my guard.

"You will pardon me," I said, "but the work is scarcely of a kind—"

He raised his thin hand.

"I am not undertaking it myself. I wished to explain to you the conditions under which I could arrange to furnish suitable porters."

His patient explanation disposed me to believe that he was merely some kind of small contractor, and in any event I had nothing to fear from this frail old man.

"Step in, sir," I said, repenting of my brusquerie—and stood aside for him.

He entered, with that Oriental meekness in which there is something majestic. I placed a chair for him in the study, and reseated myself at the table. The old man, who from the first had kept his eyes lowered deferentially, turned to me with a gentle gesture, as if to apologize for opening the conversation.

"From the papers, Mr Cavanagh," he began, "I have learned of the circumstances attending the death of Professor Deeping. Your papers"—he smiled, and I thought I had never seen a smile of such sweetness—"your papers know all! Now I understand why a Moslem is required, and I understand what is required of him. But remembering that the object of his labours would be to place a holy relic on exhibition for the amusement of unbelievers, can you reasonably expect to obtain the services of one?"

His point of view was fair enough.

"Perhaps not," I replied. "For my own part I should wish to see the slipper back in Mecca, or wherever it came from. But Professor Deeping—"

"Professor Deeping was a thorn in the flesh of the Faithful!"

My visitor's voice was gravely reproachful.

"Nevertheless his wishes must be considered," I said, "and the methods adopted by those who seek to recover the relic are such as to alienate all sympathy."

"You speak of the Hashishin?" asked the old man. "Mr Cavanagh, in your own faith you have had those who spilled the blood of infidels as freely!"

"My good sir, the existence of such an organization cannot be tolerated today! This survival of the dark ages must be stamped out. However just a cause may be, secret murder is not permissible, as you, a man of culture, a Believer, and"—I glanced at his unusual turban—"a descendant of the Prophet, must admit."

"I can admit nothing against the Guardian of the Tradition, Mr Cavanagh! The Prophet taught that we should smite the Infidel. I ask you—have you the courage of your convictions?"

"Perhaps; I trust so."

"Then assist me to rid England of what you have called a survival of the dark ages. I will furnish porters to remove and carry the safe, if you will deliver to me the key!"

I sprang to my feet.

"That is madness!" I cried. "In the first place I should be compromising with my conscience, and in the second place I should be defenceless against those who might—"

"I have with me a written promise from one highly placed—one to whose will Hassan of Aleppo bows!"

My mind greatly disturbed, I watched the venerable speaker. I had determined now that he was some religious leader of Islam in England, who had been deputed to approach me; and, let me add, I was sorely tempted to accede to his proposal, for nothing would be gained by any one if the slipper remained for ever at the museum, whereas by conniving at its recovery by those who, after all, were its rightful owners I should be ridding England of a weird and undesirable visitant.

I think I should have agreed, when I remembered that the Hashishin had murdered Professor Deeping and had mutilated others wholly innocent of

offence. I looked across at the old man. He had drawn himself up to his great height, and for the first time fully raising the lids, had fixed upon me the piercing gaze of a pair of eagle eyes. I started, for the aspect of this majestic figure was entirely different from that of the old stranger who had stood suppliant before me a moment ago.

"It is impossible," I said. "I can come to no terms with those who shield murderers."

He regarded me fixedly, but did not move.

"Es-selam 'aleykum!" I added ("Peace be on you!") closing the interview in the Eastern manner.

The old man lowered his eyes, and saluted me with graceful gravity.

"Wa-'aleykum!" he said ("And on you!"). I conducted him to the door and closed it upon his exit. In his last salute I had noticed the flashing of a ring which he wore upon his left hand, and he was gone scarce ten seconds ere my heart began to beat furiously. I snatched up "Assyrian Mythology" and with trembling fingers turned to a certain page.

There I read—

Each Sheikh of the Assassins is said to be invested with the "Ring of the Prophet." It bears a green stone, shaped in the form of a scimitar or crescent.

My dreadful suspicion was confirmed. I knew who my visitor had been.

"God in heaven!" I whispered. "It was Hassan of Aleppo!"

VII. FIRST ATTEMPT ON THE SAFE

On the following morning I was awakened by the arrival of Bristol. I hastened to admit him.

"Your visitor of yesterday," he began, "has wasted no time!"

"What has happened?"

He tugged irritably at his moustache. "I don't know!" he replied. "Of course it was no surprise to find that there isn't a Mohammedan who'll lay his little finger on Professor Deeping's safe! There's no doubt in my mind that every lascar at the docks knows Hassan of Aleppo to be in England. Some other arrangement will have to be arrived at, if the thing is ever to be

taken to the Antiquarian Museum. Meanwhile we stand to lose it. Last night —"

He accepted a cigarette, and lighted it carefully.

"Last night," he resumed, "a member of P Division was on point duty outside the late Professor's house, and two C.I.D. men were actually in the room where the safe is. Result—someone has put in at least an hour's work on the lock, but it proved too tough a job!"

I stared at him amazedly.

"Someone has been at the lock!" I cried. "But that is impossible, with two men in the room—unless—"

"They were both knocked on the head!"

"Both! But by whom! My God! They are not—"

"Oh, no! It was done artistically. They both came round about four o'clock this morning."

"And who attacked them?"

"They had no idea. Neither of them saw a thing!"

My amazement grew by leaps and bounds. "But, Bristol, one of them must have seen the other succumb!"

"Both did! Their statements tally exactly!"

"I quite fail to follow you."

"That's not surprising. Listen: When I got on the scene about five o'clock, Marden and West, the two C.I.D. men, had quite recovered their senses, though they were badly shaken, and one had a cracked skull. The constable was conscious again, too."

"What! Was he attacked?"

"In exactly the same way! I'll give you Marden's story, as he gave it to me a few minutes after the surgeon had done with him. He said that they were sitting in the study, smoking, and with both windows wide open. It was a fearfully hot night."

"Did they have lights?"

"No. West sat in an armchair near the writing-table; Marden sat by the window next to the door. I had arranged that every hour one of them should go out to the gate and take the constable's report. It was just after Marden had been out at one o'clock that it happened.

"They were sitting as I tell you when Marden thought he heard a curious sort of noise from the gate. West appeared to have heard nothing; but I have

no doubt that it was the sound of the constable's fall. West's pipe had gone out, and he struck a match to relight it. As he did so, Marden saw him drop the match, clench both fists, and with eyes glaring in the moonlight and his teeth coming together with a snap, drop from his chair.

"Marden says that he was half up from his seat when something struck him on the back of the head with fearful force. He remembered nothing more until he awoke, with the dawn creeping into the room, and heard West groaning somewhere beside him. They both had badly damaged skulls with great bruises behind the ear. It is instructive to note that their wounds corresponded almost to a fraction of an inch. They had been stunned by someone who thoroughly understood his business, and with some heavy, blunt weapon. A few minutes later came the man to relieve the constable; and the constable was found to have been treated in exactly the same way!"

"But if Marden's account is true—"

"West, as he lost consciousness, saw Marden go in exactly the same way."

"Marden was seated by the open window, but I cannot conjecture how any one can have got at West, who sat by the table!"

"The case of Marden is little less than remarkable; he was some distance from the window. No one could possibly have reached him from outside."

"And the constable?"

"The constable can give us no clue. He was suddenly struck down, as the others were. I examined the safe, of course, but didn't touch it, according to instructions. Someone had been at work on the lock, but it had defied their efforts. I'm fully expecting though that they'll be back to-night, with different tools!"

"The place is watched during the day, of course?"

"Of course. But it's unlikely that anything will be attempted in daylight. Tonight I am going down myself."

"Could you arrange that I join you?"

"I could, but you can see the danger for yourself?"

"It is extraordinarily mysterious."

"Mr Cavanagh, it's uncanny!" said Bristol. "I can understand that one of these Hashishin could easily have got up behind the man on duty out in the open. I know, and so do you, that they're past masters of that kind of thing; but unless they possess the power to render themselves invisible, it's not

evident how they can have got behind West whilst he sat at the table, with Marden actually watching him!"

"We must lay a trap for them to-night."

"Rely upon me to do so. My only fear is that they may anticipate it and change their tactics. Hassan of Aleppo apparently knows as much of our plans as we do ourselves."

Inspector Bristol, though a man of considerable culture, clearly was infected with a species of supernatural dread.

VIII. THE VIOLET EYES AGAIN

At four o'clock in the afternoon I had heard nothing further from Bristol, but I did not doubt that he would advise me of his arrangements in good time. I sought by hard work to forget for a time the extraordinary business of the stolen slipper; but it persistently intruded upon my mind. Particularly, my thoughts turned to the night of Professor Deeping's murder, and to the bewitchingly pretty woman who had warned me of the impending tragedy. She had bound me to secrecy—a secrecy which had proved irksome, for it had since appeared to me that she must have been an accomplice of Hassan of Aleppo. At the time I had been at a loss to define her peculiar accent, now it seemed evidently enough to have been Oriental.

I threw down my pen in despair, for work was impossible, went downstairs, and walked out under the arch into Fleet Street. Quite mechanically I turned to the left, and, still engaged with idle conjectures, strolled along westward.

Passing the entrance to one of the big hotels, I was abruptly recalled to the realities—by a woman's voice.

"Wait for me here," came musically to my ears.

I stopped, and turned. A woman who had just quitted a taxi-cab was entering the hotel. The day was hot and thunderously oppressive, and this woman with the musical voice wore a delicate costume of flimsiest white. A few steps upward she paused and glanced back. I had a view of a Greek profile, and for one magnetic instant looked into eyes of the deepest and most wonderful violet.

Then, shaking off inaction, I ran up the steps and overtook the lady in white as a porter swung open the door to admit her. We entered together.

"Madame," I said in a low tone, "I must detain you for a moment. There is something I have to ask."

She turned, exhibiting the most perfect composure, lowered her lashes and raised them again, the gaze of the violet eyes sweeping me from head to foot with a sort of frigid scorn.

"I fear you have made a mistake, sir. We have never met before!"

Her voice betrayed no trace of any foreign accent!

"But," I began—and paused.

I felt myself flush; for this encounter in the foyer of an hotel, with many curious onlookers, was like to prove embarrassing if my beautiful acquaintance persisted in her attitude. I fully realized what construction would be put upon my presence there, and foresaw that forcible and ignominious ejection must be my lot if I failed to establish my right to address her.

She turned away, and crossed in the direction of the staircase. A sunbeam sought out a lock of hair that strayed across her brow, and kissed it to a sudden glow like that which lurks in the heart of a blush rose.

That wonderful sheen, which I had never met with elsewhere in nature, but which no artifice could lend, served to remove my last frail doubt which had survived the evidence of the violet eyes. I had been deceived by no strange resemblance; this was indeed the woman who had been the harbinger of Professor Deeping's death. In three strides I was beside her again. Curious glances were set upon me, and I saw a servant evidently contemplating approach; but I ignored all save my own fixed purpose.

"You must listen to what I have to say!" I whispered. "If you decline, I shall have no alternative but to call in the detective who holds a warrant for your arrest!"

She stood quite still, watching me coolly. "I suppose you would wish to avoid a scene?" I added.

"You have already made me the object of much undesirable attention," she replied scornfully. "I do not need your assurance that you would disgrace me utterly! You are talking nonsense, as you must be aware—unless you are insane. But if your object be to force your acquaintance upon

me, your methods are novel, and, under the circumstances, effective. Come, sir, you may talk to me—for three minutes!"

The musical voice had lost nothing of its imperiousness, but for one instant the lips parted, affording a fleeting glimpse of pearl beyond the coral.

Her sudden change of front was bewildering. Now, she entered the lift and I followed her. As we ascended side by side I found it impossible to believe that this dainty white figure was that of an associate of the Hashishin, that of a creature of the terrible Hassan of Aleppo. Yet that she was the same girl who, a few days after my return from the East, had shown herself conversant with the plans of the murderous fanatics was beyond doubt. Her accent on that occasion clearly had been assumed, with what object I could not imagine. Then, as we quitted the lift and entered a cosy lounge, my companion seated herself upon a Chesterfield, signing to me to sit beside her.

As I did so she lay back smiling, and regarding me from beneath her black lashes. Thus, half veiled, her great violet eyes were most wonderful.

"Now, sir," she said softly, "explain yourself."

"Then you persist in pretending that we have not met before?"

"There is no occasion for pretence," she replied lightly; and I found myself comparing her voice with her figure, her figure with her face, and vainly endeavouring to compute her age. Frankly, she was bewildering—this lovely girl who seemed so wholly a woman of the world.

"This fencing is useless."

"It is quite useless! Come, I know New York, London, and I know Paris, Vienna, Budapest. Therefore I know mankind! You thought I was pretty, I suppose? I may be; others have thought so. And you thought you would like to make my acquaintance without troubling about the usual formalities? You adopted a singularly brutal method of achieving your object, but I love such insolence in a man. Therefore I forgave you. What have you to say to me?"

I perceive that I had to deal with a bold adventuress, with a consummate actress, who, finding herself in a dangerous situation, had adopted this daring line of defence, and now by her personal charm sought to lure me from my purpose.

But with the scimitar of Hassan of Aleppo stretched over me, with the dangers of the night before me, I was in no mood for a veiled duel of words, for an interchange of glances in thrust and parry, however delightful such warfare might have been with so pretty an adversary.

For a long time I looked sternly into her eyes; but their violet mystery defied, whilst her red-lipped smile taunted me.

"Unfortunately," I said, with slow emphasis, "you are protected by my promise, made on the occasion of our previous meeting. But murder has been done, so that honour scarcely demands that I respect my promise further—"

She raised her eyebrows slightly.

"Surely that depends upon the quality of the honour!" she said.

"I believe you to be a member of a murderous organization, and unless you can convince me that I am wrong, I shall act accordingly."

At that she leaned toward me, laying her hand on my arm.

"Please do not be so cruel," she whispered, "as to drag me into a matter with which truly I have no concern. Believe me, you are utterly mistaken. Wait one moment, and I will prove it."

She rose, and before I could make move to detain her, quitted the room; but the door scarcely had closed ere I was afoot. The corridor beyond was empty. I ran on. The lift had just descended. A dark man whom I recognized stood near the closed gate.

"Quick!" I said, "I am Cavanagh of the Report! Did you see a lady enter the lift?"

"I did, Mr Cavanagh," answered the hotel detective; for this was he.

In such a giant inn as this I knew full well that one could come and go almost with impunity, though one had no right to the hospitality of the establishment; and it was with a premonition respecting what his answer would be, that I asked the man—

"Is she staying here?"

"She is not. I have never seen her before!"

The girl with the violet eyes had escaped, taking all her secrets with her!

IX. SECOND ATTEMPT ON THE SAFE

"You see," said Bristol, "the Hashishin must know that the safe won't remain here unopened much longer. They will therefore probably make another attempt to-night."

"It seems likely," I replied; and was silent. Outside the open windows whispered the shrubbery, as a soft breeze stole through the bushes. Beyond, the moon made play in the dim avenue. From the old chapel hard by the sweet-toned bell proclaimed midnight. Our vigil was begun. In this room it was that Professor Deeping had met death at the hands of the murderous Easterns; here it was that Marden and West had mysteriously been struck down the night before.

To-night was every whit as hot, and Bristol and I had the windows widely opened. My companion was seated where the detective, Marden, had sat, in a chair near the westerly window, and I lay back in the armchair that had been occupied by West.

I may repeat here that the house of the late Professor Deeping was more properly a cottage, surrounded by a fairly large piece of ground, for the most part run wild. The room used as a study was on the ground floor, and had windows on the west and on the south. Those on the west (French windows) opened on a loggia; those on the south opened right into the dense tangle of a neglected shrubbery. The place possessed an oppressive atmosphere of loneliness, for which in some measure its history may have been responsible.

The silence, seemingly intensified by each whisper that sped through the elms and crept about the shrubbery, grew to such a stillness that I told myself I had experienced nothing like it since crossing with a caravan I had slept in the desert. Yet noisy, whirling London was within gunshot of us; and this, though hard enough to believe, was a reflection oddly comforting. Only one train of thought was possible, and this I pursued at random.

By what means were Marden and West struck down? In thus exposing ourselves, in order that we might trap the author or authors of the outrage, did we act wisely?

"Bristol," I said suddenly, "it was someone who came through the open window."

"No one," he replied, "came through the windows. West saw absolutely nothing. But if any one comes that way to-night, we have him!"

"West may have seen nothing; but how else could any one enter?"

Bristol offered no reply; and I plunged again into a maze of speculation.

Powerful mantraps were set in such a way that any one or anything, ignorant of their positions, coming up to the windows must unavoidably be snared. These had been placed in position with much secrecy after dusk, and the man on duty at the gate stood with his back to the wall. No one could approach him except from the front. My thoughts took a new turn.

Was the girl with the violet eyes an ally of the Hashishin? Thus far, although she so palpably had tricked me, I had found myself unable to speak of her to Bristol; for the idea had entered my mind that she might have learned of the plan to murder Deeping without directly being implicated. Now came yet another explanation. The publicity given to that sensational case might have interested some third party in the fate of the stolen slipper! Could it be that others, in no way connected with the dreadful Hassan of Aleppo, were in quest of the slipper?

Scotland Yard had taken care to ensure that the general public be kept in ignorance of the existence of such an organization as the Hashishin, but I must assume that this hypothetical third party were well aware that they had Hassan, as well as the authorities, to count with. Granting the existence of such a party, my beautiful acquaintance might be classified as one of its members. I spoke again.

"Bristol," I said, "has it occurred to you that there may be others, as well as Hassan of Aleppo, seeking to gain possession of the sacred slipper?"

"It has not," he replied. "In the strictest sense of the expression, they would be out for trouble! What gave you the idea?"

"I hardly know," I returned evasively, for even now I was loath to betray the mysterious girl with the wonderful eyes.

The chapel bell sounding the half-hour, Bristol rose with a sigh that might have been one of relief, and went out to take the report of the man on duty at the gate. As his footsteps died away along the elm avenue, it came to me how, in the darkness about, menace lurked; and I felt myself succumbing to the greatest dread experienced by man—the dread of the unknown.

All that I knew of the weird group of fanatics—survivals of a dim and evil past—who must now be watching this cottage as bloodlustful devotees watch a shrine violated, burst upon my mind. I peopled the still blackness

with lurking assassins, armed with the murderous knowledge of by-gone centuries, armed with invisible weapons which struck down from afar, supernaturally.

I glanced toward the corner of the room where the safe stood, reliquary of a worthless thing for which much blood had been spilled.

Then sounded footsteps along the avenue, and my fear whispered that they were not those of Bristol but of one who had murdered him, and who came guilefully, to murder me!

I snatched the revolver from my pocket and crossed the darkened room. Just to the right of one of the French windows I stood looking out across the loggia to the end of the avenue. The night was a bright one, and the room was flooded with a reflected mystic light, but outside the moon paved the avenue with pearl, and through the trees I saw a figure approaching.

Was it Bristol? It had his build, it had his gait; but my fears remained. Then the figure crossed the patch of shrubbery and stepped on to the loggia.

"Mr Cavanagh!"

I laughed dryly at my own cowardice, but my heart was still beating abnormally.

"Here I am, Bristol, in a ghastly funk!"

"I don't wonder! They may be on us any time now. All's well at the gate, but Morris says he heard, or thought he heard something at the side of the chapel opposite, a while ago."

"Wind in the bushes?"

"It may have been; but he says there was no breeze at the time."

We resumed our seats.

"Bristol," I said, "now that the danger grows imminent, doesn't it seem to you foolhardy for us thus to expose ourselves?"

"Perhaps it is," he agreed; "but how otherwise are we likely to learn what happened to Marden and West?"

"The enemy may adopt different measures to-night."

"I think not. Our dispositions are the same, and I credit them with cunning enough to know it. At the same time I credit ourselves with having kept the existence of the steel traps completely secret. They will assume (so I've reasoned) that we intend to rely entirely upon our superior vigilance, therefore they will try the same game as last night."

Silence fell.

The moon rays, creeping around from the right of the avenue, crossing the shrubbery and encroaching upon the low wall of the loggia, now flooded its floor. Against the silvern light, Bristol appeared to me in black silhouette. The breeze, too, seemed now to blow from a slightly different direction. It came through the windows on my right, beyond which lay the unkempt bushes which extended on that side to the wall of the grounds.

So we sat, until the moonlight poured fully in upon Bristol's back. So we sat when the clock chimed the hour of one.

Bristol arose and once more went out to the gate. He had arranged to visit Morris's post every half-hour. Again I experienced the nervous dread that he would be attacked in the avenue; but again he returned unscathed.

"All's well," he said.

But from his tones I knew that he had not forgotten that it was at this hour Marden and West had suffered mysterious attack.

Neither of us, I think, was disposed to talk. We both were unwilling to break the silence, wherein, with all our ears, we listened for the slightest disturbance.

And now my attention turned anew to the course of the slowly creeping moon rays. In my mind an idea was struggling for definition. There was something significant in the lunar lighting of the room. Why, I asked myself, had the attack been made at one o'clock? Did the time signify anything? If so, what? I looked toward Bristol.

His figure, the chair upon which he sat, were sharply outlined by the cold light. The wall behind me, and to my left, was illuminated brilliantly; but no light fell directly upon me.

The idea was taking shape. From the loggia and the avenue Bristol, I reasoned, must be clearly visible. From the shrubbery on the south, through the other windows could I be seen? Yes, silhouetted against the moonlight!

A faint sound, quite indescribable, came to my ears from somewhere outside-beyond.

"My God!" whispered Bristol. "Did you hear it?"

"Yes! What?"

"It must have been Morris!—"

Bristol was half standing, one hand upon the arm of the chair, the other concealed, but grasping his revolver as I well knew. I, too, had my revolver

in my hand, and as I twisted in my seat, preparatory to rising, in sheer nervousness I dropped the weapon upon the carpet.

With an exclamation of dismay, I stooped quickly to recover it.

As I did so something whistled past my ear, so closely as almost to touch it—and struck with a dull thud upon the wall beyond!

"Bristol!" I whispered.

But as I raised my eyes to him he seemed to crumple up, and fell loosely forward into the patch of moonlight spread upon the floor! "God in heaven!" I said aloud.

In a cold sweat of fear I crouched there, for it had become evident to me that, as I bent, I was entirely in shadow.

There was a rustling in the bushes on the left; but before I could turn in that direction, my attention was claimed elsewhere. Over into the loggia leapt an almost naked brown figure!

It was that of a small but strongly built man, who carried a short, exceedingly thick bamboo rod in his hand. My fear was too great to admit of my accurately observing anything at that time, but I noticed that some kind of leather thong or loop was attached to the end of the squat cane.

The panic fear of the supernatural was strongly upon me, and I was unable to realize that this Eastern apparition was a creature of flesh and blood. With my nerves strung up to snapping point, I crouched watching him. He entered the room, bending over the body of Bristol.

A hot breath fanned my cheek!

At that my overwrought nerves betrayed me. I uttered a stifled cry, looking upward . . . and into a pair of gleaming eyes which looked down into mine!

A second brown man (who must have entered by one of the windows overlooking the shrubbery) was bending over me!

Scarce knowing what I did, I raised my revolver and blazed straight into the dimly-seen face. Down upon me silently dropped a naked body, and something warm came flowing over my hand. But, knowing my foes to be of flesh and blood, feeling myself at handgrips now with a palpable enemy, I threw off the body, leapt up and fired, though blindly, at the flying shape that flashed across the loggia—and was lost in the shadow pools under the elms.

Upon the din of my shooting fell silence like a cloak. A moment I listened, tense, still; then I turned to the table and lighted the lamp.

In its light I saw Bristol lying like a dead man. Close beside him was a big and heavy lump of clay. It had been shaped as a ball, but now it was flattened out curiously. Bending over my unfortunate companion and learning that, though unconscious, he lived, I learnt, too, how the Hashishin contrived to strike men insensible without approaching them; I learnt that the one whom I had shot, who lay in his blood almost on the spot where Professor Deeping once had lain, was an expert slinger.

The contrivance which he carried, as did the other who had escaped, was a sling, of the ancient Persian type. In place of stones, heavy lumps of clay were used, which operated much the same as a sand-bag, whilst enabling the operator to work from a considerable distance.

Hidden, over by the ancient chapel it might be, one of this evil twain had struck down Morris, the constable; from the shelter of the trees, from many yards away, they had shot their singular missiles through the open windows at Bristol and myself. Bristol had succumbed, and now, with a redness showing through his close-cut hair immediately behind the right ear, lay wholly unconscious at my feet.

It had been a divine accident which had caused me to drop my revolver, and, stooping to recover it, unknowingly to frustrate the design of the second slinger upon myself. The light of the lamp fell upon the face of the dead Hashishin. He lay forward upon his hands, crouching almost, but with his face, his dreadful, featureless face, twisted up at me from under his left shoulder.

God knows he deserved his end; but that mutilated face is often grinning, bloodily, in my dreams.

And then as I stood, between that horrid exultation which is born of killing and the panic which threatened me out of the darkness, I saw something advancing . . . slowly . . . slowly . . . from the elmen shades toward the loggia.

It was a shape—it was a shadow. Silent it came—on—and on. Where the dusk lay deepest it paused, undefined; for I could give it no name of man or spirit. But a horror seemed to proceed from it as light from a lamp.

I groped about the table near to me, never taking my eyes from that sinister form outside. As my fingers closed upon the telephone, distant

voices and the sound of running footsteps (of those who had heard the shots) came welcome to my ears.

The form stirred, seeming to raise phantom arms in execration, and a stray moonbeam pierced the darkness shrouding it. For a fleeting instant something flashed venomously.

The sounds grew nearer. I could tell that the newcomers had found Morris lying at the gate. Yet still I stood, frozen with uncanny fear, and watching—watching the spot to which that stray beam had pierced; the spot where I had seen the moon gleam upon the ring of the Prophet!

X. AT THE BRITISH ANTIQUARIAN MUSEUM

A little group of interested spectators stood at the head of the square glass case in the centre of the lofty apartment in the British Antiquarian Museum known as the Burton Room (by reason of the fact that a fine painting of Sir Richard Burton faces you as you enter). A few other people looked on curiously from the lower end of the case. It contained but one exhibit—a dirty and dilapidated markoob—or slipper of morocco leather that had once been red.

"Our latest acquisition, gentlemen," said Mr Mostyn, the curator, speaking in a low tone to the distinguished Oriental scholars around him. "It has been left to the Institution by the late Professor Deeping. He describes it in a document furnished by his solicitor as one of the slippers worn by the Prophet Mohammed, but gives us no further particulars. I myself cannot quite place the relic."

"Nor I," interrupted one of the group. "It is not mentioned by any of the Arabian historians to my knowledge—that is, if it comes from Mecca, as I understand it does."

"I cannot possibly assert that it comes from Mecca, Dr. Nicholson," Mostyn replied. "The Professor may have taken it from Al-Madinah — perhaps from the mysterious inner passage of the baldaquin where the treasures of the place lie. But I can assure you that what little we do know of its history is sufficiently unsavoury."

I fancied that the curator's tired cultured voice faltered as he spoke; and now, without apparent reason, he moved a step to the right and glanced oddly along the room. I followed the direction of his glance, and saw a tall man in conventional morning dress, irreproachable in every detail, whose head was instantly bent upon his catalogue. But before his eyes fell I knew that their long almond shape, as well as the peculiar burnt pallor of his countenance, were undoubtedly those of an Oriental.

"There have been mysterious outrages committed, I believe, upon many of those who have come in contact with the slipper?" asked one of the savants.

"Exactly. Professor Deeping was undoubtedly among the victims. His instructions were explicit that the relic should be brought here by a Moslem, but for a long time we failed to discover any Moslem who would undertake the task; and, as you are aware, while the slipper remained at the Professor's house attempts were made to steal it."

He ceased uneasily, and glanced at the tall Eastern figure. It had edged a little nearer; the head was still bowed and the fine yellow waxen fingers of the hand from which he had removed his glove fumbled with the catalogue's leaves. It may well have been that in those days I read menace in every eye, yet I felt assured that the yellow visitor was eavesdropping—was malignantly attentive to the conversation.

The curator spoke lower than ever now; no one beyond the circle could possibly hear him as he proceeded—

"We discovered an Alexandrian Greek who, for personal reasons, not unconnected with matrimony, had turned Moslem! He carried the slipper here, strongly escorted, and placed it where you now see it. No other hand has touched it." (The speaker's voice was raised ever so slightly.) "You will note that there is a rail around the case, to prevent visitors from touching even the glass."

"Ah," said Dr. Nicholson quizzically, "And has anything untoward happened to our Graeco-Moslem friend?"

"Perhaps Inspector Bristol can tell," replied the curator.

The straight, military figure of the well-known Scotland Yard man was conspicuous among the group of distinguished—and mostly round-shouldered—scholars.

"Sorry, gentlemen," he said, smiling, "but Mr Acepulos has vanished from his tobacco shop in Soho. I am not apprehensive that he had been kidnapped or anything of that kind. I think rather that the date of his disappearance tallies with that on which he cashed his cheque for service rendered! His present wife is getting most unbeautifully fat, too."

"What precautions," someone asked, "are being taken to guard the slipper?"

"Well," Mostyn answered, "though we have only the bare word of the late Professor Deeping that the slipper was actually worn by Mohammed, it has certainly an enormous value according to Moslem ideas. There can be no doubt that a group of fanatics known as Hashishin are in London engaged in an extraordinary endeavour to recover it."

Mostyn's voice sank to an impressive whisper. My gaze sought again the tall Eastern visitor and was held fascinated by the baffled straining in those velvet eyes. But the lids fell as I looked; and the effect was that of a fire suddenly extinguished. I determined to draw Bristol's attention to the man.

"Accordingly," Mostyn continued, "we have placed it in this room, from which I fancy it would puzzle the most accomplished thief to remove it."

The party, myself included, stared about the place, as he went on to explain—

"We have four large windows here; as you see. The Burton Room occupies the end of a wing; there is only one door; it communicates with the next room, which in turn opens into the main building by another door on the landing. We are on the first floor; these two east windows afford a view of the lawn before the main entrance; those two west ones face Orpington Square; all are heavily barred as you see. During the day there is a man always on duty in these two rooms. At night that communicating door is locked. Short of erecting a ladder in full view either of the Square or of Great Orchard Street, filing through four iron bars and breaking the window and the case, I fail to see how anybody can get at the slipper here."

"If a duplicate key to the safe—" another voice struck in; I knew it afterward for that of Professor Rhys-Jenkyns.

"Impossible to procure one, Professor," cried Mostyn, his eyes sparkling with an almost boyish interest. "Mr Cavanagh here holds the keys of the case, under the will of the late Professor Deeping. They are of foreign workmanship and more than a little complicated."

The eyes of the savants were turned now in my direction.

"I suppose you have them in a place of safety?" said Dr. Nicholson.

"They are at my bankers," I replied.

"Then I venture to predict," said the celebrated Orientalist, "that the slipper of the Prophet will rest here undisturbed."

He linked his arm into that of a brother scholar and the little group straggled away, Mostyn accompanying them to the main entrance.

But I saw Inspector Bristol scratching his chin; he looked very much as if he doubted the accuracy of the doctor's prediction. He had already had some experience of the implacable devotion of the Moslem group to this treasure of the Faithful.

"The real danger begins," I suggested to him, "when the general public is admitted—after to-day, is it not?"

"Yes. All to-day's people are specially invited, or are using special invitation cards," he replied. "The people who received them often give their tickets away to those who will be likely really to appreciate the opportunity."

I looked around for the tall Oriental. He seemed to have vanished, and for some reason I hesitated to speak of him to Bristol; for my gaze fell upon an excessively thin, keen-faced man whose curiously wide-open eyes met mine smilingly, whose gray suit spoke Stein-Bloch, whose felt was a Boss raw-edge unmistakably of a kind that only Philadelphia can produce. At the height of the season such visitors are not rare, but this one had an odd personality, and moreover his keen gaze was raking the place from ceiling to floor.

Where had I met him before? To the best of my recollection I had never set eyes upon the man prior to that moment; and since he was so palpably an American I had no reason for assuming him to be associated with the Hashishin. But I remembered—indeed, I could never forget—how, in the recent past, I had met with an apparent associate of the Moslems as evidently European as this curiously alert visitor was American. Moreover . . . there was something tauntingly familiar, yet elusive, about that gaunt face.

Was it not upon the eve of the death of Professor Deeping that the girl with the violet eyes had first intruded her fascinating personality into my tangled affairs? Patently, she had then been seeking the holy slipper, and by

craft had endeavoured to bend me to her will. Then had I not encountered her again, meeting the glance of her unforgettable violet eyes outside a Strand hotel? The encounter had presaged a further attempt upon the slipper! Certainly she acted on behalf of someone interested in it; and since neither Bristol nor I could conceive of any one seeking to possess the bloodstained thing except the mysterious leader of the Hashishin—Hassan of Aleppo—as a creature of that awful fanatic being I had written her down.

Why, then, if the mysterious Eastern employed a European girl, should he not also employ an American man? It might well be that the relic, in entering the doors of the impregnable Antiquarian Museum, had passed where the diabolical arts of the Hashishin had no power to reach it—where the beauty of Western women and the craft of Eastern man were equally useless weapons. Perhaps Hassan's campaign was entering upon a new phase.

Was it a shirking of plain duty on my part that wish—that ever-present hope—that the murderous company of fanatics who had pursued the stolen slipper from its ancient resting-place to London, should succeed in recovering it? I leave you to judge.

The crescent of Islam fades to-day and grows pale, but there are yet fierce Believers, alust for the blood of the infidel. In such as these a faith dies the death of an adder, and is more venomous in its death-throes than in the full pulse of life. The ghastly indiscretion of Professor Deeping, in rifling a Moslem Sacristy, had led to the mutilation of many who, unwittingly, had touched the looted relic, had brought about his own end, had established a league of fantastic assassins in the heart of the metropolis.

Only once had I seen the venerable Hassan of Aleppo—a stately, gentle old man; but I knew that the velvet eyes could blaze into a passionate fury that seemed to scorch whom it fell upon. I knew that the saintly Hassan was Sheikh of the Hashishin. And familiarity with that dreadful organization had by no means bred contempt. I was the holder of the key, and my fear of the fanatics grew like a magic mango, darkened the sunlight of each day, and filled the night with indefinable dread.

You, who have not read poor Deeping's "Assyrian Mythology", cannot picture a creature with a huge, distorted head, and a tiny, dwarfed body—a thing inhuman, yet human—a man stunted and malformed by the cruel arts of brother men—a thing obnoxious to life, with but one passion, the passion

to kill. You cannot conceive of the years of agony spent by that creature strapped to a wooden frame—in order to prevent his growth! You cannot conceive of his fierce hatred of all humanity, inflamed to madness by the Eastern drug, hashish, and directed against the enemies of Islam—the holders of the slipper—by the wonderful power of Hassan of Aleppo.

But I had not only read of such beings, I had encountered one!

And he was but one of the many instruments of the Hashishin. Perhaps the girl with the violet eyes was another. What else to be dreaded Hassan might hold in store for us I could not conjecture.

Do you wonder that I feared? Do you wonder that I hoped (I confess it), hoped that the slipper might be recovered without further bloodshed?

XI. THE HOLE IN THE BLIND

I stepped over to the door, where a constable stood on duty.

"You observed a tall Eastern gentleman in the room a while ago, officer?"

"I did, sir."

"How long is he gone?"

The man started and began to peer about anxiously.

"That's a funny thing, sir," he said. "I was keeping my eyes specially upon him. I noticed him hovering around while Mr Mostyn was speaking; but although I could have sworn he hadn't passed out, he's gone!"

"You didn't notice his departure, then?"

"I'm sorry to say I didn't, sir."

The man clearly was perplexed, but I found small matter for wonder in the episode. I had more than suspected the stranger to be a spy of Hassan's, and members of that strange company were elusive as will-o'-the-wisps.

Bristol, at the far end of the room, was signalling to me. I walked back and joined him.

"Come over here," he said, in a low voice, "and pretend to examine these things."

He glanced significantly to his left. Following the glance, my eyes fell upon the lean American; he was peering into the receptacle which held the holy slipper.

Bristol led me across the room, and we both faced the wall and bent over a glass case. Some yellow newspaper cuttings describing its contents hung above it, and these we pretended to read.

"Did you notice that man I glanced at?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's Earl Dexter, the first crook in America! Ssh! Only goes in on very big things. We had word at the Yard he was in town; but we can't touch him—we can only keep our eyes on him. He usually travels openly and in his own name, but this time he seems to have slipped over quietly. He always dresses the same and has just given me 'good day!' They call him The Stetson Man. We heard this morning that he had booked two first-class sailings in the Oceanic, leaving for New York three weeks hence. Now, Mr Cavanagh, what is his game?"

"It has occurred to me before, Bristol," I replied, "and you may remember that I mentioned the idea to you, that there might be a third party interested in the slipper. Why shouldn't Earl Dexter be that third party?"

"Because he isn't a fool," rapped Bristol shortly. "Earl Dexter isn't a man to gather up trouble for himself. More likely if his visit has anything really to do with the slipper he's retained by Hassan and Company. Museum-breaking may be a bit out of the line of Hashishin!"

This latter suggestion dovetailed with my own ideas, and oddly enough there was something positively wholesome in the notion of the straightforward crookedness of a mere swell cracksman.

Then happened a singular thing, and one that effectually concluded our whispered colloquy. From the top end of the room, beyond the case containing the slipper, one of the yellow blinds came down with a run.

Bristol turned in a flash. It was not a remarkable accident, and might portend no more than a loose cord; but when, having walked rapidly up the room, we stood before the lowered blind, it appeared that this was no accident at all.

Some four feet from the bottom of the blind (or five feet from the floor) a piece of linen a foot square had been neatly slashed out!

I glanced around the room. Several fashionably dressed visitors were looking idly in our direction, but I could fasten upon no one of them as a likely perpetrator.

Bristol stared at me in perplexity.

"Who on earth did it," he muttered, "and what the blazes for?"

XII. THE HASHISHIN WATCH

"The American gentleman has just gone out, sir," said the sergeant at the door.

I nodded grimly and raced down the steps. Despite my half-formed desire that the slipper should be recovered by those to whom properly it belonged, I experienced at times a curious interest in its welfare. I cannot explain this. Across the hall in front of me I saw Earl Dexter passing out of the Museum. I followed him through into Kingsway and thence to Fleet Street. He sauntered easily along, a nonchalant gray figure. I had begun to think that he was bound for his hotel and that I was wasting my time when he turned sharply into quiet Salisbury Square; it was almost deserted.

My heart leapt into my mouth with a presentiment of what was coming as I saw an elegant and beautifully dressed woman sauntering along in front of us on the far side.

Was it that I detected something familiar in her carriage, in the poise of her head—something that reminded me of former unforgettable encounters; encounters which without exception had presaged attempts upon the slipper of the Prophet? Or was it that I recollected how Dexter had booked two passages to America? I cannot say, but I felt my heart leap; I knew beyond any possibility of doubt that this meeting in Salisbury Square marked the opening of a new chapter in the history of the slipper.

Dexter slipped his arm within that of the girl in front of him and they paced slowly forward in earnest conversation. I suppose my action was very amateurish and very poor detective work; but regardless of discovery I crossed the road and passed close by the pair.

I am certain that Dexter was speaking as I came up, but, well out of earshot, his voice was suddenly arrested. His companion turned and looked at me.

I was prepared for it, yet was thrilled electrically by the flashing glance of the violet eyes—for it was she—the beautiful harbinger of calamities!

My brain was in a whirl; complication piled itself upon complication; yet in the heart of all this bewilderment I thought I could detect the key of the labyrinth, but at the time my ideas were in disorder, for the violet eyes were not lowered but fixed upon me in cold scorn.

I knew myself helpless, and bending my head with conscious embarrassment I passed on hurriedly.

I had work to do in plenty, but I could not apply my mind to it; and now, although the obvious and sensible thing was to go about my business, I wandered on aimlessly, my brain employed with a hundred idle conjectures and the query, "Where have I seen The Stetson Man?" seeming to beat, like a tattoo, in my brain. There was something magnetic about the accursed slipper, for without knowing by what route I had arrived there, I found myself in Great Orchard Street and close under the walls of the British Antiquarian Museum. Then I was effectually aroused from my reverie.

Two men, both tall, stood in the shadow of a doorway on the Opposite side of the street, staring intently up at the Museum windows. It was a tropically hot afternoon and they stood in deepest shadow. No one else was in Orchard Street—that odd little backwater—at the time, and they stood gazing upward intently and gave me not even a passing glance.

But I knew one for the Oriental visitor of the morning, and despite broad noonday and the hum of busy London about me, my blood seemed to turn to water. I stood rooted to the spot, held there by a most surprising horror.

For the gray-bearded figure of the other watcher was one I could never forget; its benignity was associated with the most horrible hours of my life, with deeds so dreadful that recollection to this day sometimes breaks my sleep, arousing me in the still watches, bathed in a cold sweat of fear.

It was Hassan of Aleppo!

If he saw me, if either of them saw me, I cannot say. What I should have done, what I might have done it is useless to speak of here —for I did nothing. Inert, thralled by the presence of that eerie, dreadful being, I watched them leave the shadow of the doorway and pace slowly on with their dignified Eastern gait.

Then, knowing how I had failed in my plain duty to my fellow-men — how, finding a serpent in my path, I had hesitated to crush it, had weakly succumbed to its uncanny fascination—I made my way round to the door of the Museum.

XIII. THE WHITE BEAM

That night the deviltry began. Mr Mostyn found himself wholly unable to sleep. Many relics have curious histories, and the experienced archaeologist becomes callous to that uncanniness which seems to attach to some gruesome curios. But the slipper of the Prophet was different. No mere ghostly menace threatened its holders; an avenging scimitar followed those who came in contact with it; gruesome tragedies, mutilations, murders, had marked its progress throughout.

The night was still—as still as a London night can be; for there is always a vague murmuring in the metropolis as though the sleeping city breathed gently and sometimes stirred in its sleep.

Then, distinct amid these usual nocturnal noises, rose another, unaccountable sound, a muffled crash followed by a musical tinkling.

Mostyn sprang up in bed, drew on a dressing-gown, and took from the small safe at his bed-head the Museum keys and a loaded revolver. A somewhat dishevelled figure, pale and wild-eyed, he made his way through the private door and into the ghostly precincts of the Museum. He did not hesitate, but ascended the stairs and unlocked the door of the Assyrian gallery.

Along its ghostly aisles he passed, and before the door which gave admittance to the Burton Room paused, fumbling a moment for the key.

Inside the room something was moving!

Mostyn was keenly alarmed; he knew that he must enter at once or never. He inserted the key in the lock, swung open the heavy door, stepped through and closed it behind him. He was a man of tremendous moral courage, for now,—alone in the apartment which harboured the uncanny relic, alone in the discharge of his duty, he stood with his back to the door trembling slightly, but with the idea of retreat finding no place in his mind.

One side of the room lay in blackest darkness; through the furthermost window of the other a faint yellowed luminance (the moonlight through the blind) spread upon the polished parquet flooring. But that which held the curator spell-bound—that which momentarily quickened into life the latent

superstition, common to all mankind, was a beam of cold light which poured its effulgence fully upon the case containing the Prophet's slipper! Where the other exhibits lay either in utter darkness or semi-darkness this one it seemed was supernaturally picked out by this lunar searchlight!

It was ghostly-unnerving; but, the first dread of it passed, Mostyn recalled how during the day a hole inexplicably had been cut in that blind; he recalled that it had not been mended, but that the damaged blind had merely been rolled up again.

And as a dawning perception of the truth came to him, as falteringly he advanced a step toward the mystic beam, he saw that one side of the case had been shattered—he saw the broken glass upon the floor; and in the dense shadow behind and under the beam of light, vaguely he saw a dull red object.

It moved—it seemed to live! It moved away from the case and in the direction of the eastern windows.

"My God!" whispered Mostyn; "it's the Prophet's slipper!"

And wildly, blindly, he fired down the room. Later he knew that he had fired in panic, for nothing human was or could be in the place; yet his shot was not without effect. In the instant of its flash, something struck sharply against the dimly seen blind of one of the east windows; he heard the crash of broken glass.

He leapt to the switch and flooded the room with light. A fear of what it might hold possessed him, and he turned instantly.

Hard by the fragments of broken glass upon the floor and midway between the case and the first easterly window lay the slipper. A bell was ringing somewhere. His shot probably had aroused the attention of the policeman. Someone was clamouring upon the door of the Museum, too. Mostyn raced forward and raised the blind —that toward which the slipper had seemed to move.

The lower pane of the window was smashed. Blood was trickling down upon the floor from the jagged edges of the glass.

"Hullo there! Open the door! Open the door!"

Bells were going all over the place now; sounds of running footsteps came from below; but Mostyn stood staring at the broken window and at the solid iron bars which protected it without, which were intact, substantial —which showed him that nothing human could possibly have entered.

Yet the case was shattered, the holy slipper lay close beside him upon the floor, and from the broken window-pane blood was falling —drip-drip-drip . . .

That was the story as I heard it half an hour later. For Inspector Bristol, apprised of the happening, was promptly on the scene; and knowing how keen was my interest in the matter, he rang me up immediately. I arrived soon after Bristol and found a perplexed group surrounding the uncanny slipper of the Prophet. No one had dared to touch it; the dread vengeance of Hassan of Aleppo would visit any unbeliever who ventured to lay hand upon the holy, bloody thing. Well we knew it, and as though it had been a venomous scorpion we, a company of up-to-date, prosaic men of affairs, stood around that dilapidated markoob, and kept a respectful distance.

Mostyn, an odd figure in pyjamas and dressing-gown, turned his pale, intellectual face to me as I entered.

"It will have to be put back . . . secretly," he said.

His voice was very unsteady. Bristol nodded grimly and glanced at the two constables, who, with a plain-clothes man unknown to me, made up that midnight company.

"I'll do it, sir," said one of the constables suddenly.

"One moment"—Mostyn raised his hand!

In the ensuing silence I could hear the heavy breathing of those around me. We were all looking at the slipper, I think.

"Do you understand, fully," the curator continued, "the risk you run?"

"I think so, sir," answered the constable; "but I'm prepared to chance it."

"The hands," resumed Mostyn slowly, "of those who hitherto have ventured to touch it have been"—he hesitated—"cut off."

"Your career in the Force would be finished if it happened to you, my lad," said Bristol shortly.

"I suppose they'd look after me," said the man, with grim humour.

"They would if you met with—an accident, in the discharge of your duty," replied the inspector; "but I haven't ordered you to do it, and I'm not going to."

"All right, sir," said the man, with a sort of studied truculence, "I'll take my chance."

I tried to stop him; Mostyn, too, stepped forward, and Bristol swore frankly. But it was all of no avail.

A sort of chill seemed to claim my very soul when I saw the constable stoop, unconcernedly pick up the slipper, and replace it in the broken case.

It was out of a silence cathedral-like, awesome, that he spoke.

"All you want is a new pane of glass, sir," he said—"and the thing's done."

I anticipate in mentioning it here; but since Constable Hughes has no further place in these records I may perhaps be excused for dismissing him at this point.

He was picked up outside the section house on the following evening with his right hand severed just above the wrist.

XIV. A SCREAM IN THE NIGHT

The day that followed was one of the hottest which we experienced during the heat wave. It was a day crowded with happenings. The Burton Room was closed to the public, whilst a glazier worked upon the broken east window and a new blind was fitted to the west. Behind the workmen, guarded by a watchful commissionaire, yawned the shattered case containing the slipper.

I wondered if the visitors to the other rooms of the Museum realized, as I realized, that despite the blazing sunlight of tropical London, the shadow of Hassan of Aleppo lay starkly on that haunted building?

At about eleven o'clock, as I hurried along the Strand, I almost collided with the girl of the violet eyes! She turned and ran like the wind down Arundel Street, whilst I stood at the corner staring after her in blank amazement, as did other passers-by; for a man cannot with dignity race headlong after a pretty woman down a public thoroughfare!

My mystification grew hourly deeper; and Bristol wallowed in perplexities.

"It's the most horrible and confusing case," he said to me when I joined him at the Museum, "that the Yard has ever had to handle. It bristles with outrages and murders. God knows where it will all end. I've had London scoured for a clue to the whereabouts of Hassan and Company and drawn absolutely blank! Then there's Earl Dexter. Where does he come in? For

once in a way he's living in hiding. I can't find his headquarters. I've been thinking—"

He drew me aside into the small gallery which runs parallel with the Assyrian Room.

"Dexter has booked two passages in the Oceanic. Who is his companion?"

I wondered, I had wondered more than once, if his companion were my beautiful violet-eyed acquaintance. A scruple—perhaps an absurd scruple—hitherto had kept me silent respecting her, but now I determined to take Bristol fully into my confidence. A conviction was growing upon me that she and Earl Dexter together represented that third party whose existence we had long suspected. Whether they operated separately or on behalf of the Moslems (of which arrangement I could not conceive) remained to be seen. I was about to voice my doubts and suspicions when Bristol went on hurriedly—

"I have thoroughly examined the Burton Room, and considering that the windows are thirty feet from the ground, that there is no sign of a ladder having stood upon the lawn, and that the iron bars are quite intact, it doesn't look humanly possible for any one to have been in the room last night prior to Mostyn's arrival!"

"One of the dwarfs—"

"Not even one of the dwarfs," said Bristol, "could have passed between those iron bars!"

"But there was blood on the window!"

"I know there was, and human blood. It's been examined!"

He stared at me fixedly. The thing was unspeakably uncanny.

"To-night," he went on, "I am remaining in here"—nodding toward the Assyrian Room—"and I have so arranged it that no mortal being can possibly know I am here. Mostyn is staying, and you can stay, too, if you care to. Owing to Professor Deeping's will you are badly involved in the beastly business, and I have no doubt you are keen to see it through."

"I am," I admitted, "and the end I look for and hope for is the recovery of the slipper by its murderous owners!"

"I am with you," said Bristol. "It's just a point of honour; but I should be glad to make them a present of it. We're ostentatiously placing a constable

on duty in the hallway to-night—largely as a blind. It will appear that we're taking no other additional precautions."

He hurried off to make arrangements for my joining him in his watch, and thus again I lost my opportunity of confiding in him regarding the mysterious girl.

I half anticipated, though I cannot imagine why, that Earl Dexter would put in an appearance, during the day. He did not do so, however, for Bristol had put a constable on the door who was well acquainted with the appearance of The Stetson Man. The inspector, in the course of his investigations, had come upon what might have been a clue, but what was at best a confusing one. Close by the wall of the curator's house and lying on the gravel path he had found a part of a gold cuff link. It was of American manufacture.

Upon such slender evidence we could not justly assume that it pointed to the presence of Dexter on the night of the attempted robbery, but it served to complicate a matter already sufficiently involved.

In pursuance of Bristol's plan, I concealed myself that evening just before the closing of the Museum doors, in a recess behind a heavy piece of Babylonian sculpture. Bristol was similarly concealed in another part of the room, and Mostyn joined us later.

The Museum was closed; and so far as evidence went the authorities had relied again upon the bolts and bars hitherto considered impregnable, and upon the constable in the hall. The broken window was mended, the cut blind replaced, and within, in its shattered case, reposed the slipper of the Prophet.

All the blinds being lowered, the Assyrian Room was a place of gloom, yellowed on the western side by the moonlight through the blind. The door communicating with the Burton Room was closed but not fastened.

"They operated last night," Bristol whispered to me, "at the exact time when the moonlight shone through the hole in the westerly blind on to the case. If they come to-night, and I am quite expecting them, they will have to dispense with that assistance; but they know by experience where to reach the case."

"Despite our precautions," I said, "they will almost certainly know that a watch is being kept."

"They may or they may not," replied Bristol. "Either way I'm disposed to think there will be another attempt. Their mysterious method is so rapid that they can afford to take chances."

This was not my first night vigil since I had become in a sense the custodian of the relic, but it was quite the most dreary. Amid the tomb-like objects about us we seemed two puny mortals toying with stupendous things. We could not smoke and must converse only in whispers; and so the night wore on until I began to think that our watch would be dully uneventful.

"Our big chance," whispered Mostyn, "is in the fact that any day may change the conditions. They can't afford to wait."

He ceased abruptly, grasping my arm. From somewhere, somewhere outside the building, we all three had heard a soft whistle. A moment of tense listening followed.

"If only we could have had the place surrounded," whispered Bristol—"but it was impossible, of course."

A faint grating noise echoed through the lofty Burton Room. Bristol slipped past me in the semi-gloom, and gently opened the communicating door a few inches.

A-tiptoe, I joined him, and craning across his shoulder saw a strange and wonderful thing.

The newly glazed east window again was shattered with a booming crash! The yellow blind was thrust aside. A long something reached out toward the broken case. There was a sort of fumbling sound, and paralyzed with the wonder of it—for the window, remember, was thirty feet from the ground—I stood frozen to my post.

Not so Bristol. As the weird tentacle (or more exactly it reminded me of a gigantic crab's claw) touched the case, the Inspector leapt forward. A white beam from his electric torch cut through to the broken cabinet.

The thing was withdrawn . . . and with it went the slipper of the Prophet.

"Raise the blinds!" cried Bristol. "Mr Cavanagh! Mr Mostyn! We must not let them give us the slip!"

I got up the blind of the nearer window as Bristol raised the other. Not a living thing was in sight from either!

Mostyn was beside me, his hand resting on my shoulder. I noted how he trembled. Bristol turned and looked back at us. The light from his pocket

torch flashed upon the curator's face; and I have never seen such an expression of horrified amazement as that which it wore. Faintly, I could hear the constable racing up the steps from the hall.

Ideas of the supernatural came to us all, I know; when, with a scuffling sound not unlike that of a rat in a ceiling, something moved above us!

"Damn my thick head!" roared Bristol, furiously. "He's on the roof! It's flat as a floor and there's enough ivy alongside the water-spout on your house adjoining, Mr Mostyn, to afford foothold to an invading army!"

He plunged off toward the open door, and I heard him racing down the Assyrian Room.

"He had a short rope ladder fixed from the gutter!" he cried back at us. "Graham! Graham!" (the constable on duty in the hall)— "Get the front door open! Get . . . " His voice died away as he leapt down the stairs.

From the direction of Orpington Square came a horrid, choking scream. It rose hideously; it fell, rose again—and died.

The thief escaped. We saw the traces upon the ivy where he had hastened down. Bristol ascended by the same route, and found where the ladder-hooks had twice been attached to the gutterway. Constable Graham, who was first actually to leave the building, declared that he heard the whirr of a re-started motor lower down Great Orchard Street.

Bristol's theory, later to be dreadfully substantiated, was that the thief had broken the glass and reached into the case with an arrangement similar to that employed for pruning trees, having a clutch at the end, worked with a cord.

"Hassan has been too clever for us!" said the inspector. "But— what in God's name did that awful screaming mean?"

I had a theory, but I did not advance it then.

It was not until nearly dawn that my theory, and Bristol's, regarding the clutch arrangement, both were confirmed. For close under the railings which abut on Orpington Square, in a pool of blood we found just such an instrument as Bristol had described.

And still clutching it was a pallid and ghastly shrunken hand that had been severed from above the wrist!

"Merciful God!" whispered the inspector—"look at the opal ring on the finger! Look at the bandage where he cut himself on the broken window-

glass that first night, when Mr Mostyn disturbed him. It wasn't the Hashishin who stole the thing . . . . It's Earl Dexter's hand!"

No one spoke for a moment. Then—

"Which of them has—" began Mostyn huskily.

"The slipper of the Prophet?" interrupted Bristol. "I wonder if we shall ever know?"

XV. A SHRIVELLED HAND

Around a large square table in a room at New Scotland Yard stood a group of men, all of whom looked more or less continuously at something that lay upon the polished deal. One of the party, none other than the Commissioner himself, had just finished speaking, and in silence now we stood about the gruesome object which had furnished him with the text of his very terse address.

I knew myself privileged in being admitted to such a conference at the C.I.D. headquarters and owed my admission partly to Inspector Bristol, and partly to the fact that under the will of the late Professor Deeping I was concerned in the uncanny business we were met to discuss.

Novelty has a charm for every one; and to find oneself immersed in a maelstrom of Eastern devilry, with a group of scientific murderers in pursuit of a holy Moslem relic, and unexpectedly to be made a trustee of that dangerous curiosity, makes a certain appeal to the adventurous. But to read of such things and to participate in them are widely different matters. The slipper of the Prophet and the dreadful crimes connected with it, the mutilations, murders, the uncanny mysteries which made up its history, were filling my world with horror.

Now, in silence we stood around that table at New Scotland Yard and watched, as though we expected it to move, the ghastly "clue" which lay there. It was a shrivelled human hand, and about the thumb and forefinger there still dryly hung a fragment of lint which had bandaged a jagged wound. On one of the shrunken fingers was a ring set with a large opal.

Inspector Bristol broke the oppressive silence.

"You see, sir," he said, addressing the Commissioner, "this marks a new complication in the case. Up to this week although, unfortunately, we had made next to no progress, the thing was straightforward enough. A band of Eastern murderers, working along lines quite novel to Europe, were concealed somewhere in London. We knew that much. They murdered Professor Deeping, but failed to recover the slipper. They mutilated everyone who touched it mysteriously. The best men in the department, working night and day, failed to effect a single arrest. In spite of the mysterious activity of Hassan of Aleppo the slipper was safely lodged in the British Antiquarian Museum."

The Commissioner nodded thoughtfully.

"There is no doubt," continued Bristol, "that the Hashishin were watching the Museum. Mr Cavanagh, here"—he nodded in my direction—"saw Hassan himself lurking in the neighbourhood. We took every precaution, observed the greatest secrecy; but in spite of it all a constable who touched the accursed thing lost his right hand. Then the slipper was taken."

He stopped, and all eyes again were turned to the table.

"The Yard," resumed Bristol slowly, "had information that Earl Dexter, the cleverest crook in America, was in England. He was seen in the Museum, and the night following the slipper was stolen. Then outside the place I found—that!"

He pointed to the severed hand. No one spoke for a moment. Then—

"The new problem," said the Commissioner, "is this: who took the slipper, Dexter or Hassan of Aleppo?"

"That's it, sir," agreed Bristol. "Dexter had two passages booked in the Oceanic: but he didn't sail with her, and—that's his hand!"

"You say he has not been traced?" asked the Commissioner.

"No doctor known to the Medical Association," replied Bristol, "is attending him! He's not in any of the hospitals. He has completely vanished. The conclusion is obvious!"

"The evident deduction," I said, "is that Dexter stole the slipper from the Museum—God knows with what purpose—and that Hassan of Aleppo recovered it from him."

"You think we shall next hear of Earl Dexter from the river police?" suggested Bristol.

"Personally," replied the Commissioner, "I agree with Mr Cavanagh. I think Dexter is dead, and it is very probable that Hassan and Company are already homeward bound with the slipper of the Prophet."

With all my heart I hoped that he might be right, but an intuition was with me crying that he was wrong, that many bloody deeds would be, ere the sacred slipper should return to the East.

XVI. THE DWARF

The manner in which we next heard of the whereabouts of the Prophet's slipper was utterly unforeseen, wildly dramatic. That the Hashishin were aware that I, though its legal trustee, no longer had charge of the relic nor knowledge of its resting-place, was sufficiently evident from the immunity which I enjoyed at this time from that ceaseless haunting by members of the uncanny organization ruled by Hassan. I had begun to feel more secure in my chambers, and no longer worked with a loaded revolver upon the table beside me. But the slightest unusual noise in the night still sufficed to arouse me and set me listening intently, to chill me with dread of what it might portend. In short, my nerves were by no means recovered from the ceaseless strain of the events connected with and arising out of the death of my poor friend, Professor Deeping.

One evening as I sat at work in my chambers, with the throb of busy Fleet Street and its thousand familiar sounds floating in to me through the open windows, my phone bell rang.

Even as I turned to take up the receiver a foreboding possessed me that my trusteeship was no longer to be a sinecure. It was Bristol who had rung me up, and upon very strange business.

"A development at last!" he said; "but at present I don't know what to make of it. Can you come down now?"

"Where are you speaking from?"

"From the Waterloo Road—a delightful neighbourhood. I shall be glad if you can meet me at the entrance to Wyatt's Buildings in half an hour."

"What is it? Have you found Dexter?"

"No, unfortunately. But it's murder!"

I knew as I hung up the receiver that my brief period of peace was ended; that the lists of assassination were reopened. I hurried out through the court into Fleet Street, thinking of the key of the now empty case at the Museum which reposed at my bankers, thinking of the devils who pursued the slipper, thinking of the hundred and one things, strange and terrible, which went to make up the history of that gruesome relic.

Wyatt's Buildings, Waterloo Road, are a gloomy and forbidding block of dwellings which seem to frown sullenly upon the high road, from which they are divided by a dark and dirty courtyard. Passing an iron gateway, you enter, by way of an arch, into this sinister place of uncleanness. Male residents in their shirt sleeves lounge against the several entrances. Bedraggled women nurse dirty infants and sit in groups upon the stone steps, rendering them almost impassable. But to-night a thing had happened in Wyatt's Buildings which had awakened in the inhabitants, hardened to sordid crime, a sort of torpid interest.

Faces peered from most of the windows which commanded a view of the courtyard, looking like pallid blotches against the darkness; but a number of police confined the loungers within their several doorways, so that the yard itself was comparatively clear.

I had had some difficulty in forcing a way through the crowd which thronged the entrance, but finally I found myself standing beside Inspector Bristol and looking down upon that which had brought us both to Wyatt's Buildings.

There was no moon that night, and only the light of the lamp in the archway, with some faint glimmers from the stairways surrounding the court, reached the dirty paving. Bristol directed the light of a pocket-lamp upon the hunched-up figure which lay in the dust, and I saw it to be that of a dwarfish creature, yellow skinned and wearing only a dark loin cloth. He had a malformed and disproportionate head, a head that had been too large even for a big man. I knew after first glance that this was one of the horrible dwarfs employed by the Hashishin in their murderous business. It might even be the one who had killed Deeping; but this was impossible to determine by reason of the fact that the hideous, swollen head, together with the features, was completely crushed. I shall not describe the creature's appearance in further detail.

Having given me an opportunity to examine the dead dwarf, Bristol returned the electric lamp to his pocket and stood looking at me in the semi-gloom. A constable stood on duty quite near to us, and others guarded the archway and the doors to the dwellings. The murmur of subdued voices echoed hollowly in the wells of the staircases, and a constant excited murmur proceeded from the crowd at the entrance. No pressmen had yet been admitted, though numbers of them were at the gates.

"It happened less than an hour ago," said Bristol. "The place was much as you see it now, and from what I can gather there came the sound of a shot and several people saw the dwarf fall through the air and drop where he lies!"

The light was insufficient to show the expression upon the speaker's face, but his voice told of a great wonder.

"It is a bit like an Indian conjuring trick," I said, looking up to the sky above us; "who fired the shot?"

"So far," replied Bristol, "I have failed to find out; but there's a bullet in the thing's head. He was dead before he reached the pavement."

"Did no one see the flash of the pistol?"

"No one that I have got hold of yet. Of course this kind of evidence is very unreliable; these people regularly go out of their way to mislead the police."

"You think the body may have been carried here from somewhere else?"

"Oh, no; this is where it fell, right enough. You can see where his head struck the stones."

"He has not been moved at all?"

"No; I shall not move him until I've worked out where in heaven's name he can have fallen from! You and I have seen some mysterious things happen, Mr Cavanagh, since the slipper of the Prophet came to England and brought these people"—he nodded toward the thing at our feet—"in its train; but this is the most inexplicable incident to date. I don't know what to make of it at all. Quite apart from the question of where the dwarf fell from, who shot at him and why?"

"Have you no theory?" I asked. "The incident to my mind points directly to one thing. We know that this uncanny creature belonged to the organization of Hassan of Aleppo. We know that Hassan implacably pursues one object—the slipper. In pursuit of the slipper, then, the dwarf

came here. Bristol!"—I laid my hand upon his arm, glancing about me with a very real apprehension—"the slipper must be somewhere near!"

Bristol turned to the constable standing hard by.

"Remain here," he ordered. Then to me: "I should like you to come up on to the roof. From there we can survey the ground and perhaps arrive at some explanation of how the dwarf came to fall upon that spot."

Passing the constable on duty at one of the doorways and making our way through the group of loiterers there, we ascended amid conflicting odours to the topmost floor. A ladder was fixed against the wall communicating with a trap in the ceiling. Several individuals in their shirt sleeves and all smoking clay pipes had followed us up. Bristol turned upon them.

"Get downstairs," he said—"all the lot of you, and stop there!"

With muttered imprecations our audience dispersed, slowly returning by the way they had come. Bristol mounted the ladder and opened the trap. Through the square opening showed a velvet patch spangled with starry points. As he passed up on to the roof and I followed him, the comparative cleanness of the air was most refreshing after the varied fumes of the staircase.

Side by side we leaned upon the parapet looking down into the dirty courtyard which was the theatre of this weird mystery; looking down upon the stage, sordidly Western, where a mystic Eastern tragedy had been enacted.

I could see the constable standing beside the crushed thing upon the stones.

"Now," said Bristol, with a sort of awe in his voice, "where did he fall from?"

And at his words, looking down at the spot where the dwarf lay, and noting that he could not possibly have fallen there from any of the buildings surrounding the courtyard, an eerie sensation crept over me; for I was convinced that the happening was susceptible of no natural explanation.

I had heard—who has not heard?—of the Indian rope trick, where a fakir throws a rope into the air which remains magically suspended whilst a boy climbs upward and upward until he disappears into space. I had never credited accounts of the performance; but now I began seriously to wonder if the arts of Hassan of Aleppo were not as great or greater than the arts of

fakir. But the crowning mystery to my mind was that of the Hashishin's death. It would seem that as he had hung suspended in space he had been shot!

"You say that someone heard the sound of the shot?" I asked suddenly.

"Several people," replied Bristol; "but no one knows, or no one will say, from what direction it came. I shall go on with the inquiry, of course, and cross-examine every soul in Wyatt's Buildings. Meanwhile, I'm open to confess that I am beaten."

In the velvet sky countless points blazed tropically. The hum of the traffic in Waterloo Road reached us only in a muffled way. Sordidness lay beneath us, but up there under the heavens we seemed removed from it as any Babylonian astronomer communing with the stars.

When, some ten minutes later, I passed out into the noise of Waterloo Road, I left behind me an unsolved mystery and took with me a great dread; for I knew that the quest of the sacred slipper was not ended, I knew that another tragedy was added to its history —and I feared to surmise what the future might hold for all of us.

XVII. THE WOMAN WITH THE BASKET

Deep in thought respecting the inexplicable nature of this latest mystery, I turned in the direction of the bridge, and leaving behind me an ever-swelling throng at the gate of Wyatt's Buildings, proceeded westward.

The death of the dwarf had lifted the case into the realms of the marvellous, and I noted nothing of the bustle about me, for mentally I was still surveying that hunched-up body which had fallen out of empty space.

Then in upon my preoccupation burst a woman's scream!

I aroused myself from reverie, looking about to right and left. Evidently I had been walking slowly, for I was less than a hundred yards from Wyatt's Buildings, and hard by the entrance to an uninviting alley from which I thought the scream had proceeded.

And as I hesitated, for I had no desire to become involved in a drunken brawl, again came the shrill scream: "Help! help!"

I cannot say if I was the only passer-by who heard the cry; certainly I was the only one who responded to it. I ran down the narrow street, which was practically deserted, and heard windows thrown up as I passed for the cries for help continued.

Just beyond a patch of light cast by a street lamp a scene was being enacted strange enough at any time and in any place, but doubly singular at that hour of the night, or early morning, in a lane off the Waterloo Road.

An old woman, from whose hand a basket of provisions had fallen, was struggling in the grasp of a tall Oriental! He was evidently trying to stifle her screams and at the same time to pinion her arms behind her!

I perceived that there was more in this scene than met the eye. Oriental footpads are rarities in the purlieus of Waterloo Road. So much was evident; and since I carried a short, sharp argument in my pocket, I hastened to advance it.

At the sight of the gleaming revolver barrel the man, who was dressed in dark clothes and wore a turban, turned and ran swiftly off. I had scarce a glimpse of his pallid brown face ere he was gone, nor did the thought of pursuit enter my mind. I turned to the old woman, who was dressed in shabby black and who was rearranging her thick veil in an oddly composed manner, considering the nature of the adventure that had befallen her.

She picked up her basket, and turned away. Needless to say I was rather shocked at her callous ingratitude, for she offered no word of thanks, did not even glance in my direction, but made off hurriedly toward Waterloo Road.

I had been on the point of inquiring if she had sustained any injury, but I checked the words and stood looking after her in blank wonderment. Then my ideas were diverted into a new channel. I perceived, as she passed under an adjacent lamp, that her basket contained provisions such as a woman of her appearance would scarcely be expected to purchase. I noted a bottle of wine, a chicken, and a large melon.

The nationality of the assailant from the first had marked the affair for no ordinary one, and now a hazy notion of what lay behind all this began to come to me.

Keeping well in the shadows on the opposite side of the way, I followed the woman with the basket. The lane was quite deserted; for, the disturbance over, those few residents who had raised their windows had

promptly lowered them again. She came out into Waterloo Road, crossed over, and stood waiting by a stopping-place for electric cars. I saw her arranging a cloth over her basket in such a way as effectually to conceal the contents. A strong mental excitement possessed me. The detective fever claims us all at one time or another, I think, and I had good reason for pursuing any inquiry that promised to lead to the elucidation of the slipper mystery. A theory, covering all the facts of the assault incident, now presented itself, and I stood back in the shadow, watchful; in a degree, exultant.

A Greenwich-bound car was hailed by the woman with the basket. I could not be mistaken, I felt sure, in my belief that she cast furtive glances about her as she mounted the steps. But, having seen her actually aboard, my attention became elsewhere engaged.

All now depended upon securing a cab before the tram car had passed from view!

I counted it an act of Providence that a disengaged taxi appeared at that moment, evidently bound for Waterloo Station. I ran out into the road with cane upraised.

As the man drew up—

"Quick!" I cried. "You see that Greenwich car—nearly at the Ophthalmic Hospital? Follow it. Don't get too near. I will give you further instructions through the tube." I leapt in. We were off!

The rocking car ahead was rounding the bend now toward St. George's Circus. As it passed the clock and entered South London Road it stopped. I raised the tube.

"Pass it slowly!"

We skirted the clock tower, and bore around to the right. Then I drew well back in the corner of the cab.

The woman with the basket was descending! "Pull up a few yards beyond!" I directed. As the car re-started, and passed us, the taxi became stationary. I peered out of the little window at the back.

The woman was returning in the direction of Waterloo Road!

"Drive slowly back along Waterloo Road," was my next order. "Pretend you are looking for a fare; I will keep out of sight."

The man nodded. It was unlikely that any one would notice the fact that the cab was engaged.

I was borne back again upon my course. The woman kept to the right, and, once we were entered into the straight road which leads to the bridge, I again raised the speaking-tube.

"Pull up," I said. "On the right-hand side is an old woman carrying a basket, fifty yards ahead. Do you see her? Keep well behind, but don't lose sight of her."

The man drew up again and sat watching the figure with the basket until it was almost lost from sight. Then slowly we resumed our way. I would have continued the pursuit afoot now, but I feared that my quarry might again enter a vehicle. She did not do so, however, but coming abreast of the turning in which the mysterious assault had taken place, she crossed the road and disappeared from view.

I leapt out of the cab, thrust half a crown into the man's hand, and ran on to the corner. The night was now far advanced, and I knew that the chances of detection were thereby increased. But the woman seemed to have abandoned her fears, and I saw her just ahead of me walking resolutely past the lamp beyond which a short time earlier she had met with a dangerous adventure.

Since the opposite side of the street was comparatively in darkness, I slipped across, and in a state of high nervous tension pursued this strange work of espionage. I was convinced that I had forestalled Bristol and that I was hot upon the track of those who could explain the mystery of the dead dwarf.

The woman entered the gate of the block of dwellings even more forbidding in appearance than those which that night had staged a dreadful drama.

As the figure with the basket was lost from view I crept on, and in turn entered the evil-smelling hallway. I stepped cautiously, and standing beneath a gaslight protected by a wire frame, I congratulated myself upon having reached that point of vantage as silently as any Sioux stalker.

Footsteps were receding up the stone stairs. Craning my neck, I peered up the well of the staircase. I could not see the woman, but from the sound of her tread it was possible to count the landings which she passed. When she had reached the fourth, and I heard her step upon yet another flight, I knew that she must be bound for the topmost floor; and observing every

precaution, almost holding my breath in a nervous endeavour to make not the slightest sound, rapidly I mounted the stairs.

I was come to the third landing in this secret fashion when quite distinctly I heard the grating of a key in a lock!

Since four doors opened upon each of the landings, at all costs, I thought, I must learn by which door she entered.

Throwing caution to the winds I raced up the remaining flights . . . and there at the top the woman confronted me, with blazing eyes!— with eyes that thrilled every nerve; for they were violet eyes, the only truly violet eyes I have ever seen! They were the eyes of the woman who like a charming, mocking will-o'-the-wisp had danced through this tragic scene from the time that poor Professor Deeping had brought the Prophet's slipper to London up to this present hour!

There at the head of those stone steps in that common dwelling-house I knew her—and in the violet eyes it was written that she knew, and feared, me!

"What do you want? Why are you following me?"

She made no endeavour to disguise her voice. Almost, I think, she spoke the words involuntarily.

I stood beside her. Quickly as she had turned from the door at my ascent, I had noted that it was that numbered forty-eight which she had been about to open.

"You waste words," I said grimly. "Who lives there?"

I nodded in the direction of the doorway. The violet eyes watched me with an expression in their depths which I find myself wholly unable to describe. Fear predominated, but there was anger, too, and with it a sort of entreaty which almost made me regret that I had taken this task upon myself. From beneath the shabby black hat escaped an errant lock of wavy hair wholly inconsistent with the assumed appearance of the woman. The flickering gaslight on the landing sought out in that wonderful hair shades which seemed to glow with the soft light seen in the heart of a rose. The thick veil was raised now and all attempts at deception abandoned. At bay she faced me, this secret woman whom I knew to hold the key to some of the darkest places which we sought to explore.

"I live there," she said slowly. "What do you want with me?"

"I want to know," I replied, "for whom are those provisions in your basket?"

She watched me fixedly.

"And I want to know," I continued, "something that only you can tell me. We have met before, madam, but you have always eluded me. This time you shall not do so. There's much I have to ask of you, but particularly I want to know who killed the Hashishin who lies dead at no great distance from here!"

"How can I tell you that? Of what are you speaking?"

Her voice was low and musical; that of a cultured woman. She evidently recognized the futility of further subterfuge in this respect.

"You know quite well of what I am speaking! You know that you can tell me if any one can! The fact that you go disguised alone condemns you! Why should I remind you of our previous meetings—of the links which bind you to the history of the Prophet's slipper?" She shuddered and closed her eyes. "Your present attitude is a sufficient admission!"

She stood silent before me, with something pitiful in her pose—a wonderfully pretty woman, whose disarranged hair and dilapidated hat could not mar her beauty; whose clumsy, ill-fitting garments could not conceal her lithe grace.

Our altercation had not thus far served to arouse any of the inhabitants and on that stuffy landing, beneath the flickering gaslight, we stood alone, a group of two which epitomized strange things.

Then, with that quietly dramatic note which marks real life entrances and differentiates them from the loudly acclaimed episodes of the stage, a third actor took up his cue.

"Both hands, Mr Cavanagh!" directed an American voice.

Nerves atwitch, I started around in its direction.

From behind the slightly opened door of No. 48 protruded a steel barrel, pointed accurately at my head!

I hesitated, glancing from the woman toward the open door.

"Do it quick!" continued the voice incisively. "You are up against a desperate man, Mr Cavanagh. Raise your hands. Carneta, relieve Mr Cavanagh of his gun!"

Instantly the girl, with deft fingers, had obtained possession of my revolver.

"Step inside," said the crisp, strident voice. Knowing myself helpless and quite convinced that I was indeed in the clutches of desperate people, I entered the doorway, the door being held open from within. She whom I had heard called Carneta followed. The door was reclosed; and I found myself in a perfectly bare and dim passageway. From behind me came the order—

"Go right ahead!"

Into a practically unfurnished room, lighted by one gas jet, I walked. Some coarse matting hung before the two windows and a fairly large grip stood on the floor against one wall. A gas-ring was in the hearth, together with a few cheap cooking utensils.

I turned and faced the door. First entered Carneta, carrying the basket; then came a man with a revolver in his left hand and his right arm strapped across his chest and swathed in bandages. One glance revealed the fact that his right hand had been severed— revealed the fact, though I knew it already, that my captor was Earl Dexter.

He looked even leaner than when I had last seen him. I had no doubt that his ghastly wound had occasioned a tremendous loss of blood. His gaunt face was positively emaciated, but the steely gray eyes had lost nothing of their brightness. There was a good deal about Mr Earl Dexter, the cracksman, that any man must have admired.

"Shut the door, Carneta," he said quietly. His companion closed the door and Dexter sat down on the grip, regarding me with his oddly humorous smile.

"You're a visitor I did not expect, Mr Cavanagh," he said. "I expected someone worse. You've interfered a bit with my plans but I don't know that I can't rearrange things satisfactorily. I don't think I'll stop for supper, though—" He glanced at the girl, who stood silent by the door.

"Just pack up the provisions," he directed, nodding toward the basket —"in the next room."

She departed without a word.

"That's a noticeable dust coat you're wearing, Mr Cavanagh," said the American; "it gives me a great notion. I'm afraid I'll have to borrow it."

He glanced, smiling, at the revolver in his left hand and back again to me. There was nothing of the bully about him, nothing melodramatic; but I took

off the coat without demur and threw it across to him.

"It will hide this stump," he said grimly; "and any of the Hashishin gentlemen who may be on the look-out—though I rather fancy the road is clear at the moment—will mistake me for you. See the idea? Carneta will be in a cab and I'll be in after her and away before they've got time to so much as whistle."

Very awkwardly he got into the coat.

"She's a clever girl, Carneta," he said. "She's doctored me all along since those devils cut my hand off."

As he finished speaking Carneta returned.

She had discarded her rags and wore a large travelling coat and a fashionable hat.

"Ready?" asked Dexter. "We'll make a rush for it. We meant to go to-night anyway. It's getting too hot here!" He turned to me.

"Sorry to say," he drawled, "I'll have to tie you up and gag you. Apologize; but it can't be helped."

Carneta nodded and went out of the room again, to return almost immediately with a line that looked as though it might have been employed for drying washing.

"Hands behind you," rapped Dexter, toying with the revolver—"and think yourself lucky you've got two!"

There was no mistaking the manner of man with whom I had to deal, and I obeyed; but my mind was busy with a hundred projects. Very neatly the girl bound my wrists, and in response to a slight nod from Dexter threw the end of the line up over a beam in the sloping ceiling, for the room was right under the roof, and drew it up in such a way that, my wrists being raised behind me, I became utterly helpless. It was an ingenious device indicating considerable experience.

"Just tie his handkerchief around his mouth," directed Dexter: "that will keep him quiet long enough for our purpose. I hope you will be released soon, Mr Cavanagh," he added. "Greatly regret the necessity."

Carneta bound the handkerchief over my mouth.

Dexter extinguished the gas.

"Mr Cavanagh," he said, "I've gone through hell and I've lost the most useful four fingers and a thumb in the United States to get hold of the

Prophet's slipper. Any one can have it that's open to pay for it—but I've got to retire on the deal, so I'll drive a hard bargain! Good-night!"

There was a sound of retreating footsteps, and I heard the entrance door close quietly.

XVIII. WHAT CAME THROUGH THE WINDOW

I had not been in my unnatural position for many minutes before I began to suffer agonies, agonies not only physical but mental; for standing there like some prisoner of the Inquisition, it came to me how this dismantled apartment must be the focus of the dreadful forces of Hassan of Aleppo!

That Earl Dexter had the slipper of the Prophet I no longer doubted, and that he had sustained, in this dwelling beneath the roof, an uncanny siege during the days which had passed since the theft from the Antiquarian Museum, was equally certain. Helpless, gagged, I pictured those hideous creatures, evil products of the secret East, who might, nay, who must surround that place! I thought of the horrible little yellow man who lay dead in Wyatt's Buildings; and it became evident to me that the house in which I was now imprisoned must overlook the back of those unsavoury tenements. The windows, sack-covered now, no doubt commanded a view of the roofs of the buildings. One of the mysteries that had puzzled us was solved. It was Earl Dexter who had shot the yellow dwarf as he was bound for this very room! But how humanly the Hashishin had proposed to gain his goal, how he had travelled through empty space—for from empty space the shot had brought him down—I could not imagine.

I knew something of the almost supernatural attributes of these people. From Professor Deeping's book I knew of the incredible feats which they could perform when under the influence of the drug hashish. From personal experience also I knew that they had powers wholly abnormal.

The pain in my arms and back momentarily increased. An awesome silence ruled. I tortured myself with pictures of murderous yellow men possessed of the power claimed by the Mahatmas, of levitation. Mentally I could see a distorted half-animal creature carrying a great gleaming knife and floating supernaturally toward me through the night!

A soft pattering sound became perceptible on the sloping roof above!

I think I have never known such intense and numbing fear as that which now descended upon me. Perhaps I may be forgiven it. A more dreadful situation it would be hard to devise. Knowing that I was on the fifth story of a house, bound, helpless, I knew, too, that a second mystic guardian of the slipper was come to accomplish the task in which the first had failed!

I began to pray fervently.

Neither of the windows were closed; and now through the intense darkness I heard one of them being raised up—up—up . . .

The sacking was pulled aside inch by inch.

Silhouetted against the faintly luminous background I saw a hunched, unnatural figure. The real was more dreadful even than the imaginary—for some stray beam of light touched into cold radiance a huge curved knife which the visitant held between his teeth!

My fear became a madness, and I twisted my body violently in a wild endeavour to free myself. A dreadful pain shot through my left shoulder, and the whole nightmare scene—the thing with the knife at the window—the low-ceiled room-began to fade away from me. I seemed to be falling into deep water.

A splintering crash and the sound of shouting formed my last recollections ere unconsciousness came.

I found myself lying in an armchair with Bristol forcing brandy between my lips. My left arm hung limply at my side and the pain in my dislocated shoulder was excruciating.

"Thank God you are all right, Mr Cavanagh!" said the inspector. "I got the surprise of my life when we smashed the door in and found you tied up here!"

"You came none too soon," I said feebly. "God knows how Providence directed you here."

"Providence it was," replied Bristol. "From the roof of Wyatt's Buildings —you know the spot?—I saw the second yellow devil coming. By God! They meant to have it to-night! They don't value their lives a brass farthing against that damned slipper!"

"But how—"

"Along the telegraph-wires, Mr Cavanagh! They cross Wyatt's Buildings and cross this house. It was a moonless night or we should have seen it at

once! I watched him, saw him drop to this roof—and brought the men around to the front."

"Did he, that awful thing, escape?"

"He dropped full forty feet into a tree—from the tree to the ground, and went off like a cat!"

"Earl Dexter has escaped us," I said, "and he has the slipper!"

"God help him!" replied Bristol. "For by now he has that hell-pack at his heels! What a case! Heavens above, it will drive me mad!"

XIX. A RAPPING AT MIDNIGHT

Inspector Bristol finished his whisky at a gulp and stood up, a tall, massive figure, stretching himself and yawning.

"The detective of fiction would be hard at work on this case, now," he said, smiling, "but I don't even pretend to be. I am at a standstill and I don't care who knows it."

"You have absolutely no clue to the whereabouts of Earl Dexter?"

"Not the slightest, Mr Cavanagh. You hear a lot about the machinery of the law, but as a matter of fact, looking for a clever man hidden in London is a good deal like looking for a needle in a haystack. Then, he may have been bluffing when he told you he had the Prophet's slipper. He's already had his hand cut off through interfering with the beastly thing, and I really can't believe he would take further chances by keeping it in his possession. Nevertheless, I should like to find him."

He leaned back against the mantelpiece, scratching his head perplexedly. In this perplexity he had my sympathy. No such pursuit, I venture to say, had ever before been required of Scotland Yard as this of the slipper of the Prophet. An organization founded in 1090, which has made a science of assassination, which through the centuries has perfected the malign arts, which, lingering on in a dark spot in Syria, has suddenly migrated and established itself in London, is a proposition almost unthinkable.

It was hard to believe that even the daring American cracksman should have ventured to touch that blood-stained relic of the Prophet, that he should have snatched it away from beneath the very eyes of the fanatics

who fiercely guarded it. What he hoped to gain by his possession of the slipper was not evident, but the fact remained that if he could be believed, he had it, and provided Scotland Yard's information was accurate, he still lurked in hiding somewhere in London.

Meanwhile, no clue offered to his hiding-place, and despite the ceaseless vigilance of the men acting under Bristol's orders, no trace could be found of Hassan of Aleppo nor of his fiendish associates.

"My theory is," said Bristol, lighting a cigarette, "that even Dexter's cleverness has failed to save him. He's probably a dead man by now, which accounts for our failing to find him; and Hassan of Aleppo has recovered the slipper and returned to the East, taking his gruesome company with him —God knows how! But that accounts for our failing to find him."

I stood up rather wearily. Although poor Deeping had appointed me legal guardian of the relic, and although I could render but a poor account of my stewardship, let me confess that I was anxious to take that comforting theory to my bosom. I would have given much to have known beyond any possibility of doubt that the accursed slipper and its blood-lustful guardian were far away from England. Had I known so much, life would again have had something to offer me besides ceaseless fear, endless watchings. I could have slept again, perhaps; without awaking, clammy, peering into every shadow, listening, nerves atwitch to each slightest sound disturbing the night; without groping beneath the pillow for my revolver.

"Then you think," I said, "that the English phase of the slipper's history is closed? You think that Dexter, minus his right hand, has eluded British law —that Hassan and Company have evaded retribution?"

"I do!" said Bristol grimly, "and although that means the biggest failure in my professional career, I am glad—damned glad!"

Shortly afterward he took his departure; and I leaned from the window, watching him pass along the court below and out under the arch into Fleet Street. He was a man whose opinions I valued, and in all sincerity I prayed now that he might be right; that the surcease of horror which we had recently experienced after the ghastly tragedies which had clustered thick about the haunted slipper, might mean what he surmised it to mean.

The heat to-night was very oppressive. A sort of steaming mist seemed to rise from the court, and no cooling breeze entered my opened windows. The clamour of the traffic in Fleet Street came to me but remotely. Big Ben

began to strike midnight. So far as I could see, residents on the other stairs were all abed and a velvet shadow carpet lay unbroken across three parts of the court. The sky was tropically perfect, cloudless, and jewelled lavishly. Indeed, we were in the midst of an Indian summer; it seemed that the uncanny visitants had brought, together with an atmosphere of black Eastern deviltry, something, too, of the Eastern climate.

The last stroke of the Cathedral bell died away. Other more distant bells still were sounding dimly, but save for the ceaseless hum of the traffic, no unusual sound now disturbed the archaic peace of the court.

I returned to my table, for during the time that had passed I had badly neglected my work and now must often labour far into the night. I was just reseated when there came a very soft rapping at the outer door!

No doubt my mood was in part responsible, but I found myself thinking of Poe's weird poem, "The Raven"; and like the character therein I found myself hesitating.

I stole quietly into the passage. It was in darkness. How odd it is that in moments of doubt instinctively one shuns the dark and seeks the light. I pressed the switch lighting the hall lamp, and stood looking at the closed door.

Why should this late visitor have rapped in so uncanny a fashion in preference to ringing the bell?

I stepped back to my table and slipped a revolver into my pocket.

The muffled rapping was repeated. As I stood in the study doorway I saw the flap of the letter-box slowly raised!

Instantly I extinguished both lights. You may brand me as childishly timid, but incidents were fresh in my memory which justified all my fears.

A faintly luminous slit in the door showed me that the flap was now fully raised. It was the dim light on the stairway shining through. Then quite silently the flap was lowered. Came the soft rapping again.

"Who's there?" I cried.

No one answered.

Wondering if I were unduly alarming myself, yet, I confess, strung up tensely in anticipation that this was some device of the phantom enemy, I stood in doubt.

The silence remained unbroken for thirty seconds or more. Then yet again it was disturbed by that ghostly, muffled rapping.

I advanced a step nearer to the door.

"Who's there?" I cried loudly. "What do you want?"

The flap of the letter box began to move, and I formed a sudden determination. Making no sound in my heelless Turkish slippers I crept close up to the door and dropped upon my knees.

Thereupon the flap became fully lifted, but from where I crouched beneath it I was unable to see who or what was looking in; yet I hesitated no longer. I suddenly raised myself and thrust the revolver barrel through the opening!

"Who are you?" I cried. "Answer or I fire!"—and along the barrel I peered out on to the landing.

Still no one answered. But something impalpable—a powder—a vapour—to this hour I do not know what—enveloped me with its nauseating fumes; was puffed fully into my face! My eyes, my mouth, my nostrils became choked up, it seemed, with a deadly stifling perfume.

Wildly, feeling that everything about me was slipping away, that I was sinking into a void, for ought I knew that of dissolution, I pulled the trigger once, twice, thrice ...

"My God!"—the words choked in my throat and I reeled back into the passage—"it's not loaded!"

I threw up my arms to save myself, lurched, and fell forward into what seemed a bottomless pit.

XX. THE GOLDEN PAVILION

When I opened my eyes it was to a conviction that I dreamed. I lay upon a cushioned divan in a small apartment which I find myself at a loss adequately to describe.

It was a yellow room, then, its four walls being hung with yellow silk, its floor being entirely covered by a yellow Persian carpet. One lamp, burning in a frame of some lemon coloured wood and having its openings filled with green glass, flooded the place with a ghastly illumination. The lamp hung by gold chains from the ceiling, which was yellow. Several low tables of the same lemon-hued wood as the lamp-frame stood around; they were

inlaid in fanciful designs with gleaming green stones. Turn my eyes where I would, clutch my aching head as I might, this dream chamber would not disperse, but remained palpable before me—yellow and green and gold.

There was a niche behind the divan upon which I lay framed about with yellow wood. In it stood a golden bowl and a tall pot of yellow porcelain; I lay amid yellow cushions having golden tassels. Some of them were figured with vivid green devices.

To contemplate my surroundings assuredly must be to court madness. No door was visible, no window; nothing but silk and luxury, yellow and green and gold.

To crown all, the air was heavy with a perfume wholly unmistakable by one acquainted with Egypt's ruling vice. It was the reek of smouldering hashish—a stench that seemed to take me by the throat, a vapour damnable and unclean. I saw that a little censer, golden in colour and inset with emeralds, stood upon the furthermost corner of the yellow carpet. From it rose a faint streak of vapour; and I followed the course of the sickly scented smoke upward through the still air until in oily spirals it lost itself near to the yellow ceiling. As a sick man will study the veriest trifle I studied that wisp of smoke, pencilled grayly against the silken draperies, the carven tables, against the almost terrifying persistency of the yellow and green and gold.

I strove to rise, but was overcome by vertigo and sank back again upon the yellow cushions. I closed my eyes, which throbbed and burned, and rested my head upon my hands. I ceased to conjecture if I dreamed or was awake. I knew that I felt weak and ill, that my head throbbed agonizingly, that my eyes smarted so as to render it almost impossible to keep them open, that a ceaseless humming was in my ears.

For some time I lay endeavouring to regain command of myself, to prepare to face again that scene which had something horrifying in its yellowness, touched with the green and gold.

And when finally I reopened my eyes, I sat up with a suppressed cry. For a tall figure in a yellow robe from beneath which peeped yellow slippers, a figure crowned with a green turban, stood in the centre of the apartment!

It was that of a majestic old man, white bearded, with aquiline nose, and the fierce eagle eyes of a fanatic set upon me sternly, reprovingly.

With folded arms he stood watching me, and I drew a sharp breath and rose slowly to my feet.

There amid the yellow and green and gold, amid the abominable reek of burning hashish I stood and faced Hassan of Aleppo!

No words came to me; I was confounded.

Hassan spoke in that gentle voice which I had heard only once before.

"Mr Cavanagh," he said, "I have brought you here that I might warn you. Your police are seeking me night and day, and I am fully alive to my danger whilst I stay in your midst. But for close upon a thousand years the Sheikh-al-jebal, Lord of the Hashishin, has guarded the traditions and the relics of the Prophet, Salla-'llahu 'ale yhi wasellem! I, Hassan of Aleppo, am Sheikh of the Order to-day, and my sacred duty has brought me here."

The piercing gaze never left my face. I was not yet by any means my own man and still I made no reply.

"You have been wise," continued Hassan, "in that you have never touched the sacred slipper. Had you lain hands upon it, no secrecy could have availed you. The eye of the Hashishin sees all. There is a shaft of light which the true Believer perceives at night as he travels toward El-Medineh. It is the light which uprises, a spiritual fire, from the tomb of the Prophet (Salla-'llahu 'aleyhi wasellem!). The relics also are radiant, though in a lesser degree."

He took a step toward me, spreading out his lean brown hands, palms downward.

"A shaft of light," he said impressively, "shines upward now from London. It is the light of the holy slipper." He gazed intently at the yellow drapery at the left of the divan, but as though he were looking not at the wall but through it. His features worked convulsively; he was a man inspired. "I see it now!" he almost whispered—"that white light by which the guardians of the relic may always know its resting place!"

I managed to force words to my lips.

"If you know where the slipper is," I said, more for the sake of talking than for anything else, "why do you not recover it?"

Hassan turned his eyes upon me again.

"Because the infidel dog," he cried loudly, "who has soiled it with his unclean touch, defies us—mocks us! He has suffered the loss of the offending hand, but the evil ginn protect him; he is inspired by efreets! But

God is great and Mohammed is His only Prophet! We shall triumph; but it is written, oh, daring infidel, that you again shall become the guardian of the slipper!"

He spoke like some prophet of old and I stared at him fascinated. I was loth to believe his words.

"When again," he continued, "the slipper shall be in the receptacle of which you hold the key, that key must be given to me!"

I thought I saw the drift of his words now; I thought I perceived with what object I had been trapped and borne to this mysterious abode for whose whereabouts the police vainly were seeking. By the exercise of the gift of divination it would seem that Hassan of Aleppo had forecast the future history of the accursed slipper or believed that he had done so. According to his own words I was doomed once more to become trustee of the relic. The key of the case at the Antiquarian Museum, to which he had prophesied the slipper's return, would be the price of my life! But—

"In order that these things may be fulfilled," he continued, "I must permit you to return to your house. So it is written, so it shall be. Your life is in my hands; beware when it is demanded of you that you hesitate not in yielding up the key!"

He raised his hands before him, making a sort of obeisance, I doubt not in the direction of Mecca, drew aside one of the yellow hangings behind him and disappeared, leaving me alone again in that nightmare apartment of yellow and green and gold. A moment I stood watching the swaying curtain. Utter silence reigned, and a sort of panic seized me infinitely greater than that occasioned by the presence of the weird Sheikh. I felt that I must escape from the place or that I should become raving mad.

I leapt forward to the curtain which Hassan had raised and jerked it aside; it had concealed a door. In this door and about level with my eyes was a kind of little barred window through which shone a dim green light. I bent forward, peering into the place beyond, but was unable to perceive anything save a vague greenness.

And as I peered, half believing that the whole episode was a dreadful, fevered dream, the abominable fumes of hashish grew, or seemed to grow, quite suddenly insupportable. Through the square opening, from the green void beyond, a cloud of oily vapour, pungent, stifling, resembling that of burning Indian hemp, poured out and enveloped me!

With a gasping cry I fell back, fighting for breath, for a breath of clean air unpolluted with hashish. But every inhalation drew down into my lungs the fumes that I sought to escape from. I experienced a deathly sickness; I seemed to be sinking into a sea of hashish, amid bubbles of yellow and green and gold, and I knew no more until, struggling again to my feet, surrounded by utter darkness—I struck my head on the corner of my writing-table . . . for I lay in my own study!

My revolver, unloaded, was upon the table beside me. The night was very still. I think it must have been near to dawn.

"My God!" I whispered, "did I dream it all? Did I dream it all?"

XXI. THE BLACK TUBE

"There's no doubt in my mind," said Inspector Bristol, "that your experience was real enough."

The sun was shining into my room now, but could not wholly disperse the cloud of horror which lay upon it. That I had been drugged was sufficiently evident from my present condition, and that I had been taken away from my chambers Inspector Bristol had satisfactorily proved by an examination of the soles of my slippers.

"It was a clever trick," he said. "God knows what it was they puffed into your face through the letter box, but the devilish arts of ten centuries, we must remember, are at the command of Hassan of Aleppo! The repetition of the trick at the mysterious place you were taken to is particularly interesting. I should say you won't be in a hurry to peer through letter boxes and so forth in the future?"

I shook my aching head.

"That accursed yellow room," I replied, "stank with the fumes of hashish. It may have been some preparation of hashish that was used to drug me."

Bristol stood looking thoughtfully from the window.

"It was a nightmare business, Mr Cavanagh," he said; "but it doesn't advance our inquiry a little bit. The prophecy of the old man with the white beard—whom you assure me to be none other than Hassan of Aleppo—is something we cannot very well act upon. He clearly believes it himself; for

he has released you after having captured you, evidently in order that you may be at liberty to take up your duty as trustee of the slipper again. If the slipper really comes back to the Museum the fact will show Hassan to be something little short of a magician. I shan't envy you then, Mr Cavanagh, considering that you hold the keys of the case!"

"No," I replied wearily. "Poor Professor Deeping thought that he acted in my interests and that my possession of the keys would constitute a safeguard. He was wrong. It has plunged me into the very vortex of this ghastly affair."

"It is maddening," said Bristol, "to know that Hassan and Company are snugly located somewhere under our very noses, and that all Scotland Yard can find no trace of them. Then to think that Hassan of Aleppo, apparently by means of some mystical light, has knowledge of the whereabouts of the slipper and consequently of the whereabouts of Earl Dexter (another badly wanted man) is extremely discouraging! I feel like an amateur; I'm ashamed of myself!"

Bristol departed in a condition of irritable uncertainty.

My head in my hands, I sat for long after his departure, with the phantom characters of the ghoulish drama dancing through my brain. The distorted yellow dwarfs seemed to gibe apish before me. Severed hands clenched and unclenched themselves in my face, and gleaming knives flashed across the mental picture. Predominant over all was the stately figure of Hassan of Aleppo, that benignant, remorseless being, that terrible guardian of the holy relic who directed the murderous operations. Earl Dexter, The Stetson Man, with his tightly bandaged arm, his gaunt, clean-shaven face and daredevil smile, figured, too, in my feverish daydream; nor was that other character missing, the girl with the violet eyes whose beautiful presence I had come to dread; for like a sybil announcing destruction her appearances in the drama had almost invariably presaged fresh tragedies. I recalled my previous meetings with this woman of mystery. I recalled my many surmises regarding her real identity and association with the case. I wondered why in the not very distant past I had promised to keep silent respecting her; I wondered why up to that present moment, knowing beyond doubt that her activities were inimical to my interests, were criminal, I had observed that foolish pledge.

And now my door-bell was ringing—as intuitively I had anticipated. So certain was I of the identity of my visitor that as I walked along the passage I was endeavouring to make up my mind how I should act, how I should receive her.

I opened the door; and there, wearing European garments but a green turban . . . stood Hassan of Aleppo!

When I say that amazement robbed me of the power to speak, to move, almost to think, I doubt not you will credit me. Indeed, I felt that modern London was crumbling about me and that I was become involved in the fantastic mazes of one of those Oriental intrigues such as figure in the Romance of Abu Zeyd, or with which most European readers have been rendered familiar by the glowing pages of "The Thousand and One Nights."

"Effendim," said my visitor, "do not hesitate to act as I direct!"

In his gloved hand he carried what appeared to be an ebony cane. He raised and pointed it directly at me. I perceived that it was, in fact, a hollow tube.

"Death is in my hand," he continued; "enter slowly and I will follow you."

Still the sense of unreality held me thralled and my brain refused me service. Like an hypnotic subject I walked back to my study, followed by my terrible visitor, who reclosed the door behind him.

He sat facing me across my littered table with the mysterious tube held loosely in his grasp.

How infinitely more terrifying are perils unknown than those known and appreciated! Had a European armed with a pistol attempted a similar act of coercion, I cannot doubt that I should have put up some sort of fight; had he sat before me now as Hassan of Aleppo sat, with a comprehensible weapon thus laid upon his knees, I should have taken my chance, should have attacked him with the lamp, with a chair, with anything that came to my hand.

But before this awful, mysterious being who was turning my life into channels unsuspected, before that black tube with its unknown potentialities, I sat in a kind of passive panic which I cannot attempt to describe, which I had never experienced before and have never known since.

"There is one about to visit you," he said, "whom you know, whom I think you expect. For it is written that she shall come and such events cast a shadow before them. I, too, shall be present at your meeting!"

His eagle eyes opened widely; they burned with fanaticism.

"Already she is here!" he resumed suddenly, and bent as one listening. "She comes under the archway; she crossed the courtyard —and is upon the stair! Admit her, effendim; I shall be close behind you!"

The door-bell rang.

With the consciousness that the black tube was directed toward the back of my head, I went and opened the door. My mind was at work again, and busy with plans to terminate this impossible situation.

On the landing stood a girl wearing a simple white frock which fitted her graceful figure perfectly. A white straw hat, of the New York tourist type, with a long veil draped from the back suited her delicate beauty very well. The red mouth drooped a little at the corners, but the big violet eyes, like lamps of the soul, seemed afire with mystic light.

"Mr Cavanagh," she said, very calmly and deliberately, "there is only one way now to end all this trouble. I come from the man who can return the slipper to where it belongs; but he wants his price!"

Her quiet speech served completely to restore my mental balance, and I noted with admiration that her words were so chosen as to commit her in no way. She knew quite well that thus far she might appear in the matter with impunity, and she clearly was determined to say nothing that could imperil her.

"Will you please come in?" I said quietly—and stood aside to admit her.

Exhibiting wonderful composure, she entered—and there, in the badly lighted hallway came face to face with my other visitor!

It was a situation so dramatic as to seem unreal.

Away from that tall figure retreated the girl with the violet eyes —and away—until she stood with her back to the wall. Even in the gloom I could see that her composure was deserting her; her beautiful face was pallid.

"Oh, God!" she whispered, all but inaudible—"You!"

Hassan, grasping the black rod in his hand, signed to her to enter the study. She stood quite near to me, with her eyes fixed upon him. I bent closer to her.

"My revolver—in left-hand table drawer," I breathed in her ear. "Get it. He is watching me!"

I could not tell if my words had been understood, for, never taking her gaze from the Sheikh of the Assassins, she sidled into the study. I followed her; and Hassan came last of all. Just within the doorway he stood, confronting us.

"You have come," he said, addressing the girl and speaking in perfect English but with a marked accent, "to open your impudent negotiations through Mr Cavanagh for the return of the thrice holy relic to the Museum! Your companion, the man, who is inspired by the Evil One, has even dared to demand ransom for the slipper from me!"

Hassan was majestic in his wrath; but his eyes were black with venomous hatred.

"He has suffered the penalty which the Koran lays down; he has lost his right hand. But the lord of all evil protects him, else ere this he had lost his life! Move no closer to that table!"

I started. Either Hassan of Aleppo was omniscient or he had overheard my whispered words!

"Easily I could slay you where you stand!" he continued. "But to do so would profit me nothing. This meeting has been revealed to me. Last night I witnessed it as I slept. Also it has been revealed to me by Erroohanee, in the mirror of ink, that the slipper of the Prophet, Salla-'llahu 'ale yhi wasellem! Shall indeed return to that place accursed, that infidel eyes may look upon it! It is the will of Allah, whose name be exalted, that I hold my hand, but it is also His will that I be here, at whatever danger to my worthless body."

He turned his blazing eyes upon me.

"To-morrow, ere noon," he said, "the slipper will again be in the Museum from which the man of evil stole it. So it is written; obscure are the ways. We met last night, you and I, but at that time much was dark to me that now is light. The holy 'Alee spoke to me in a vision, saying: 'There are two keys to the case in which it will be locked. Secure one, leaving the other with him who holds it! Let him swear to be secret. This shall be the price of his life!'"

The black tube was pointed directly at my forehead.

"Effendim," concluded the speaker, "place in my hand the key of the case in the Antiquarian Museum!"

Hands convulsively clenched, the girl was looking from me to Hassan. My throat felt parched. but I forced speech to my lips.

"Your omniscience fails you," I said. "Both keys are at my bank!"

Blacker grew the fierce eyes—and blacker. I gave myself up for lost; I awaited death—death by some awful, unique means—with what courage I could muster.

From the court below came the sound of voices, the voices of passers-by who so little suspected what was happening near to them that had someone told them they certainly had refused to credit it. The noise of busy Fleet Street came drumming under the archway, too.

Then, above all, another sound became audible. To this day I find myself unable to define it; but it resembled the note of a silver bell.

Clearly it was a signal; for, hearing it, Hassan dropped the tube and glanced toward the open window.

In that instant I sprang upon him!

That I had to deal with a fanatic, a dangerous madman, I knew; that it was his life or mine, I was fully convinced. I struck out then and caught him fairly over the heart. He reeled back, and I made a wild clutch for the damnable tube, horrid, unreasoning fear of which thus far had held me inert.

I heard the girl scream affrightedly, and I knew, and felt my heart chill to know, that the tube had been wrenched from my hand! Hassan of Aleppo, old man that he appeared, had the strength of a tiger. He recovered himself and hurled me from him so that I came to the floor crashingly half under my writing-table!

Something he cried back at me, furiously—and like an enraged animal, his teeth gleaming out from his beard, he darted from the room. The front door banged loudly.

Shaken and quivering, I got upon my feet. On the threshold, in a state of pitiable hesitancy, stood the pale, beautiful accomplice of Earl Dexter. One quick glance she flashed at me, then turned and ran!

Again the door slammed. I ran to the window, looking out into the court. The girl came hurrying down the steps, and with never a backward glance ran on and was lost to view in one of the passages opening riverward.

Out under the arch, statelily passed a tall figure—and Inspector Bristol was entering! I saw the detective glance aside as the two all but met. He stood still, and looked back!

"Bristol!" I cried, and waved my arms frantically.

"Stop him! Stop him! It's Hassan of Aleppo!"

Bristol was not the only one to hear my wild cry—not the only one to dash back under the arch and out into Fleet Street.

But Hassan of Aleppo was gone!

XXII. THE LIGHT OF EL-MEDINEH

Bristol and I walked slowly in the direction of the entrance of the British Antiquarian Museum. It was the day following upon the sensational scene in my chambers.

"There's very little doubt," said Bristol, "that Earl Dexter has the slipper and that Hassan of Aleppo knows where Dexter is in hiding. I don't know which of the two is more elusive. Hassan apparently melted into thin air yesterday; and although The Stetson Man has never within my experience employed disguises, no one has set eyes upon him since the night that he vanished from his lodgings off the Waterloo Road. It's always possible for a man to baffle the police by remaining closely within doors, but during all the time that has elapsed Dexter must have taken a little exercise occasionally, and the missing hand should have betrayed him."

"The wonder to me is," I replied, "that he has escaped death at the hands of the Hashishin. He is a supremely daring man, for I should think that he must be carrying the slipper of the Prophet about with him!"

"I would rather he did it than I!" commented Bristol. "For sheer audacity commend me to The Stetson Man! His idea no doubt was to use you as intermediary in his negotiations with the Museum authorities, but that plan failing, he has written them direct, thoughtfully omitting his address, of course!"

We were, in fact, at that moment bound for the Museum to inspect this latest piece of evidence.

"The crowning example of the man's audacity and cleverness," added my companion, "is his having actually approached Hassan of Aleppo with a similar proposition! How did he get in touch with him? All Scotland Yard has failed to find any trace of that weird character!"

"Birds of a feather—" I suggested.

"But they are not birds of a feather!" cried Bristol. "On your own showing, Hassan of Aleppo is simply waiting his opportunity to balance Dexter's account forever! I always knew Dexter was a clever man; I begin to think he's the most daring genius alive!"

We mounted the steps of the Museum. In the hallway Mostyn, the curator, awaited us. Having greeted Bristol and myself he led the way to his private office, and from a pigeon-hole in his desk took out a letter typewritten upon a sheet of quarto paper.

Bristol spread it out upon the blotting pad and we bent over it curiously.

SIR—

I believe I can supply information concerning the whereabouts of the missing slipper of Mohammed. As any inquiry of this nature must be extremely perilous to the inquirer and as the relic is a priceless one, my fee would be 10,000 pounds. The fanatics who seek to restore the slipper to the East must not know of any negotiations, therefore I omit my address, but will communicate further if you care to insert instructions in the agony column of Times.

Faithfully,

EARL DEXTER

Bristol laughed grimly.

"It's a daring game," he said; "a piece of barefaced impudence quite characteristic.

"He's posing as a sort of private detective now, and is prepared for a trifling consideration to return the slipper which he stole himself! He must know, though, that we have his severed hand at the Yard to be used in evidence against him."

"Is the Burton Room open to the public again?" I asked Mostyn.

"It is open, yes," he replied, "and a quite unusual number of visitors come daily to gaze at the empty case which once held the slipper of the Prophet."

"Has the case been mended?"

"Yes; it is quite intact again; only the exhibit is missing."

We ascended the stairs, passed along the Assyrian Room, which seemed to be unusually crowded, and entered the lofty apartment known as the

Burton Room. The sunblinds were drawn, and a sort of dim, religious light prevailed therein. A group of visitors stood around an empty case at the farther end of the apartment.

"You see," said Mostyn, pointing, "that empty case has a greater attraction than all the other full ones!"

But I scarcely heeded his words, for I was intently watching the movements of one of the group about the empty case. I have said that the room was but dimly illuminated, and this fact, together no doubt with some effect of reflected light, enhanced by my imagination, perhaps produced the phenomenon which was occasioning me so much amazement.

Remember that my mind was filled with memories of weird things, that I often found myself thinking of that mystic light which Hassan of Aleppo had called the light of El-Medineh—that light whereby, undeterred by distance, he claimed to be able to trace the whereabouts of any of the relics of the Prophet.

Bristol and Mostyn walked on then; but I stood just within the doorway, intently, breathlessly watching an old man wearing an out-of-date Inverness coat and a soft felt hat. He had a gray beard and moustache, and long, untidy hair, walked with a stoop, and in short was no unusual type of Visitor to that institution.

But it seemed to me, and the closer I watched him the more convinced I became, that this was no optical illusion, that a faint luminosity, a sort of elfin light, played eerily about his head!

As Bristol and Mostyn approached the case the old man began to walk toward me and in the direction of the door. The idea flashed through my mind that it might be Hassan of Aleppo himself, Hassan who had predicted that the stolen slipper should that day be returned to the Museum!

Then he came abreast of me, passed me, and I felt that my surmise had been wrong. I saw Bristol, from farther up the room, turn and look back. Something attracted his trained eye, I suppose, which was not perceptible to me. But he suddenly came striding along. Obviously he was pursuing the old man, who was just about to leave the apartment. Seeing that the latter had reached the doorway, Bristol began to run.

The old man turned; and amid a chorus of exclamations from the astonished spectators, Bristol sprang upon him!

How it all came about I cannot say, cannot hope to describe; but there was a short, sharp scuffle, the crack of a well-directed blow . . . and Bristol was rolling on his back, the old man, hatless, was racing up the Assyrian Room, and everyone in the place seemed to be shouting at once!

Bristol, with blood streaming from his face, staggered to his feet, clutching at me for support.

"After him, Mr Cavanagh!" he cried hoarsely. "It's your turn to-day! After him! That's Earl Dexter!"

Mostyn waited for no more, but went running quickly through the Assyrian Room. I may mention here that at the head of the stairs he found the caped Inverness which had served to conceal Dexter's mutilated arm, and later, behind a piece of statuary, a wig and a very ingenious false beard and moustache were discovered. But of The Stetson Man there was no trace. His brief start had enabled him to make good his escape.

As Mostyn went off, and a group of visitors flocked in our direction, Bristol, who had been badly shaken by the blow, turned to them.

"You will please all leave the Burton Room immediately," he said.

Looks of surprise greeted his words; but with his handkerchief raised to his face, he peremptorily repeated them. The official note in his voice was readily to be detected; and the wonder-stricken group departed with many a backward glance.

As the last left the Burton Room, Bristol pointed, with a rather shaky finger, at the soft felt hat which lay at his feet. It had formed part of Dexter's disguise. Close beside it lay another object which had evidently fallen from the hat—a dull red thing lying on the polished parquet flooring.

"For God's sake don't go near it!" whispered Bristol. "The room must be closed for the present. And now I'm off after that man. Step clear of it."

His words were unnecessary; I shunned it as a leprous thing.

It was the slipper of the Prophet!

XXIII. THE THREE MESSAGES

I stood in the foyer of the Astoria Hotel. About me was the pulsing stir of transatlantic life, for the tourist season was now at its height, and I counted

myself fortunate in that I had been able to secure a room at this establishment, always so popular with American visitors. Chatting groups surrounded me and I became acquainted with numberless projects for visiting the Tower of London, the National Gallery, the British Museum, Windsor Castle, Kew Gardens, and the other sights dear to the heart of our visiting cousins. Loaded lifts ascended and descended. Bradshaws were in great evidence everywhere; all was hustle and glad animation.

The tall military-looking man who stood beside me glanced about him with a rather grim smile.

"You ought to be safe enough here, Mr Cavanagh!" he said.

"I ought to be safe enough in my own chambers," I replied wearily. "How many of these pleasure-seeking folk would believe that a man can be as greatly in peril of his life in Fleet Street as in the most uncivilized spot upon the world map? Do you think if I told that prosperous New Yorker who is buying a cigar yonder, for instance, that I had been driven from my chambers by a band of Eastern assassins founded some time in the eleventh century, he would believe it?"

"I am certain he wouldn't!" replied Bristol. "I should not have credited it myself before I was put in charge of this damnable case."

My position at that hour was in truth an incredible one. The sacred slipper of Mohammed lay once more in the glass case at the Antiquarian Museum from which Earl Dexter had stolen it. Now, with apish yellow faces haunting my dreams, with ghostly menaces dogging me day and night, I was outcast from my own rooms and compelled, in self-defence, to live amid the bustle of the Astoria. So wholly nonplussed were the police authorities that they could afford me no protection. They knew that a group of scientific murderers lay hidden in or near to London; they knew that Earl Dexter, the foremost crook of his day, was also in the metropolis—and they could make no move, were helpless; indeed, as Bristol had confessed, were hopeless!

Bristol, on the previous day, had unearthed the Greek cigar merchant, Acepulos, who had replaced the slipper in its case (for a monetary consideration). He had performed a similar service when the bloodstained thing had first been put upon exhibition at the Museum, and for a considerable period had disappeared. We had feared that his religious pretensions had not saved him from the avenging scimitar of Hassan; but

quite recently he had returned again to his Soho shop, and in time thus to earn a second cheque.

As Bristol and I stood glancing about the foyer of the hotel, a plain-clothes officer whom I knew by sight came in and approached my companion. I could not divine the fact, of course, but I was about to hear news of the money-loving and greatly daring Graeco-Moslem.

The detective whispered something to Bristol, and the latter started, and paled. He turned to me.

"They haven't overlooked him this time, Mr Cavanagh," he said. "Acepulos has been found dead in his room, nearly decapitated!"

I shuddered involuntarily. Even there, amid the chatter and laughter of those light-hearted tourists, the shadow of Hassan of Aleppo was falling upon me.

Bristol started immediately for Soho and I parted from him in the Strand, he proceeding west and I eastward, for I had occasion that morning to call at my bank. It was the time of the year when London is full of foreigners, and as I proceeded in the direction of Fleet Street I encountered more than one Oriental. To my excited imagination they all seemed to glance at me furtively, with menacing eyes, but in any event I knew that I had little to fear whilst I contrived to keep to the crowded thoroughfares. Solitude I dreaded and with good reason.

Then at the door of the bank I found fresh matter for reflection. The assistant manager, Mr Colby, was escorting a lady to the door. As I stood aside, he walked with her to a handsome car which waited, and handed her in with marks of great deference. She was heavily veiled and I had no more than a glimpse of her, but she appeared to be of middle age and had gray hair and a very stately manner.

I told myself that I was unduly suspicious, suspicious of everyone and of everything; yet as I entered the bank I found myself wondering where I had seen that dignified, grayhaired figure before. I even thought of asking the manager the name of his distinguished customer, but did not do so, for in the circumstances such an inquiry must have appeared impertinent.

My business transacted, I came out again by the side entrance which opens on the little courtyard, for this branch of the London County and Provincial Bank occupies a corner site.

A ragged urchin who was apparently waiting for me handed me a note. I looked at him inquiringly.

"For me?" I said.

"Yes, sir. A dark gentleman pointed you out as you was goin' into the bank."

The note was written upon a half sheet of paper and, doubting if it was really intended for me, I unfolded it and read the following—

Mr Cavanagh, take the keys of the case containing the holy slipper to your hotel this evening without fail.

HASSAN.

"Who gave you this, boy?" I asked sharply.

"A foreign gentleman, sir, very dark—like an Indian."

"Where is he?"

"He went off in a cab, sir, after he give me the note."

I handed the boy sixpence and slowly pursued my way. An idea was forming in my mind to trap the enemy by seeming acquiescent. I wondered if my movements were being watched at that moment. Since it was more than probable, I returned to the bank, entered, and made some trivial inquiry of a cashier, and then came out again and walked on as far as the Report office.

I had not been in the office more than five minutes before I received a telegram from Inspector Bristol. It had been handed in at Soho, and the message was an odd one.

CAVANAGH, Report, London. Plot afoot to steal keys. Get them from bank and join me 11 o'clock at Astoria. Have planned trap.

BRISTOL.

This was very mysterious in view of the note so recently received by me, but I concluded that Bristol had hit upon a similar plan to that which was forming in my own mind. It seemed unnecessarily hazardous, though, actually to withdraw the keys from their place of safety.

Pondering deeply upon the perplexities of this maddening case, I shortly afterward found myself again at the bank. With the manager I descended to the strong-room, and the safe was unlocked which contained the much-sought-for keys of the case at the Antiquarian Museum.

"There are the keys, quite safe!—and by the way, this is my second visit here this morning, Mr Cavanagh," said the manager, with whom I was upon

rather intimate terms. "A foreign lady who has recently become a customer of the bank deposited some valuable jewels here this morning—less than an hour ago, in fact."

"Indeed," I said, and my mind was working rapidly. "The lady who came in the large blue car, a gray-haired lady?"

"Yes," was the reply, "did you notice her, then?"

I nodded and said no more, for in truth I had no more to say. I had good reason to respect the uncanny powers of Hassan of Aleppo, but I doubted if even his omniscience could tell him (since I had actually gone down into the strong-room) whether when I emerged I had the keys, or whether my visit and seeming acceptance of his orders had been no more than a subterfuge!

That the Hashishin had some means of communicating with me at the Astoria was evident from the contents of the note which I had received, and as I walked in the direction of the hotel my mind was filled with all sorts of misgivings. I was playing with fire! Had I done rightly or should I have acted otherwise? I sighed wearily. The dark future would resolve all my doubts.

When I reached the Astoria, Bristol had not arrived. I lighted a cigarette and sat down in the lounge to await his coming. Presently a boy approached, handing me a message which had been taken down from the telephone by the clerk. It was as follows—

Tell Mr Cavanagh, who is waiting in the hotel, to take what I am expecting to his chambers, and say that I will join him there in twenty minutes.

INSPECTOR BRISTOL.

Again I doubted the wisdom of Bristol's plan. Had I not fled to the Astoria to escape from the dangerous solitude of my rooms? That he was laying some trap for the Hashishin was sufficiently evident, and whilst I could not justly suspect him of making a pawn of me I was quite unable to find any other explanation of this latest move.

I was torn between conflicting doubts. I glanced at my watch. Yes! There was just time for me to revisit the bank ere joining Bristol at my chambers! I hesitated. After all, in what possible way could it jeopardize his plans for me merely to pretend to bring the keys?

"Hang it all!" I said, and jumped to my feet. "These maddening conjectures will turn my brain! I'll let matters stand as they are, and risk the consequences!"

I hesitated no longer, but passed out from the hotel and once more directed my steps in the direction of Fleet Street.

As I passed in under the arch through which streamed many busy workers, I told myself that to dread entering my own chambers at high noon was utterly childish. Yet I did dread doing so! And as I mounted the stair and came to the landing, which was always more or less dark, I paused for quite a long time before putting the key in the lock.

The affair of the accursed slipper was playing havoc with my nerves, and I laughed dryly to note that my hand was not quite steady as I turned the key, opened my door, and slipped into the dim hallway.

As I closed it behind me, something, probably a slight noise, but possibly something more subtle—an instinct—made me turn rapidly.

There facing me stood Hassan of Aleppo.

XXIV. I KEEP THE APPOINTMENT

That moment was pungent with drama. In the intense hush of the next five seconds I could fancy that the world had slipped away from me and that I was become an unsubstantial thing of dreams. I was in no sense master of myself; the effect of the presence of this white-bearded fanatic was of a kind which I am entirely unable to describe. About Hassan of Aleppo was an aroma of evil, yet of majesty, which marked him strangely different from other men—from any other that I have ever known. In his venerable presence, remembering how he was Sheikh of the Assassins, and recalling his bloody history, I was always conscious of a weakness, physical and mental. He appalled me; and now, with my back to the door, I stood watching him and watching the ominous black tube which he held in his hand. It was a weapon unknown to Europe and therefore more fearful than the most up-to-date of death-dealing instruments.

Hassan of Aleppo pointed it toward me.

"The keys, effendim," he said; "hand me the keys!"

He advanced a step; his manner was imperious. The black tube was less than a foot removed from my face. That I had my revolver in my pocket could avail me nothing, for in my pocket it must remain, since I dared to make no move to reach it under cover of that unfamiliar, terrible weapon.

The black eyes of Hassan glared insanely into mine.

"You will have placed them in your pocketcase," he said. "Take it out; hand it to me!"

I obeyed, for what else could I do? Taking the case from my pocket, I placed it in his lean brown hand.

An expression of wild exultation crossed his features; the eagle eyes seemed to be burning into my brain. A puff of hot vapour struck me in the face—something which was expelled from the mysterious black tube. And with memories crowding to my mind of similar experiences at the hands of the Hashishin, I fell back, clutching at my throat, fighting for my life against the deadly, vaporous thing that like a palpable cloud surrounded me. I tried to cry out, but the words died upon my tongue. Hassan of Aleppo seemed to grow huge before my eyes like some ginn of Eastern lore. Then a curtain of darkness descended. I experienced a violent blow upon the forehead (I suppose I had pitched forward), and for the time resigned my part in the drama of the sacred slipper.

XXV. THE WATCHER IN BANK CHAMBERS

At about five o'clock that afternoon Inspector Bristol, who had spent several hours in Soho upon the scene of the murder of the Greek, was walking along Fleet Street, bound for the offices of the Report. As he passed the court, on the corner of which stands a branch of the London County and Provincial Bank, his eye was attracted by a curious phenomenon.

There are reflectors above the bank windows which face the court, and it appeared to Bristol that there was a hole in one of these, the furthermost from the corner. A tiny beam of light shone from the bank window on to the reflector, or from the reflector on to the window, which circumstance in itself was not curious. But above the reflector, at an acute angle, this

mysterious beam was seemingly projected upward. Walking a little way up the court he saw that it shone through, and cast a disc of light upon the ceiling of an office on the first floor of Bank Chambers above.

It is every detective's business to be observant, and although many thousands of passersby must have cast their eyes in the same direction that day, there is small matter for wonder in the fact that Bristol alone took the trouble to inquire into the mystery —for his trained eye told him that there was a mystery here.

Possibly he was in that passive frame of mind when the brain is particularly receptive of trivial impressions; for after a futile search of the Soho cigar store for anything resembling a clue, he was quite resigned to the idea of failure in the case of Hassan and Company. He walked down the court and into the entrance of Bank Chambers. An Inspection of the board upon the wall showed him that the first floor apparently was occupied by three firms, two of them legal, for this is the neighbourhood of the law courts, and the third a press agency. He stepped up to the first floor. Past the doors bearing the names of the solicitors and past that belonging to the press agent he proceeded to a fourth suite of offices. Here, pinned upon the door frame, appeared a card which bore the legend—

THE CONGO FIBRE COMPANY

Evidently the Congo Fibre Company had so recently taken possession of the offices that there had been no time to inscribe their title either upon the doors or upon the board in the hall.

Inspector Bristol was much impressed, for into one of the rooms occupied by the Fibre Company shone that curious disc of light which first had drawn his attention to Bank Chambers. He rapped on the door, turned the handle, and entered. The sole furniture of the office in which he found himself apparently consisted of one desk and an office stool, which stool was occupied by an office boy. The windows opened on the court, and a door marked "Private" evidently communicated with an inner office whose windows likewise must open on the court. It was the ceiling of this inner office, unless the detective's calculation erred, which he was anxious to inspect.

"Yes, sir?" said the boy tentatively.

Bristol produced a card which bore the uncompromising legend: John Henry Smith.

"Take my card to Mr Boulter, boy," he said tersely. The boy stared.

"Mr Boulter, sir? There isn't any one of that name here."

"Oh!" said Bristol, looking around him in apparent surprise: "how long is he gone?"

"I don't know, sir. I've only been here three weeks, and Mr Knowlson only took the offices a month ago."

"Oh," commented Bristol, "then take my card to Mr Knowlson; he will probably be able to give me Mr Boulter's present address."

The boy hesitated. The detective had that authoritative manner which awes the youthful mind.

"He's out, sir," he said, but without conviction.

"Is he?" rapped Bristol. "Well, I'll leave my card."

He turned and quitted the office, carefully closing the door behind him. Three seconds later he reopened it, and peering in, was in time to see the boy knock upon the private door. A little wicket, or movable panel, was let down, the card of John Henry Smith was passed through to someone unseen, and the wicket was reclosed!

The boy turned and met the wrathful eye of the detective. Bristol reentered, closing the door behind him.

"See here, young fellow," said he, "I don't stand for those tricks! Why didn't you tell me Mr Knowlson was in?"

"I'm very sorry, sir!"—the boy quailed beneath his glance—"but he won't see any one who hasn't an appointment."

"Is there someone with him, then?"

"No."

"Well, what's he doing?"

"I don't know, sir; I've never been in to see!"

"What! never been in that room?"

"Never!" declared the boy solemnly. "And I don't mind telling you," he added, recovering something of his natural confidence, "that I am leaving on the 31st. This job ain't any use to me!"

"Too much work?" suggested Bristol.

"No work at all!" returned the boy indignantly. "I'm just here for a blessed buffer, that's what I'm here for, a buffer!"

"What do you mean?"

"I just have to sit here and see that nobody gets into that office. Lively, ain't it? Where's the prospects?"

Bristol surveyed him thoughtfully.

"Look here, my lad," he said quietly; "is that door locked?"

"Always," replied the boy.

"Does Mr Knowlson come to that shutter when you knock?"

"Yes."

"Then go and knock!"

The boy obeyed with alacrity. He rapped loudly on the door, not noticing or not caring that the visitor was standing directly behind him. The shutter was lowered and a grizzled, bearded face showed for a moment through the opening.

Bristol leant over the boy and pushed a card through into the hand of the man beyond. On this occasion it did not bear the legend "John Henry Smith," but the following—

CHIEF INSPECTOR BRISTOL
C.I.D.
NEW SCOTLAND YARD

"Good afternoon, Mr Knowlson," said the detective dryly. "I want to come in!"

There followed a moment of silence, from which Bristol divined that he had blundered upon some mystery, possibly upon a big case; then a key was turned in the lock and the door thrown open.

"Come right in, Inspector," invited a strident voice. "Carter, you can go home."

Bristol entered warily, but not warily enough. For as the door was banged upon his entrance he faced around only in time to find himself looking down the barrel of a Colt automatic.

With his back to the door which contained the wicket, now reclosed, stood the man with the bearded face. The revolver was held in his left hand; his right arm terminated in a bandaged stump. But without that his steel-gray eyes would have betrayed him to the detective.

"Good God!" whispered Bristol. "It's Earl Dexter!"

"It is!" replied the cracksman, "and you've looked in at a real inconvenient time! My visitors mostly seem to have that knack. I'll have to ask you to stay, Inspector. Sit down in that chair yonder."

Bristol knew his man too well to think of opening any argument at that time. He sat down as directed, and ignoring the revolver which covered him all the time, began coolly to survey the room in which he found himself. In several respects it was an extraordinary apartment.

The only bright patch in the room was the shining disc upon the ceiling; and the detective noted with interest that this marked the position of an arrangement of mirrors. A white-covered table, entirely bare, stood upon the floor immediately beneath this mysterious apparatus. With the exception of one or two ordinary items of furniture and a small hand lathe, the office otherwise was unfurnished. Bristol turned his eyes again upon the daring man who so audaciously had trapped him—the man who had stolen the slipper of the Prophet and suffered the loss of his hand by the scimitar of an Hashishin as a result. When he had least expected to find one, Fate had thrown a clue in Bristol's way. He reflected grimly that it was like to prove of little use to him.

"Now," said Dexter, "you can do as you please, of course, but you know me pretty well and I advise you to sit quiet."

"I am sitting quiet!" was the reply.

"I am sorry," continued Dexter, with a quick glance at his maimed arm, "that I can't tie you up, but I am expecting a friend any moment now."

He suddenly raised the wicket with a twitch of his elbow and, without removing his gaze from the watchful detective, cried sharply—

"Carter!"

But there was no reply.

"Good; he's gone!"

Dexter sat down facing Bristol.

"I have lost my hand in this game, Mr Bristol," he said genially, "and had some narrow squeaks of losing my head; but having gone so far and lost so much I'm going through, if I don't meet a funeral! You see I'm up against two tough propositions."

Bristol nodded sympathetically.

"The first," continued Dexter, "is you and Cavanagh, and English law generally. My idea—if I can get hold of the slipper again— oh! you needn't

stare; I'm out for it!—is to get the Antiquarian Institution to ransom it. It's a line of commercial speculation I have worked successfully before. There's a dozen rich highbrows, cranks to a man, connected with it, and they are my likeliest buyers—sure. But to keep the tone of the market healthy there's Hassan of Aleppo, rot him! He's a dangerous customer to approach, but you'll note I've been in negotiation with him already and am still, if not booming, not much below par!"

"Quite so," said Bristol. "But you've cut off a pretty hefty chew nevertheless. They used to call you The Stetson Man, you used to dress like a fashion plate and stop at the big hotels. Those days are past, Dexter, I'm sorry to note. You're down to the skulking game now and you're nearer an advert for Clarkson than Stein-Bloch!"

"Yep," said Dexter sadly, "I plead guilty, but I think here's Carneta!"

Bristol heard the door of the outer office open, and a moment later that upon which his gaze was set opened in turn, to admit a girl who was heavily veiled, and who started and stood still in the doorway, on perceiving the situation. Never for one unguarded moment did the American glance aside from his prisoner.

"The Inspector's dropped in, Carneta!" he drawled in his strident way. "You're handy with a ball of twine; see if you can induce him to stay the night!"

The girl, immediately recovering her composure, took off her hat in a businesslike way and began to look around her, evidently in search of a suitable length of rope with which to fasten up Bristol.

"Might I suggest," said the detective, "that if you are shortly quitting these offices a couple of the window-cords neatly joined would serve admirably?"

"Thanks," drawled Dexter, nodding to his companion, who went into the outer office, where she might be heard lowering the windows. She was gone but a few moments ere she returned again, carrying a length of knotted rope. Under cover of Dexter's revolver, Bristol stoically submitted to having his wrists tied behind him. The end of the line was then thrown through the ventilator above the door which communicated with the outer office and Bristol was triced up in such a way that, his wrists being raised behind him to an uncomfortable degree, he was almost forced to stand upon tiptoe. The line was then secured.

"Very workmanlike!" commented the victim. "You'll find a large handkerchief in my inside breast pocket. It's a clean one, and I can recommend it as a gag!"

Very promptly it was employed for the purpose, and Inspector Bristol found himself helpless and constrained in a very painful position. Dexter laid down his revolver.

"We will now give you a free show, Inspector," he said, genially, "of our camera obscura!"

He pulled down the blinds, which Bristol noted with interest to be black, but through an opening in one of them a mysterious ray of light—the same that he had noticed from Fleet Street—shone upon that point in the ceiling where the arrangement of mirrors was attached. Dexter made some alteration, apparently in the focus of the lens (for Bristol had divined that in some way a lens had been fixed in the reflector above the bank window below) and the disc of light became concentrated. The white-covered table was moved slightly, and in the darkness some further manipulation was performed.

"Observe," came the strident voice—"we now have upon the screen here a minute moving picture. This little device, which is not protected in any way, is of my own invention, and proved extremely useful in the Arkwright jewel case, which startled Chicago. It has proved useful now. I know almost as much concerning the arrangements below as the manager himself. In confidence, Inspector, this is my last bid for the slipper! I have plunged on it. Madame Sforza, the distinguished Italian lady who recently opened an account below, opened it for 500 pounds cash. She has drawn a portion, but a balance remains which I am resigned to lose. Her motor-car (hired), her references (forged), the case of jewels which she deposited this morning (duds!)—all represent a considerable outlay. It's a nerve-racking line of operation, too. Any hour of the day may bring such a visitor as yourself, for example. In short, I am at the end of my tether."

Bristol, ignoring the increasing pain in his arms and wrists, turned his eyes upon the white-covered table and there saw a minute and clear-cut picture, such as one sees in a focussing screen, of the interior of the manager's office of the London County and Provincial Bank!

XXVI. THE STRONG-ROOM

I wonder how often a sense of humour has saved a man from desperation? Perhaps only the Easterns have thoroughly appreciated that divine gift. I have interpolated the adventure of Inspector Bristol in order that the sequence of my story be not broken; actually I did not learn it until later, but when, on the following day, the whole of the facts came into my possession, I laughed and was glad that I could laugh, for laughter has saved many a man from madness.

Certainly the Fates were playing with us, for at a time very nearly corresponding with that when Bristol found himself bound and helpless in Bank Chambers I awoke to find myself tied hand and foot to my own bed! Nothing but the haziest recollections came to me at first, nothing but dim memories of the awful being who had lured me there; for I perceived now that all the messages proceeded, not from Bristol, but from Hassan of Aleppo! I had been a fool, and I was reaping the fruits of my folly. Could I have known that almost within pistol shot of me the Inspector was trussed up as helpless as I, then indeed my situation must have become unbearable, since upon him I relied for my speedy release.

My ankles were firmly lashed to the rails at the foot of my bed; each of my wrists was tied back to a bedpost. I ached in every limb and my head burned feverishly, which latter symptom I ascribed to the powerful drug which had been expelled into my face by the uncanny weapon carried by Hassan of Aleppo. I reflected bitterly how, having transferred my quarters to the Astoria, I could not well hope for any visitor to my chambers; and even the event of such a visitor had been foreseen and provided against by the cunning lord of the Hashishin. A gag, of the type which Dumas has described in "Twenty Years After," the poire d'angoisse, was wedged firmly into my mouth, so that only by preserving the utmost composure could I breathe. I was bathed in cold perspiration. So I lay listening to the familiar sounds without and reflecting that it was quite possible so to lie, undisturbed, and to die alone, my presence there wholly unsuspected!

Once, toward dusk, my phone bell rang, and my state of mind became agonizing. It was maddening to think that someone, a friend, was virtually within reach of me, yet actually as far removed as if an ocean divided us! I

tasted the hellish torments of Tantalus. I cursed fate, heaven, everything; I prayed; I sank into bottomless depths of despair and rose to dizzy pinnacles of hope, when a footstep sounded on the landing and a thousand wild possibilities, vague possibilities of rescue, poured into my mind.

The visitor hesitated, apparently outside my door; and a change, as sudden as lightning out of a cloud, transformed my errant fancies. A gruesome conviction seized me, as irrational as the hope which it displayed, that this was one of the Hashishin—an apish yellow dwarf, a strangler, the awful Hassan himself!

The footsteps receded down the stairs. And my thoughts reverted into the old channels of dull despair.

I weighed the chances of Bristol's seeking me there; and, eager as I was to give them substance, found them but airy—ultimately was forced to admit them to be nil.

So I lay, whilst only a few hundred yards from me a singular scene was being enacted. Bristol, a prisoner as helpless as myself, watched the concluding business of the day being conducted in the bank beneath him; he watched the lift descend to the strongroom —the spying apparatus being slightly adjusted in some way; he saw the clerks hastening to finish their work in the outer office, and as he watched, absorbed by the novelty of the situation, he almost forgot the pain and discomfort which he suffered . . .

"This little peep-show of ours has been real useful," Dexter confided out of the darkness. "I got an impression of the key of the strongroom door a week ago, and Carneta got one of the keys of the safe only this morning, when she lodged her box of jewellery with the bank! I was at work on that key when you interrupted me, and as by means of this useful apparatus I have learnt the combination, you ought to see some fun in the next few hours!"

Bristol repressed a groan, for the prospect of remaining in that position was thus brought keenly home to him.

The bank staff left the premises one by one until only a solitary clerk worked on at a back desk. His task completed, he, too, took his departure and the bank messenger commenced his nightly duty of sweeping up the offices. It was then that excitement like an anaesthetic dulled the detective's pain—indeed, he forgot his aching body and became merely a watchful intelligence.

So intent had he become upon the picture before him that he had not noticed the fact that he was alone in the office of the Congo Fibre Company. Now he realized it from the absolute silence about him, and from another circumstance.

The spying apparatus had been left focussed, and on to the screen beneath his eyes, bending low behind the desks and creeping, Indian-like, around, toward the head of the stair which communicated with the strongroom and the apartment used by the messenger, came the alert figure of Earl Dexter!

It may be a surprise to some people to learn that at any time in the day the door of a bank, unguarded, should be left open, when only a solitary messenger is within the premises; yet for a few minutes at least each evening this happens at more than one City bank, where one of the duties of the resident messenger is to clean the outer steps. Dexter had taken advantage of the man's absence below in quest of scrubbing material to enter the bank through the open door.

Watching, breathless, and utterly forgetful of his own position, Bristol saw the messenger, all unconscious of danger, come up the stairs carrying a pail and broom. As his head reached the level of the railings The Stetson Man neatly sand-bagged him, rushed across to the outer door, and closed it!

Given duplicate keys and the private information which Dexter so ingeniously had obtained, there are many London banks vulnerable to similar attack. Certainly, bullion is rarely kept in a branch storeroom, but the detective was well aware that the keys of the case containing the slipper were kept in this particular safe!

He was convinced, and could entertain no shadowy doubt, that at last Dexter had triumphed. He wondered if it had ever hitherto fallen to the lot of a representative of the law thus to be made an accessory to a daring felony!

But human endurance has well-defined limits. The fading light rendered the ingenious picture dim and more dim. The pain occasioned by his position became agonizing, and uttering a stifled groan he ceased to take an interest in the robbery of the London County and Provincial Bank.

Fate is a comedian; and when later I learned how I had lain strapped to my bed, and, so near to me, Bristol had hung helpless as a butchered carcass in the office of the Congo Fibre Company, whilst, in our absence from the

stage, the drama of the slipper marched feverish to its final curtain, I accorded Fate her well-earned applause. I laughed; not altogether mirthfully.

XXVII. THE SLIPPER

Someone was breaking in at the door of my chambers!

I aroused myself from a state of coma almost death-like and listened to the blows. The sun was streaming in at my windows.

A splintering crash told of a panel broken. Then a moment later I heard the grating of the lock, and a rush of footsteps along the passage.

"Try the study!" came a voice that sounded like Bristol's, save that it was strangely weak and shaky.

Almost simultaneously the Inspector himself threw open the bedroom door—and, very pale and haggard-eyed, stood there looking across at me. It was a scene unforgettable.

"Mr Cavanagh!" he said huskily—"Mr Cavanagh! Thank God you're alive! But"—he turned—"this way, Marden!" he cried, "Untie him quickly! I've got no strength in my arms!"

Marden, a C.I.D. man, came running, and in a minute, or less, I was sitting up gulping brandy.

"I've had the most awful experience of my life," said Bristol. "You've fared badly enough, but I've been hanging by my wrists—you know Dexter's trick!—for close upon sixteen hours! I wasn't released until Carter, an office boy, came on the scene this morning!"

Very feebly I nodded; I could not talk.

"The strong-room of your bank was rifled under my very eyes last evening!" he continued, with something of his old vigour; "and five minutes after the Antiquarian Museum was opened to the public this morning quite an unusual number of visitors appeared.

"I saw the bank manager the moment he arrived, and learned a piece of news that positively took my breath away! I was at the Museum seven minutes later and got another shock! There in the case was the red slipper!"

"Then," I whispered-"it hadn't been stolen?"

"Wrong! It had! This was a duplicate, as Mostyn, the curator, saw at a glance! Some of the early visitors—they were Easterns—had quite surrounded the case. They were watched, of course, but any number of Orientals come to see the thing; and, short of smashing the glass, which would immediately attract attention, the authorities were unprepared, of course, for any attempt. Anyway, they were tricked. Somebody opened the case. The real slipper of the Prophet is gone!"

"They told you at the bank—"

"That you had withdrawn the keys! If Dexter had known that!"

"Hassan of Aleppo took them from me last night! At last the Hashishin have triumphed."

Bristol sank into the armchair.

"Every port is watched," he said. "But—"

XXVIII. CARNETA

"I am entirely at your mercy; you can do as you please with me. But before you do anything I should like you to listen to what I have to say."

Her beautiful face was pale and troubled. Violet eyes looked sadly into mine.

"For nearly an hour I have been waiting for this chance—until I knew you were alone," she continued. "If you are thinking of giving me up to the police, at least remember that I came here of my own free will. Of course, I know you are quite entitled to take advantage of that; but please let me say what I came to say!"

She pleaded so hard, with that musical voice, with her evident helplessness, most of all with her wonderful eyes, that I quite abandoned any project I might have entertained to secure her arrest. I think she divined this masculine weakness, for she said, with greater confidence—

"Your friend, Professor Deeping, was murdered by the man called Hassan of Aleppo. Are you content to remain idle while his murderer escapes?"

God knows I was not. My idleness in the matter was none of my choosing. Since poor Deeping's murder I had come to handgrips with the assassins more than once, but Hassan had proved too clever for me, too

clever for Scotland Yard. The sacred slipper was once more in the hands of its fanatic guardian.

One man there was who might have helped the search, Earl Dexter. But Earl Dexter was himself wanted by Scotland Yard!

From the time of the bank affair up to the moment when this beautiful visitor had come to my chambers I had thought Dexter, as well as Hassan, to have fled secretly from England. But the moment that I saw Carneta at my door I divined that The Stetson Man must still be in London.

She sat watching me and awaiting my answer.

"I cannot avenge my friend unless I can find his murderer."

Eagerly she bent forward.

"But if I can find him?"

That made me think, and I hesitated before speaking again.

"Say what you came to say," I replied slowly. "You must know that I distrust you. Indeed, my plain duty is to detain you. But I will listen to anything you may care to tell me, particularly if it enables me to trap Hassan of Aleppo."

"Very well," she said, and rested her elbows upon the table before her. "I have come to you in desperation. I can help you to find the man who murdered Professor Deeping, but in return I want you to help me!"

I watched her closely. She was very plainly, almost poorly, dressed. Her face was pale and there were dark marks around her eyes. This but served to render their strange beauty more startling; yet I could see that my visitor was in real trouble. The situation was an odd one.

"You are possibly about to ask me," I suggested, "to assist Earl Dexter to escape the police?"

She shook her head. Her voice trembled as she replied—

"That would not have induced me to run the risk of coming here. I came because I wanted to find a man who was brave enough to help me. We have no friends in London, and so it became a question of terms. I can repay you by helping you to trace Hassan."

"What is it, then, that Dexter asks me to do?"

"He asks nothing. I, Carneta, am asking!"

"Then you are not come from him?"

At my question, all her self-possession left her. She abruptly dropped her face into her hands and was shaken with sobs! It was more than I could

bear, unmoved. I forgot the shady past, forgot that she was the associate of a daring felon, and could only realize that she was a weeping woman, who had appealed to my pity and who asked my aid.

I stood up and stared out of the window, for I experienced a not unnatural embarrassment. Without looking at her I said—

"Don't be afraid to tell me your troubles. I don't say I should go out of my way to be kind to Mr Dexter, but I have no wish whatever to be instrumental in"—I hesitated—"in making you responsible for his misdeeds. If you can tell me where to find Hassan of Aleppo, I won't even ask you where Dexter is—"

"God help me! I don't know where he is!"

There was real, poignant anguish in her cry. I turned and confronted her. Her lashes were all wet with tears.

"What! has he disappeared?"

She nodded, fought with her emotion a moment, and went on unsteadily,

"I want you to help me to find him for in finding him we shall find Hassan!"

"How so?"

Her gaze avoided me now.

"Mr Cavanagh, he has staked everything upon securing the slipper —and the Hashishin were too clever for him. His hand—those Eastern fiends cut off his hand! But he would not give in. He made another bid—and lost again. It left him almost penniless."

She spoke of Earl Dexter's felonious plans as another woman might have spoken of her husband's unwise investments! It was fantastic hearing that confession of The Stetson Man's beautiful partner, and I counted the interview one of the strangest I had ever known.

A sudden idea came to me. "When did Dexter first conceive the plan to steal the slipper?" I asked.

"In Egypt!" answered Carneta. "Yes! You may as well know! He is thoroughly familiar with the East, and he learned of the robbery of Professor Deeping almost as soon as it became known to Hassan. I know what you are going to ask—"

"Ahmad Ahmadeen!"

"Yes! He travelled home as Ahmadeen—the only time he ever used a disguise. Oh! the thing is accursed!" she cried. "I begged him, implored

him, to abandon his attempts upon it. Day and night we were watched by those ghastly yellow men! But it was all in vain. He knew, had known for a long time, where Hassan of Aleppo was in hiding!"

And I reflected that the best men at New Scotland Yard had failed to pick up the slightest clue!

"The Hashishin, of whom that dreadful man is leader, are rich, or have supporters who are rich. The plan was to make them pay for the slipper."

"My God! it was playing with fire!"

She sat silent awhile. Emotion threatened to get the upper hand. Then—

"Two days ago," she almost whispered, "he set out—to . . . get the slipper!"

"To steal it?"

"To steal it!"

"From Hassan of Aleppo?"

I could scarcely believe that any man, single-handed, could have had the hardihood to attempt such a thing.

"From Hassan, yes!"

I faced her, amazed, incredulous.

"Dexter had suffered mutilation, he knew that the Hashishin sought his life for his previous attempts upon the relic of the Prophet, and yet he dared to venture again into the very lions' den?"

"He did, Mr Cavanagh, two days ago. And—"

"Yes?" I urged, as gently as I could, for she was shaking pitifully.

"He never came back!"

The words were spoken almost in a whisper. She clenched her hands and leapt from the chair, fighting down her grief and with such a stark horror in her beautiful eyes that from my very soul I longed to be able to help her.

"Mr Cavanagh" (she had courage, this bewildering accomplice of a cracksman), "I know the house he went to! I cannot hope to make you understand what I have suffered since then. A thousand times I have been on the point of going to the police, confessing all I knew, and leading them to that house! O God! if only he is alive, this shall be his last crooked deal —and mine! I dared not go to the police, for his sake! I waited, and watched, and hoped, through two such nights and days . . . then I ventured. I should have gone mad if I had not come here. I knew you had good cause to hate, to detest me, but I remembered that you had a great grievance against

Hassan. Not as great, O heaven! not as great as mine, but yet a great one. I remembered, too, that you were the kind of man—a woman can come to . . . "

She sank back into the chair, and with her fingers twining and untwining, sat looking dully before her.

"In brief," I said, "what do you propose?"

"I propose that we endeavour to obtain admittance to the house of Hassan of Aleppo—secretly, of course, and all I ask of you in return for revealing the secret of its situation is—"

"That I let Dexter go free?"

Almost inaudibly she whispered: "If he lives!"

Surely no stranger proposition ever had been submitted to a law-abiding citizen. I was asked to connive in the escape of a notorious criminal, and at one and the same time to embark upon an expedition patently burglarious! As though this were not enough, I was invited to beard Hassan of Aleppo, the most dreadful being I had ever encountered East or West, in his mysterious stronghold!

I wondered what my friend, Inspector Bristol, would have thought of the project; I wondered if I should ever live to see Hassan meet his just deserts as a result of this enterprise, which I was forced to admit a foolhardy one. But a man who has selected the career of a war correspondent from amongst those which Fleet Street offers, is the victim of a certain craving for fresh experiences; I suppose, has in his character something of an adventurous turn.

For a while I stood staring from the window, then faced about and looked into the violet eyes of my visitor.

"I agree, Carneta!" I said.

XXIX. WE MEET MR ISAACS

Quitting the wayside station, and walking down a short lane, we came out upon Watling Street, white and dusty beneath the afternoon sun. We were less than an hour's train journey from London but found ourselves amid the Kentish hop gardens, amid a rural peace unbroken. My companion

carried a camera case slung across her shoulder, but its contents were less innocent than one might have supposed. In fact, it contained a neat set of those instruments of the burglar's art with whose use she appeared to be quite familiar.

"There is an inn," she said, "about a mile ahead, where we can obtain some vital information. He last wrote to me from there."

Side by side we tramped along the dusty road. We both were silent, occupied with our own thoughts. Respecting the nature of my companion's I could entertain little doubt, and my own turned upon the foolhardy nature of the undertaking upon which I was embarked. No other word passed between us then, until upon rounding a bend and passing a cluster of picturesque cottages, the yard of the Vinepole came into view.

"Do they know you by sight here?" I asked abruptly.

"No, of course not; we never made strategic mistakes of that kind. If we have tea here, no doubt we can learn all we require."

I entered the little parlour of the inn, and suggested that tea should be served in the pretty garden which opened out of it upon the right.

The host, who himself laid the table, viewed the camera case critically.

"We get a lot of photographers down here," he remarked tentatively.

"No doubt," said my companion. "There is some very pretty scenery in the neighbourhood."

The landlord rested his hands upon the table.

"There was a gentleman here on Wednesday last," he said; "an old gentleman who had met with an accident, and was staying somewhere hereabouts for his health. But he'd got his camera with him, and it was wonderful the way he could use it, considering he hadn't got the use of his right hand."

"He must have been a very keen photographer," I said, glancing at the girl beside me.

"He took three or four pictures of the Vinepole," replied the landlord (which I doubted, since probably his camera was a dummy); "and he wanted to know if there were any other old houses in the neighbourhood. I told him he ought to take Cadham Hall, and he said he had heard that the Gate House, which is about a mile from here, was one of the oldest buildings about."

A girl appeared with a tea tray, and for a moment I almost feared that the landlord was about to retire; but he lingered, whilst the girl distributed the things about the table, and Carneta asked casually, "Would there be time for me to photograph the Gate House before dark?"

"There might be time," was the reply, "but that's not the difficulty. Mr Isaacs is the difficulty."

"Who is Mr Isaacs?" I asked.

"He's the Jewish gentleman who bought the Gate House recently. Lots of money he's got and a big motor car. He's up and down to London almost every day in the week, but he won't let anybody take photographs of the house. I know several who've asked."

"But I thought," said Carneta, innocently, "you said the old gentleman who was here on Wednesday went to take some?"

"He went, yes, miss; but I don't know if he succeeded."

Carneta poured out some tea.

"Now that you speak of it," she said, "I too have heard that the Gate House is very picturesque. What objection can Mr Isaacs have to photographers?"

"Well, you see, miss, to get a picture of the house, you have to pass right through the grounds."

"I should walk right up to the house and ask permission. Is Mr Isaacs at home, I wonder?"

"I couldn't say. He hasn't passed this way to-day."

"We might meet him on the way," said I. "What is he like?"

"A Jewish gentleman sir, very dark, with a white beard. Wears gold glasses. Keeps himself very much to himself. I don't know anything about his household; none of them ever come here."

Carneta inquired the direction of Cadham Hall and of the Gate House, and the landlord left us to ourselves. My companion exhibited signs of growing agitation, and it seemed to me that she had much ado to restrain herself from setting out without a moment's delay for the Gate House, which, I readily perceived, was the place to which our strange venture was leading us.

I found something very stimulating in the reflection that, rash though the expedition might be, and, viewed from whatever standpoint, undeniably

perilous, it promised to bring me to that secret stronghold of deviltry where the sinister Hassan of Aleppo so successfully had concealed himself.

The work of the modern journalist had many points of contact with that of the detective; and since the murder of Professor Deeping I had succumbed to the man-hunting fever more than once. I knew that Scotland Yard had failed to locate the hiding-place of the remarkable and evil man who, like an efreet of Oriental lore, obeyed the talisman of the stolen slipper, striking down whomsoever laid hand upon its sacredness. It was a novel sensation to know that, aided by this beautiful accomplice of a rogue, I had succeeded where the experts had failed!

Misgivings I had and shall not deny. If our scheme succeeded it would mean that Deeping's murderer should be brought to justice. If it failed-well, frankly, upon that possibility I did not dare to reflect!

It must be needless for me to say that we two strangely met allies were ill at ease, sometimes to the point of embarrassment. We proceeded on our way in almost unbroken silence, and, save for a couple of farm hands, without meeting any wayfarer, up to the time that we reached the brow of the hill and had our first sight of the Gate House lying in a little valley beneath. It was a small Tudor mansion, very compact in plan and its roof glowed redly in the rays of the now setting sun.

From the directions given by the host of the Vinepole it was impossible to mistake the way or to mistake the house. Amid well-wooded grounds it stood, a place quite isolated, but so typically English that, as I stood looking down upon it, I found myself unable to believe that any other than a substantial country gentleman could be its proprietor.

I glanced at Carneta. Her violet eyes were burning feverishly, but her lips twitched in a bravely pitiful way.

Clearly now my adventure lay before me; that red-roofed homestead seemed to have rendered it all substantial which hitherto had been shadowy; and I stood there studying the Gate House gravely, for it might yet swallow me up, as apparently it had swallowed Earl Dexter.

There, amid that peaceful Kentish landscape, fantasy danced and horrors unknown lurked in waiting. . .

The eminence upon which we were commanded an extensive prospect, and eastward showed a tower and flagstaff which marked the site of Cadham Hall. There were homeward-bound labourers to be seen in the

lanes now, and where like a white ribbon the Watling Street lay across the verdant carpet moved an insect shape, speedily.

It was a car, and I watched it with vague interest. At a point where a dense coppice spread down to the roadway and a lane crossed west to east, the car became invisible. Then I saw it again, nearer to us and nearer to the Gate House. Finally it disappeared among the trees.

I turned to Carneta. She, too, had been watching. Now her gaze met mine.

"Mr Isaacs!" she said; and her voice was less musical than usual. "His chauffeur, who learned his business in Cairo, is probably the only one of his servants who remains in England."

"What!" I began—and said no more.

Where the road upon which we stood wound down into the valley and lost itself amid the trees surrounding the Gate House, the car suddenly appeared again, and began to mount the slope toward us!

"Heavens!" whispered Carneta. "He may have seen us—with glasses! Quick! Let us walk back until the hill-top conceals us; then we must hide somewhere!"

I shared her excitement. Without a moment's hesitation we both turned and retraced our steps. Twenty paces brought us to a spot where a stack of mangel wurzels stood at the roadside.

"This will do!" I said.

We ran around into the field, and crouched where we could peer out on the road without ourselves being seen. Nor had we taken up this position a moment too soon.

Topping the slope came a light-weight electric, driven by a man who, in his spruce uniform, might have passed at a glance for a very dusky European. The car had a limousine back, and as the chauffeur slowed down, out from the open windows right and left peered the solitary occupant.

He had the cast of countenance which is associated with the best type of Jew, with clear-cut aquiline features wholly destitute of grossness. His white beard was patriarchal and he wore gold-rimmed pince-nez and a glossy silk hat. Such figures may often be met with in the great money-markets of the world, and Mr Isaacs would have passed for a successful financier in even more discerning communities than that of Cadham.

But I scarcely breathed until the car was past; and, beside me, my companion, crouching to the ground, was trembling wildly. Fifty yards toward the village Mr Isaacs evidently directed the man to return.

The car was put about, and flashed past us at high speed down into the valley. When the sound of the humming motor had died to something no louder than the buzz of a sleepy wasp, I held out my hand to Carneta and she rose, pale, but with blazing eyes, and picked up her camera case.

"If he had detected us, everything would have been lost!" she whispered.

"Not everything!" I replied grimly—and showed her the revolver which I had held in my hand whilst those eagle eyes had been seeking us. "If he had made a sign to show that he had seen us, in fact, if he had once offered a safe mark by leaning from the car, I should have shot him dead without hesitation!"

"We must not show ourselves again, but wait for dusk. He must have seen us, then, on the hilltop, but I hope without recognizing us. He has the sight and instincts of a vulture!"

I nodded, slipping the revolver into my pocket, but I wondered if I should not have been better advised to have risked a shot at the moment that I had recognized "Mr Isaacs" for Hassan of Aleppo.

XXX. AT THE GATE HOUSE

From sunset to dusk I lurked about the neighbourhood of the Gate House with my beautiful accomplice—watching and waiting: a man bound upon stranger business, I dare swear, than any other in the county of Kent that night.

Our endeavour now was to avoid observation by any one, and in this, I think, we succeeded. At the same time, Carneta, upon whose experience I relied implicitly, regarded it as most important that we should observe (from a safe distance) any one who entered or quitted the gates.

But none entered, and none came out. When, finally, we made along the narrow footpath skirting the west of the grounds, the night was silent—most strangely still.

The trees met overhead, but no rustle disturbed their leaves and of animal life no indication showed itself. There was no moon.

A full appreciation of my mad folly came to me, and with it a sense of heavy depression. This stillness that ruled all about the house which sheltered the awful Sheikh of the Assassins was ominous, I thought. In short, my nerves were playing me tricks.

"We have little to fear," said my companion, speaking in a hushed and quivering voice. "The whole of the party left England some days ago."

"Are you sure?"

"Certain! We learned that before Earl made his attempt. Hassan remains, for some reason; Hassan and one other—the one who drives the car."

"But the slipper?"

"If Hassan remains, so does the slipper!" From the knapsack, which, as you will have divined, did not contain a camera, she took out an electric pocket lamp, and directed its beam upon the hedge above us.

"There is a gap somewhere here!" she said. "See if you can find it. I dare not show the light too long."

Darkness followed. I clambered up the bank and sought for the opening of which Carneta had spoken.

"The light here a moment," I whispered. "I think I have it!"

Out shone the white beam, and momentarily fell upon a black hole in the thickset hedge. The light disappeared, and as I extended my hand to Carneta she grasped it and climbed up beside me.

"Put on your rubber shoes," she directed. "Leave the others here."

There in the darkness I did as she directed, for I was provided with a pair of tennis shoes. Carneta already was suitably shod.

"I will go first," I said. "What is the ground like beyond?"

"Just unkempt bushes and weeds."

Upon hands and knees I crawled through, saw dimly that there was a short descent, corresponding with the ascent from the lane, and turned, whispering to my fellow conspirator to follow.

The grounds proved even more extensive than I had anticipated. We pressed on, dodging low-sweeping branches and keeping our arms up to guard our faces from outshoots of thorn bushes. Our progress necessarily was slow, but even so quite a long time seemed to have elapsed ere we came in sight of the house.

This was my first expedition of the kind; and now that my goal was actually in sight I became conscious of a sort of exultation hard to describe. My companion, on the contrary, seemed to have become icily cool. When next she spoke, her voice had a businesslike ring, which revealed the fact that she was no amateur at this class og work.

"Wait here," she directed. "I am going to pass all around the house, and I will rejoin you."

I could see her but dimly, and she moved off as silent as an Indian deer-stalker, leaving me alone there crouching at the extreme edge of the thicket. I looked out over a small wilderness of unkempt flower-beds; so much it was just possible to perceive. The plants in many instances had spread on to the pathways and contested survival with the flourishing weeds. All was wild—deserted—eerie.

A sense of dampness assailed me, and I raised my eyes to the low-lying building wherein no light showed, no sign of life was evident. The nearer wing presented a verandah apparently overgrown by some climbing plant, the nature of which it was impossible to determine in the darkness.

The zest for the nocturnal operation which temporarily had thrilled me succumbed now to loneliness. With keen anxiety I awaited the return of my more experienced accomplice. The situation was grotesque, utterly bizarre; but even my sense of humour could not save me from the growing dread which this seemingly deserted place poured into my heart.

When upon the right I heard a faint rustling I started, and grasped the revolver in my pocket.

"Not a sound!" came in Carneta's voice. "Keep just inside the bushes and come this way. There is something I want to show you."

The various profuse growths rendered concealment simple enough—if indeed any other concealment were necessary than that which the strangely black night afforded. Just within the evil-smelling thicket we made a half circuit of the building, and stopped.

"Look!" whispered Carneta.

The word was unnecessary, for I was staring fixedly in the direction of that which evidently had occasioned her uneasiness.

It was a small square window, so low-set that I assumed it to be that of a cellar, and heavily cross-barred.

From it, out upon a tangled patch of vegetation, shone a dull red light!

"There's no other light in the place," my companion whispered. "For God's sake, what can it be?"

My mind supplied no explanation. The idea that it might be a dark room no doubt was suggested by the assumed role of Carneta; but I knew that idea to be absurd. The red light meant something else.

Evidently the commencing of operations before all lights were out was irregular, for Carneta said slowly—

"We must wait and watch the light. There was formerly a moat around the Gate House; that must be the window of a dungeon."

I little relished the prospect of waiting in that swamp-like spot, but since no alternative presented itself I accepted the inevitable. For close upon an hour we stood watching the red window. No sound of bird, beast, or man disturbed our vigil; in fact, it would appear that the very insects shunned the neighbourhood of Hassan of Aleppo. But the red light still shone out.

"We must risk it!" said Carneta steadily. "There are French windows opening on to that verandah. Ten yards farther around the bushes come right up to the wall of the house. We'll go that way and around by the other wing on to the verandah."

Any action was preferable to this nerve-sapping delay, and with a determination to shoot, and shoot to kill, any one who opposed our entrance, I passed through the bushes and, with Carneta, rounded the southern border of that silent house and slipped quietly on to the verandah.

Kneeling, Carneta opened the knapsack. My eyes were growing accustomed to the darkness, and I was just able to see her deft hands at work upon the fastenings. She made no noise, and I watched her with an ever-growing wonder. A female burglar is a personage difficult to imagine. Certainly, no one ever could have suspected this girl with the violet eyes of being an expert crackswoman; but of her efficiency there could be no question. I think I had never witnessed a more amazing spectacle than that of this cultured girl manipulating the tools of the house breaker with her slim white fingers.

Suddenly she turned and clutched my arm.

"The windows are not fastened!" she whispered.

A strange courage came to me—perhaps that of desperation. For, ignoring the ominous circumstance, I pushed open the nearest window and stepped into the room beyond! A hissing breath from Carneta acknowledged

my performance, and she entered close behind me, silent in her rubber-soled shoes.

For one thrilling moment we stood listening. Then came the white beam from the electric lamp to cut through the surrounding blackness.

The room was totally unfurnished!

XXXI. THE POOL OF DEATH

Not a sound broke the stillness of the Gate House. It was the most eerily silent place in which I had ever found myself. Out into the corridor we went, noiselessly. It was stripped, uncarpeted.

Three doors we passed, two upon the left and one upon the right. We tried them all. All were unfastened, and the rooms into which they opened bare and deserted. Then we came upon a short, descending stair, at its foot a massive oaken door.

Carneta glided down, noiseless as a ghost, and to one of the blackened panels applied an ingenious little instrument which she carried in her knapsack. It was not unlike a stethoscope; and as I watched her listening, by means of this arrangement, for any sound beyond the oaken door, I reflected how almost every advance made by science places a new tool in the hand of the criminal.

No word had been spoken since we had discovered this door; none had been necessary. For we both knew that the place beyond was that from which proceeded the mysterious red light.

I directed the ray of the electric torch upon Carneta, as she stood there listening, and against that sombre oaken background her face and profile stood out with startling beauty. She seemed half perplexed and half fearful. Then she abruptly removed the apparatus, and, stooping to the knapsack, replaced it and took out a bunch of wire keys, signing to me to hand her the lamp.

As I crept down the steps I saw her pause, glancing back over her shoulder toward the door. The expression upon her face induced me to direct the light in the same direction.

Why neither of us had observed the fact before I cannot conjecture; but a key was in the lock!

Perhaps the traffic of the night afforded no more dramatic moment than this. The house which we were come prepared burglariously to enter was thrown open, it would seem, to us, inviting our inspection!

Looking back upon that moment, it seems almost incredible that the sight of a key in a lock should have so thrilled me. But at the time I perceived something sinister in this failure of the Lord of the Hashishin to close his doors to intruders. That Carneta shared my doubts and fears was to be read in her face; but her training had been peculiar, I learned, and such as establishes a surprising resoluteness of character.

Quite noiselessly she turned the key, and holding a dainty pocket revolver in her hand, pushed the door open slowly!

An odour, sickly sweet and vaguely familiar, was borne to my nostrils. Carneta became outlined in dim, reddish light. Bending forward slightly, she entered the room, and I, with muscles tensed nervously, advanced and stood beside her.

I perceived that this was a cellar; indeed, I doubt not that in some past age it had served as a dungeon. From the stone roof hung the first evidence of Eastern occupation which the Gate House had yielded; in the form of an Oriental lantern, or fanoos, of rose-coloured waxed paper upon a copper frame. Its vague light revealed the interior of the hideous place upon whose threshold we stood.

Straight before us, deep set in the stone wall, was the tiny square window, iron-barred without, and glazed with red glass, the light from which had so deeply mystified us. Within a niche in the wall, a little to the left of the window, rested an object which, at that moment, claimed our undivided attention the sight of which so wrought upon us that temporarily all else was forgotten.

It was the red slipper of the Prophet!

"My God!" whispered Carneta—"my God!"—and clutched at me, swaying dizzily.

A few inches from our feet the floor became depressed, how deeply I could not determine, for it was filled with water, water filthy and slimy! The strange, nauseating odour had grown all but unsupportable; it seemingly proceeded from this fetid pool which, occupying the floor of the dungeon,

offered a barrier, since its depth was unknown, of fully twelve feet between ourselves and the farther wall.

There was a faint, dripping sound: a whispering, echoing drip-drip of falling water. I could not tell from whence it proceeded.

Almost supporting my companion, whose courage seemed suddenly to have failed her, I stared fascinatedly at that blood-stained relic. Something then induced me to look behind; I suppose a warning instinct of that sort which is unexplainable. I only know that upholding Carneta with my left arm, and nervously grasping my revolver in my right, I turned and glanced over my shoulder.

Very slowly, but with a constant, regular motion, the massive door was closing!

I snatched away my arm; in my left hand I held the electric torch, and springing sharply about I directed the searching ray into the black gap of the stairway. A yellow face, a malignant Oriental face, came suddenly, fully, into view! Instantly I recognized it for that of the man who had driven Hassan's car!

Acting upon the determination with which I had entered the Gate House, I raised my revolver and fired straight between the evil eyes! To the fact that I dropped my left hand in the act of pulling the trigger with my right, and thus lost my mark, the servant of Hassan of Aleppo owed his escape. I missed him. He uttered a shrill cry of fear and went racing up the wooden stair. I followed him with the light and fired twice at the retreating figure. I heard him stumble and a second time cry out. But, though I doubt not he was hit, he recovered himself, for I heard his tread in the corridor above.

Propping wide the door with my foot, I turned to Carneta. Her face was drawn and haggard; but her mouth set in a sort of grim determination.

"Earl is dead!" she said, in a queer, toneless voice. "He died trying to get —that thing! I will get it, and destroy it!"

Before I could detain her, even had I sought to do so, she stepped into the filthy water, struggled to recover her foothold, and sank above her waist into its sliminess. Without hesitation she began to advance toward the niche which contained the slipper. In the middle of the pool she stopped.

What memory it was which supplied the clue to the identity of that nauseating smell, heaven alone knows; but as the girl stopped and drew

herself up rigidly—then turned and leapt wildly back toward the door—I knew what occasioned that sickly odour!

She screamed once, dreadfully—shrilly—a scream of agonizing fear that I can never forget. Then, roughly I grasped her, for the need was urgent—and dragged her out on to the floor beside me. With her wet garments clinging to her limbs, she fell prostrate on the stones.

A yard from the brink the slimy water parted, and the yellow snout of a huge crocodile was raised above the surface! The saurian eyes, hungrily malevolent, rose next to view!

The extremity of our danger found me suddenly cool. As the thing drew its slimy body up out of the poor I waited. The jaws were extended toward the prostrate body, were but inches removed from it, dripped their saliva upon the soddened skirt—when I bent forward, and at a range of some ten inches emptied the remaining three loaded chambers of my revolver into the creature's left eye!

Upchurned in bloody foam became the water of that dreadful place . . . . As one recalls the incidents of a fevered dream, I recall dragging Carneta away from the contorted body of the death-stricken reptile. A nightmare chaos of horrid, revolting sights and sounds forms my only recollection of quitting the dungeon of the slipper.

I succeeded in carrying her up the stairs and out through the empty rooms on to the verandah; but there, from sheer exhaustion, I laid her down. I had no means of reviving her and I lacked the strength to carry her farther. Having recharged my revolver, I stood watching her where she lay, wanly beautiful in the dim light.

There was no doubt in my mind respecting the fate of Earl Dexter, nor could I doubt that the slipper in the dungeon below was a duplicate of the real one. It was a death-trap into which he had lured Dexter and which he had left baited for whomsoever might trace the cracksman to the Gate House. Why Hassan should have remained behind, unless from fanatic lust of killing, I could not imagine.

When at last the fresher night air had its effect, and Carneta opened her eyes, I led her to the gates, nor did she offer the slightest resistance, but looked dully before her, muttering over and over again, "Earl, Earl!"

The gates were open; we passed out on to the open road. No man pursued us, and the night was gravely still.

XXXII. SIX GRAY PATCHES

When the invitation came from my old friend Hilton to spend a week "roughing it" with him in Warwickshire I accepted with alacrity. If ever a man needed a holiday I was that man. Nervous breakdown threatened me at any moment; the ghastly experience at the Gate House together with Carneta's grief-stricken face when I had parted from her were obsessing memories which I sought in vain to shake off.

A brief wire had contained the welcome invitation, and up to the time when I had received it I had been unaware that Hilton was back in England. Moreover, beyond the fact that his house, "Uplands," was near H—, for which I was instructed to change at New Street Station, Birmingham, I had little idea of its location. But he added "Wire train and will meet at H—"; so that I had no uneasiness on that score.

I had contemplated catching the 2:45 from Euston, but by the time I had got my work into something like order, I decided that the 6:55 would be more suitable and decided to dine on the train.

Altogether, there was something of a rush and hustle attendant upon getting away, and when at last I found myself in the cab, bound for Euston, I sat back with a long-drawn sigh. The quest of the Prophet's slipper was ended; in all probability that blood-stained relic was already Eastward bound. Hassan of Aleppo, its awful guardian, had triumphed and had escaped retribution. Earl Dexter was dead. I could not doubt that; for the memory of his beautiful accomplice, Carneta, as I last had seen her, broken-hearted, with her great violet eyes dulled in tearless agony—have I not said that it lived with me?

Even as the picture of her lovely, pale face presented itself to my mind, the cab was held up by a temporary block in the traffic—and my imagination played me a strange trick.

Another taxi ran close alongside, almost at the moment that the press of vehicles moved on again. Certainly, I had no more than a passing glimpse of the occupants; but I could have sworn that violet eyes looked suddenly

into mine, and with equal conviction I could have sworn to the gaunt face of the man who sat beside the violet-eyed girl for that of Earl Dexter!

The travellers, however, were immediately lost to sight in the rear, and I was left to conjecture whether this had been a not uncommon form of optical delusion or whether I had seen a ghost.

At any rate, as I passed in between the big pillars, "The gateway of the North," I scrutinized, and closely, the numerous hurrying figures about me. None of them, by any stretch of the imagination, could have been set down for that of Dexter, The Stetson Man. No doubt, I concluded, I had been tricked by a chance resemblance.

Having dispatched my telegram, I boarded the 6:55. I thought I should have the compartment to myself, and so deep in reverie was I that the train was actually clear of the platforms ere I learned that I had a companion. He must have joined me at the moment that the train started. Certainly, I had not seen him enter. But, suddenly looking up, I met the eyes of this man who occupied the corner seat facing me.

This person was olive-skinned, clean-shaven, fine featured, and perfectly groomed. His age might have been anything from twenty-five to forty-five, but his hair and brows were jet black. His eyes, too, were nearer to real black than any human eyes I had ever seen before—excepting the awful eyes of Hassan of Aleppo. Hassan of Aleppo! It was, to that hour, a mystery how his group of trained assassins—the Hashishin—had quitted England. Since none of them were known to the police, it was no insoluble mystery, I admit; but nevertheless it was singular that the careful watching of the ports had yielded no result. Could it be that some of them had not yet left the country? Could it be—

I looked intently into the black eyes. They were caressing, smiling eyes, and looked boldly into mine. I picked up a magazine, pretending to read. But I supported it with my left hand; my right was in my coat pocket—and it rested upon my Smith and Wesson!

So much had the slipper of Mohammed done for me: I went in hourly dread of murderous attack!

My travelling companion watched me; of that I was certain. I could feel his gaze. But he made no move and no word passed between us. This was the situation when the train slowed into Northampton. At Northampton, to

my indescribable relief (frankly, I was as nervous in those days as a woman), the Oriental traveller stepped out on to the platform.

Having reclosed the door, he turned and leaned in through the open window.

"Evidently you are not concerned, Mr Cavanagh," he said. "Be warned. Do not interfere with those that are!"

The night swallowed him up.

My fears had been justified; the man was one of the Hashishin—a spy of Hassan of Aleppo! What did it mean?

I craned from the window, searching the platform right and left. But there was no sign of him.

When the train left Northampton I found myself alone, and I should only weary you were I to attempt to recount the troubled conjectures that bore me company to Birmingham.

The train reached New Street at nine, with the result that having gulped a badly needed brandy and soda in the buffet, I grabbed my bag, raced across —and just missed the connection! More than an hour later I found myself standing at ten minutes to eleven upon the H— platform, watching the red taillight of the "local" disappear into the night. Then I realized to the full that with four miles of lonely England before me there hung above my head a mysterious threat—a vague menace. The solitary official, who but waited my departure to lock up the station, was the last representative of civilization I could hope to encounter until the gates of "Uplands" should be opened to me!

What was the matter with which I was warned not to interfere? Might I not, by my mere presence in that place, unwittingly be interfering now?

With the station-master's directions humming like a refrain in my ears, I passed through the sleeping village and out on to the road. The moon was exceptionally bright and unobscured, although a dense bank of cloud crept slowly from the west, and before me the path stretched as an unbroken thread of silvery white twining a sinuous way up the bracken-covered slope, to where, sharply defined against the moonlight sky, a coppice in grotesque silhouette marked the summit.

The month had been dry and tropically hot, and my footsteps rang crisply upon the hard ground. There is nothing more deceptive than a straight road

up a hill; and half an hour's steady tramping but saw me approaching the trees.

I had so far resolutely endeavoured to keep my mind away from the idea of surveillance. Now, as I paused to light my pipe—a never-failing friend in loneliness—I perceived something move in the shadows of a neighbouring bush.

This object was not unlike a bladder, and the very incongruity of its appearance served to revive all my apprehensions. Taking up my grip, as though I had noticed nothing of an alarming nature, I pursued my way up the slope, leaving a trail of tobacco smoke in my wake; and having my revolver secreted up my right coat-sleeve.

Successfully resisting a temptation to glance behind, I entered the cover of the coppice, and, now invisible to any one who might be dogging me, stood and looked back upon the moon-bright road.

There was no living thing in sight, the road was empty as far as the eye could see. The coppice now remained to be negotiated, and then, if the station-master's directions were not at fault, "Uplands" should be visible beyond. Taking, therefore, what I had designed to be a final glance back down the hillside, I was preparing to resume my way when I saw something —something that arrested me.

It was a long way behind—so far that, had the moon been less bright, I could never have discerned it. What it was I could not even conjecture; but it had the appearance of a vague gray patch, moving—not along the road, but through the undergrowth—in my direction.

For a second my eye rested upon it. Then I saw a second patch—a third —a fourth!

Six!

There were six gray patches creeping up the slope toward me!

The sight was unnerving. What were these things that approached, silently, stealthily—like snakes in the grass?

A fear, unlike anything I had known before the quest of the Prophet's slipper had brought fantastic horror into my life, came upon me. Revolver in hand I ran—ran for my life toward the gap in the trees that marked the coppice end. And as I went something hummed through the darkness beside my head, some projectile, some venomous thing that missed its mark by a bare inch!

Painfully conversant with the uncanny weapons employed by the Hashishin, I knew now, beyond any possibility of doubt, that death was behind me.

A pattering like naked feet sounded on the road, and, without pausing in my headlong career, I sent a random shot into the blackness.

The crack of the Smith and Wesson reassured me. I pulled up short, turned, and looked back toward the trees.

Nothing—no one!

Breathing heavily, I crammed my extinguished briar into my pocket —re-charged the empty chamber of the revolver—and started to run again toward a light that showed over the treetops to my left.

That, if the man's directions were right, was "Uplands"—if his directions were wrong—then . . .

A shrill whistle—minor, eerie, in rising cadence—sounded on the dead silence with piercing clearness! Six whistles—seemingly from all around me—replied!

Some object came humming through the air, and I ducked wildly.

On and on I ran—flying from an unknown, but, as a warning instinct told me, deadly peril—ran as a man runs pursued by devils.

The road bent sharply to the left then forked. Overhanging trees concealed the house, and the light, though high up under the eaves, was no longer visible. Trusting to Providence to guide me, I plunged down the lane that turned to the left, and, almost exhausted, saw the gates before me—saw the sweep of the drive, and the moonlight, gleaming on the windows!

None of the windows were illuminated.

Straight up to the iron gates I raced.

They were locked!

Without a moment's hesitation I hurled my grip over the top and clambered up the bars! As I got astride, from the blackness of the lane came the ominous hum, and my hat went spinning away across the lawn!—the black cloud veiled the moon and complete darkness fell.

Then I dropped and ran for the house—shouting, though all but winded —"Hilton! Hilton! Open the door!"

Sinking exhausted on the steps, I looked toward the gates—but they showed only dimly in the dense shadows of the trees.

Bzzz! Buzz!

I dropped flat in the portico as something struck the metal knob of the door and rebounded over me. A shower of gravel told of another misdirected projectile.

Crack! Crack! Crack! The revolver spoke its short reply into the mysterious darkness; but the night gave up no sound to tell of a shot gone home.

"Hilton! Hilton!" I cried, banging on the panels with the butt of the weapon. "Open the door! Open the door!"

And now I heard the coming footsteps along the hall within; heavy bolts were withdrawn—the door swung open—and Hilton, pale-faced, appeared. His hand shot out, grabbed my coat collar; and weak, exhausted, I found myself snatched into safety, and the door rebolted.

"Thank God!" I whispered. "Thank God! Hilton, look to all your bolts and fastenings. Hell is outside!"

XXXIII. HOW WE WERE REINFORCED

Hilton, I learned, was living the simple life at "Uplands." The place was not yet decorated and was only partly furnished. But with his man, Soar, he had been in solitary occupation for a week.

"Feel better now?" he asked anxiously.

I reached for my tumbler and blew a cloud of smoke into the air. I could hear Soar's footsteps as he made the round of bolts and bars, testing each anxiously.

"Thanks, Hilton," I said. "I'm quite all right. You are naturally wondering what the devil it all means? Well, then, I wired you from Euston that I was coming by the 6:55."

"H— Post Office shuts at 7. I shall get your wire in the morning!"

"That explains your failing to meet me. Now for my explanation!"

"Surrounding this house at the present moment," I continued, "are members of an Eastern organization—the Hashishin, founded in Khorassan in the eleventh century and flourishing to-day!"

"Do you mean it, Cavanagh?"

"I do! One Hassan of Aleppo is the present Sheikh of the order, and he has come to England, bringing a fiendish company in his train, in pursuit of the sacred slipper of Mohammed, which was stolen by the late Professor Deeping—-"

"Surely I have read something about this?"

"Probably. Deeping was murdered by Hassan! The slipper was placed in the Antiquarian Museum—"

"From which it was stolen again!"

"Correct—by Earl Dexter, America's foremost crook! But the real facts have never got into print. I am the only pressman who knows them, and I have good reason for keeping my knowledge to myself! Dexter is dead (I believe I saw his ghost to-day). But although, to the best of my knowledge, the accursed slipper is in the hands of Hassan and Company, I have been watched since I left Euston, and on my way to 'Uplands' my life was attempted!"

"For God's sake, why?"

"I cannot surmise, Hilton. Deeping, for certain reasons that are irrelevant at the moment, left the keys of the case at the Museum in my perpetual keeping—but the case was rifled a second time—"

"I read of it!"

"And the keys were stolen from me. I am utterly at a loss to understand why the Hashishin—for it is members of that awful organization who, without a doubt, surround this house at the present moment—should seek my life. Hilton, I have brought trouble with me!"

"It's almost incredible!" said Hilton, staring at me. "Why do these people pursue you?"

Ere I had time to reply Soar entered, arrayed, as was Hilton, in his night attire. Soar was an ex-dragoon and a model man.

"Everything fast, sir," he reported; "but from the window of the bedroom over here—the room I got ready for Mr Cavanagh—I thought I saw someone in the orchard."

"Eh?" jerked Hilton—"in the orchard? Come on up, Cavanagh!"

We all ran upstairs. The moonlight was streaming into the room.

"Keep back!" I warned.

Well within the shadow, I crept up to the window and looked out. The night was hot and still. No breeze stirred the leaves, but the edge of the

frowning thunder cloud which I had noted before spread a heavy carpet of ebony black upon the ground. Beyond, I could dimly discern the hills. The others stood behind me, constrained by the fear of this mysterious danger which I had brought to "Uplands."

There was someone moving among the trees!

Closer came the figure, and closer, until suddenly a shaft of moonlight found passage and spilled a momentary pool of light amid the shadows, I could see the watcher very clearly. A moment he stood there, motionless, and looking up at the window; then as he glided again into the shade of the trees the darkness became complete. But I watched, crouching there nervously, for long after he was gone.

"For God's sake, who is it?" whispered Hilton, with a sort of awe in his voice.

"It's Hassan of Aleppo!" I replied.

Virtually, the house, with the capital of the Midlands so near upon the one hand, the feverish activity of the Black Country reddening the night upon the other, was invested by fanatic Easterns!

We descended again to the extemporized study. Soar entered with us and Hilton invited him to sit down.

"We must stick together to-night!" he said. "Now, Cavanagh, let us see if we can find any explanation of this amazing business. I can understand that at one period of the slipper's history you were an object of interest to those who sought to recover it; but if, as you say, the Hashishin have the slipper now, what do they want with you? If you have never touched it, they cannot be prompted by desire for vengeance."

"I have never touched it," I replied grimly; "nor even any receptacle containing it."

As I ceased speaking came a distant muffled rumbling.

"That's the thunder," said Hilton. "There's a tremendous storm brewing."

He poured out three glasses of whisky, and was about to speak when Soar held up a warning finger.

"Listen!" he said.

At his words, with tropical suddenness down came the rain.

Hilton, his pipe in his hand, stood listening intently.

"What?" he asked.

"I don't know, sir; the sound of the rain has drowned it."

Indeed, the rain was descending in a perfect deluge, its continuous roar drowning all other sounds; but as we three listened tensely we detected a noise which hitherto had seemed like the overflowing of some spout.

But louder and clearer it grew, until at last I knew it for what it was.

"It's a motor-car!" I cried.

"And coming here!" added Soar. "Listen! it's in the lane!"

"It certainly isn't a taxicab," declared Hilton. "None of the men will come beyond the village."

"That's the gate!" said Soar, in an awed voice, and stood up, looking at Hilton.

"Come on," said the latter abruptly, making for the door.

"Be careful, Hilton!" I cried; "it may be a trick!"

Soar unbolted the front door, threw it open, and looked out. In the darkness of the storm it was almost impossible to see anything in the lane outside. But at that moment a great sheet of lightning split the gloom, and we saw a taxicab standing close up to the gateway!

"Help! Open the gate!" came a high-pitched voice; "open the gate!"

Out into the rain we ran and down the gravel path. Soar had the gate open in a twinkling, and a woman carrying a brown leather grip, but who was so closely veiled that I had no glimpse of her features, leapt through on to the drive.

"Lend a hand, two of you!" cried a vaguely familiar voice—"this way!"

Hilton and Soar stepped out into the road. The driver of the cab was lying forward across the wheel, apparently insensible, but as Hilton seized his arm he moved and spoke feebly.

"For God's sake be quick, sir!" he said. "They're after us! They're on the other side of the lane, there!"

With that he dropped limply into Hilton's arms!

He was dragged in on to the drive—and something whizzed over our heads and went sputtering into the gravel away up toward the house. The last to enter was the man who had come in the cab. As he barred the gate behind him he suddenly reached out through the bars and I saw a pistol in his hand.

Once—twice—thrice—he fired into the blackness of the lane.

"Take that, you swine!" he shouted. "Take that!"

As quickly as we could, bearing the insensible man, we hurried back to the door. On the step the woman was waiting for us, with her veil raised. A blinding flash of lightning came as we mounted the step—and I looked into the violet eyes of Carneta! I turned and stared at the man behind me.

It was Earl Dexter.

Three of the mysterious missiles fell amongst us, but miraculously no one was struck. Amid the mighty booming of the thunder we reentered the houses and got the door barred. In the hall we laid down the unconscious man and stood, a strangely met company, peering at one another in the dim lamplight.

"We've got to bury the hatchet, Mr Cavanagh!" said Dexter. "It's a case of the common enemy. I've brought you your bag!" and he pointed to the brown grip upon the floor.

"My bag!" I cried. "My bag is upstairs in my room."

"Wrong, sir!" snapped The Stetson Man. "They are like as two peas in a pod, I'll grant you, but the bag you snatched off the platform at New Street was mine! That's what I'm after; I ought to be on the way to Liverpool. That's what Hassan's after!"

"The bag!"

"You don't need to ask what's in the bag?" suggested Dexter.

"What is in the bag?" ask Hilton hoarsely.

"The slipper of the Prophet, sir!" was the reply.

XXXIV. MY LAST MEETING WITH HASSAN OF ALEPPO

I felt dazed, as a man must feel who has just heard the death sentence pronounced upon him. Hilton seemed to have become incapable of speech or action; and in silence we stood watching Carneta tending the unconscious man. She forced brandy from a flask between his teeth, kneeling there beside him with her face very pale and dark rings around her eyes. Presently she looked up.

"Will you please get me a bowl of water and a sponge?" she said quietly.

Soar departed without a word, and no one spoke until he returned, bringing the sponge and the water, when the girl set to work in a

businesslike way to cleanse a wound which showed upon the man's head.

"She's a good nurse is Carneta," said Dexter coolly. "She was the only doctor I had through this"—indicating his maimed wrist. "If you will fetch my bag down, there's some lint in it."

I hesitated.

"You needn't worry," said Dexter; "as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. You've handled the bag, and I'm not asking you to do any more."

I went up to my room and lifted the grip from the chair upon which I had put it. Even now I found it difficult to perceive any difference between this and mine. Both were of identical appearance and both new. In fact, I had bought mine only that morning, my old one being past use, and being in a hurry, I had not left it to be initialled.

As I picked up the bag the lightning flashed again, and from the window I could see the orchard as clearly as by sunlight. At the farther end near the wall someone was standing watching the house.

I went downstairs carrying the fatal bag, and rejoined the group in the hall.

"He will have to be got to bed," said Carneta, referring to the wounded man; "he will probably remain unconscious for a long time."

Accordingly, we took the patient into one of the few furnished bedrooms, and having put him to bed left him in care of the beautiful nurse. When we four men met again downstairs, amazement had rendered the whole scene unreal to me. Soar stood just within the open door, not knowing whether to go or to remain; but Hilton motioned to him to stay. Earl Dexter bit off the end of a cigar and stood with his left elbow resting on the mantelpiece.

His gaunt face looked gaunter than ever, but the daredevil gray eyes still nursed that humorous light in their depths.

"Mr Cavanagh," he said, "we're brothers! And if you'll consider a minute, you'll see that I'm not lying when I say I'm on the straight, now and for always!"

I made no reply: I could think of none.

"I'm a crook," he resumed, "or I was up to a while ago. There's a warrant out for me—the first that ever bore my name. I've sailed near the wind often enough, but it was desperation that got me into hot water about that!"

He jerked his cigar in the direction of his grip, which lay now on the rug at his feet.

"I lost a useful right hand," he went on—"and I lost every cent I had. It was a dead rotten speculation—for I lost my good name! I mean it! Believe me, I've handled some shady propositions in the past, but I did it right in the sunlight! Up to the time I went out for that damned slipper I could have had lunch with any detective from Broadway to the Strand! I didn't need any false whiskers and the Ritz was good enough for The Stetson Man. What now? I'm 'wanted!' Enough said."

He tossed the cigar—he had smoked scarce an inch of it—into the empty grate.

"I'm an Aunt Sally for any man to shy at," he resumed bitterly. "My place henceforth is in the dark. Right! I've finished; the book's closed. From the time I quit England—if I can quit—I'm on the straight! I've promised Carneta, and I mean to keep my word. See here—"

Dexter turned to me.

"You'll want to know how I escaped from the cursed death-trap at Hassan's house in Kent? I'll tell you. I was never in it! I was hiding and waiting my chance. You know what was left to guard the slipper while the Sheikh—rot him—was away looking after arrangements for getting his mob out of the country?"

I nodded.

"You fell into the trap—you and Carneta. By God! I didn't know till it was all over! But two minutes later I was inside that place —and three minutes later I was away with the slipper! Oh, it wasn't a duplicate; it was the goods! What then? Carneta had had a sickening of the business and she just invited me to say Yes or No. I said Yes; and I'm a straight man onward."

"Then what were you doing on the train with the slipper?" asked Hilton sharply.

"I was going to Liverpool, sir!" snapped The Stetson Man, turning on him. "I was going to try to get aboard the Mauretania and then make terms for my life! What happened? I slipped out at Birmingham for a drink—grip in hand! I put it down beside me, and Mr Cavanagh here, all in a hustle, must have rushed in behind me, snatched a whisky and snatched my grip and started for H—!"

A vivid flash of lightning flickered about the room. Then came the deafening boom of the thunder, right over the house it seemed.

"I knew from the weight of the grip it wasn't mine," said Dexter, "and I was the most surprised guy in Great Britain and Ireland when I found whose it was! I opened it, of course! And right on top was a waistcoat and right in the first pocket was a telegram. Here it is!"

He passed it to me. It was that which I had received from Hilton. I had packed the suit which I had been wearing that morning and must previously have thrust the telegram into the waistcoat pocket.

"Providence!" Dexter assured me. "Because I got on the station in time to see Hassan of Aleppo join the train for H—! I was too late, though. But I chartered a taxi out on Corporation Street and invited the man to race the local! He couldn't do it, but we got here in time for the fireworks! Mr Cavanagh, there are anything from six to ten Hashishin watching this house!"

"I know it!"

"They're bareheaded; and in the dark their shaven skulls look like nothing human. They're armed with those damned tubes, too. I'd give a thousand dollars—if I had it!—to know their mechanism. Well, gentlemen, deeds speak. What am I here for, when I might be on the way to Liverpool, and safety?"

"You're here to try to make up for the past a bit!" said a soft, musical voice. "Mr Cavanagh's life is in danger."

Carneta entered the room.

The light played in that wonderful hair of hers; and pale though she was, I thought I had never seen a more beautiful woman.

"Tell them," she said quietly, "what must be done."

Soar glanced at me out of the corner of his eyes and shifted uneasily. Hilton stared as if fascinated.

"Now," rapped Dexter, in his strident voice, "putting aside all questions of justice and right (we're not policemen), what do we want—you and I, Mr Cavanagh?"

"I can't think clearly about anything," I said dully. "Explain yourself."

"Very well. Inspector Bristol, C.I.D., would want me and Hassan arrested. I don't want that! What I want is peace; I want to be able to sleep in comfort; I want to know I'm not likely to be murdered on the next corner! Same with you?"

"Yes—yes."

"How can we manage it? One way would be to kill Hassan of Aleppo; but he wants a lot of killing—I've tried! Moreover, directly we'd done it, another Sheikh-al-jebal would be nominated and he'd carry on the bloody work. We'd be worse off than ever. Right! we've got to connive at letting the blood-stained fanatic escape, and we've got to give up the slipper!"

"I'll do that with all my heart!"

"Sure! But you and I have both got little scores up against Hassan, which it's not in human nature to forget. But I've got it worked out that there's only one way. It may nearly choke us to have to do it, I'll allow. I'm working on the Moslem character. Mr Hilton, make up a fire in the grate here!"

Hilton stared, not comprehending.

"Do as he asks," I said. "Personally, I am resigned to mutilation, since I have touched the bag containing the slipper, but if Dexter has a plan—"

"Excuse me, sir," Soar interrupted. "I believe there's some coal in the coal-box, but I shall have to break up a packing-case for firewood—or go out into the yard!"

"Let it be the packing-case," replied Hilton hastily.

Accordingly a fire was kindled, whilst we all stood about the room in a sort of fearful uncertainty; and before long a big blaze was roaring up the chimney. Dexter turned to me.

"Mr Cavanagh," said he, "I want you to go right upstairs, open a first-floor window—I would suggest that of your bedroom—and invite Hassan of Aleppo to come and discuss terms!"

Silence followed his words; we were all amazed. Then—

"Why do you ask me to do this?" I inquired.

"Because," replied Dexter, "I happen to know that Hassan has some queer kind of respect for you—I don't know why."

"Which is probably the reason why he tried to kill me to-night!"

"That's beside the question, Mr Cavanagh. He will believe you —which is the important point."

"Very well. I have no idea what you have in mind but I am prepared to adopt any plan since I have none of my own. What shall I say?"

"Say that we are prepared to return the slipper—on conditions."

"He will probably try to shoot me as I stand at the window."

Dexter shrugged his shoulders.

"Got to risk it," he drawled.

"And what are the conditions?"

"He must come right in here and discuss them! Guarantee him safe conduct and I don't think he'll hesitate. Anyway, if he does, just tell him that the slipper will be destroyed immediately!"

Without a word I turned on my heel and ascended the stairs.

I entered my room, crossed to the window, and threw it widely open. Hovering over the distant hills I could see the ominous thunder cloud, but the storm seemed to have passed from "Uplands," and only a distant muttering with the faint dripping of water from the pipes broke the silence of the night. A great darkness reigned, however, and I was entirely unable to see if any one was in the orchard.

Like some mueddin of fantastic fable I stood there.

"Hassan!" I cried—"Hassan of Aleppo!"

The name rang out strangely upon the stillness—the name which for me had a dreadful significance; but the whole episode seemed unreal, the voice that had cried unlike my voice.

Instantly as any magician summoning an efreet I was answered.

Out from the trees strode a tall figure, a figure I could not mistake. It was that of Hassan of Aleppo!

"I hear, effendim, and obey," he said. "I am ready. Open the door!"

"We are prepared to discuss terms. You may come and go safely" —still my voice sounded unfamiliar in my ears.

"I know, effendim; it is so written. Open the door."

I closed the window and mechanically descended the stairs.

"Mind it isn't a trap!" cried Hilton, who, with the others, had overheard every word of this strange interview. "They may try to rush the door directly we open it."

"I'll stand the chest behind it," said Soar; "between the door and the wall, so that only one can enter at a time."

This was done, and the door opened.

Alone, majestic, entered Hassan of Aleppo.

He was dressed in European clothes but wore the green turban of a Sherif. With his snowy beard and coal-black eyes he seemed like a vision of the Prophet, of the Prophet in whose name he had committed such ghastly atrocities.

Deigning no glance to Soar nor to Hilton, he paced into the room, passing me and ignoring Carneta, where Earl Dexter awaited him. I shall never forget the scene as Hassan entered, to stand looking with blazing eyes at The Stetson Man, who sat beside the fire with the slipper of Mohammed in his hand!

"Hassan," said Dexter quietly, "Mr Cavanagh has had to promise you safe conduct, or as sure as God made me, I'd put a bullet in you!"

The Sheikh of the Hashishin glared fixedly at him.

"Companion of the evil one," he said, "it is not written that I shall die by your hand—or by the hand of any here. But it has been revealed to me that to-night the gates of Paradise may be closed in my face."

"I shouldn't be at all surprised," drawled Dexter. "But it's up to you. You've got to swear by Mohammed—"

"Salla-'llahu 'aleyhi wasellem!"

"That you won't lay a hand upon any living soul, or allow any of your followers to do so, who has touched the slipper or had anything to do with it, but that you will go in peace."

"You are doomed to die!"

"You don't agree, then?"

"Those who have offended must suffer the penalty!"

"Right!" said Dexter—and prepared to toss the slipper into the heart of the fire!

"Stop! Infidel! Stop!"

There was real agony in Hassan's voice. To my inexpressible surprise he dropped upon his knee, extending his lean brown hands toward the slipper.

Dexter hesitated. "You agree, then?"

Hassan raised his eyes to the ceiling.

"I agree," he said. "Dark are the ways. It is the will of God. . ."

Dimly the booming of the thunder came echoing back to us from the hills. Above its roll sounded a barbaric chanting to which the drums of angry heaven formed a fitting accompaniment.

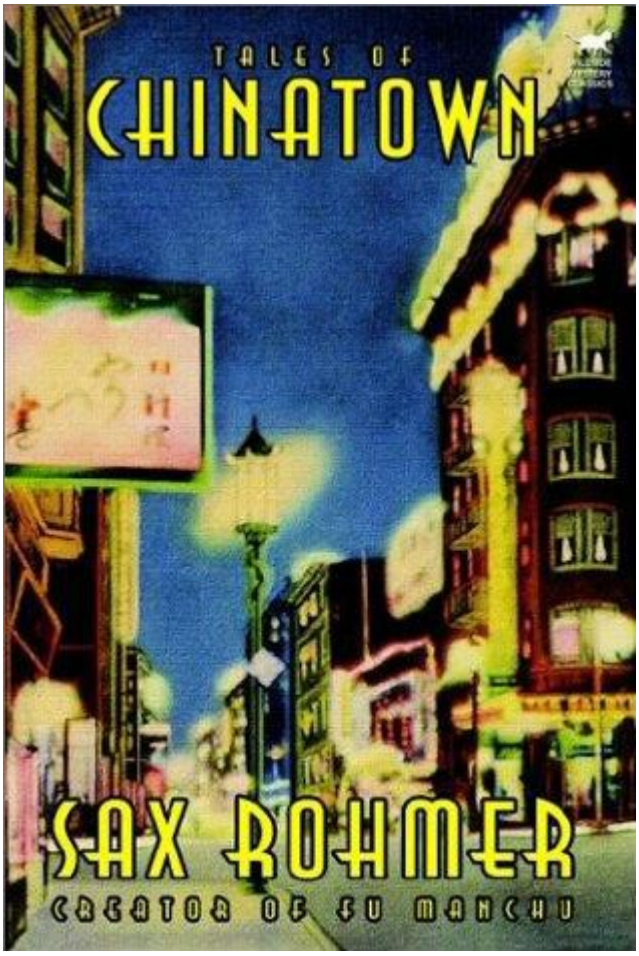
I heard Soar shooting the bolts again upon the going of our strange visitor.

Faint and more faint grew the chanting, until it merged into the remote muttering of the storm—and was lost. The quest of the sacred slipper was ended.

THE END

Tales of Chinatown

First Published 1922



Contents

The Daughter of Huang Chow
Kerry's Kid
The Pigtail of Hi Wing Ho
The House of Golden Joss
The Man With the Shaven Skull
The White Hat
Tcheriapin
The Dance of the Veils
The Hand of the Mandarin Quong
The Key of the Temple of Heaven

THE DAUGHTER OF HUANG CHOW

I. "DIAMOND FRED"

In the saloon bar of a public-house, situated only a few hundred yards from the official frontier of Chinatown, two men sat at a small table in a corner, engaged in earnest conversation. They afforded a sharp contrast. One was a thick-set and rather ruffianly looking fellow, not too cleanly in either person or clothing, and, amongst other evidences that at one time he had known the prize ring, possessing a badly broken nose. His companion was dressed with that spruceness which belongs to the successful East End Jew; he was cleanly shaven, of slight build, and alert in manner and address.

Having ordered and paid for two whiskies and sodas, the Jew, raising his glass, nodded to his companion and took a drink. The glitter of a magnificent diamond which he wore seemed to attract the other's attention almost hypnotically.

"Cheerio, Freddy!" said the thick-set man. "Any news?"

"Nothing much," returned the one addressed as Freddy, setting his glass upon the table and selecting a cigarette from a packet which he carried in his pocket.

"I'm not so sure," growled the other, watching him suspiciously. "You've been lying low for a long time, and it's not like you to slack off except when there's something big in sight."

"Hm!" said his companion, lighting his cigarette. "What do you mean exactly?"

Jim Poland—for such was the big man's name—growled and spat reflectively into a spittoon.

"I've had my eye on you, Freddy," he replied; "I've had my eye on you!"

"Oh, have you?" murmured the other. "But tell me what you mean!"

Beneath his suave manner lay a threat, and, indeed, Freddy Cohen, known to his associates as "Diamond Fred," was in many ways a formidable personality. He had brought to his chosen profession of crook a first-rate American training, together with all that mental agility and cleverness which belong to his race, and was at once an object of envy and admiration amongst the fraternity which keeps Scotland Yard busy.

Jim Poland, physically a more dangerous character, was not in the same class with him; but he was not without brains of a sort, and Cohen, although smiling agreeably, waited with some anxiety for his reply.

"I mean," growled Poland, "that you're not wasting your time with Lala Huang for nothing."

"Perhaps not," returned Cohen lightly. "She's a pretty girl; but what business is it of yours?"

"None at all. I ain't interested in 'er good looks; neither are you."

Cohen shrugged and raised his glass again.

"Come on," growled Poland, leaning across the table. "I know, and I'm in on it. D'ye hear me? I'm in on it. These are hard times, and we've got to stick together."

"Oh," said Cohen, "that's the game, is it?"

"That's the game right enough. You won't go wrong if you bring me in, even at fifty-fifty, because maybe I know things about old Huang that you don't know."

The Jew's expression changed subtly, and beneath his drooping lids he glanced aside at the speaker. Then:

"It's no promise," he said, "but what do you know?"

Poland bent farther over the table.

"Chinatown's being watched again. I heard this morning that Red Kerry was down here."

Cohen laughed.

"Red Kerry!" he echoed. "Red Kerry means nothing in my young life, Jim."

"Don't 'e?" returned Jim, snarling viciously. "The way he cleaned up that dope crowd awhile back seemed to show he was no jug, didn't it?"

The Jew made a facial gesture as if to dismiss the subject.

"All right," continued Poland. "Think that way if you like. But the patrols have been doubled. I suppose you know that? And it's a cert there are special men on duty, ever since the death of that Chink."

Cohen shifted uneasily, glancing about him in a furtive fashion.

"See what I mean?" continued the other. "Chinatown ain't healthy just now."

He finished his whisky at a draught, and, standing up, lurched heavily across to the counter. He returned with two more glasses. Then, reseating

himself and bending forward again:

"There's one thing I reckon you don't know," he whispered in Cohen's ear. "I saw that Chink talking to Lala Huang only a week before the time he was hauled out of Limehouse Reach. I'm wondering, Diamond, if, with all your cleverness, you may not go the same way."

"Don't try to pull the creep stuff on me, Jim," said Cohen uneasily. "What are you driving at, anyway?"

"Well," replied Poland, sipping his whisky reflectively, "how did that Chink get into the river?"

"How the devil do I know?"

"And what killed him? It wasn't drowning, although he was all swelled up."

"See here, old pal," said Cohen. "I know 'Frisco better than you know Limehouse. Let me tell you that this little old Chinatown of yours is pie to me. You're trying to get me figuring on Chinese death traps, secret poisons, and all that junk. Boy, you're wasting your poetry. Even if you did see the Chink with Lala, and I doubt it— Oh, don't get excited, I'm speaking plain —there's no connection that I can see between the death of said Chink and old Huang Chow."

"Ain't there?" growled Poland huskily. He grasped the other's wrist as in a vise and bent forward so that his battered face was close to the pale countenance of the Jew. "I've been covering old Huang for months and months. Now I'm going to tell you something. Since the death of that Chink Red Kerry's been covering him, too."

"See here!" Cohen withdrew his arm from the other's grasp angrily. "You can't freeze me out of this claim with bogey stuff. You're listed, my lad, and you know it. Chief Inspector Kerry is your pet nightmare. But if he walked in here right now I could ask him to have a drink. I wouldn't but I could. You've got the wrong angle, Jim. Lala likes me fine, and although she doesn't say much, what she does say is straight. I'll ask her to-night about the Chink."

"Then you'll be a damned fool."

"What's that?"

"I say you'll be a damned fool. I'm warning you, Freddy. There are Chinks and Chinks. All the boys know old Huang Chow has got a regular

gold mine buried somewhere under the floor. But all the boys don't know what I know, and it seems that you don't either."

"What is that?"

Jim Poland bent forward more urgently, again seizing Cohen's wrist, and:

"Huang Chow is a mighty big bug amongst the Chinese," he whispered, glancing cautiously about him. "He's hellish clever and rotten with money. A man like that wants handling. I'm not telling you what I know. But call it fifty-fifty and maybe you'll come out alive."

The brow of Diamond Fred displayed beads of perspiration, and with a blue silk handkerchief which he carried in his breast pocket he delicately dried his forehead.

"You're an old hand at this stuff, Jim," he muttered. "It amounts to this, I suppose; that if I don't agree you'll queer my game?"

Jim Poland's brow lowered and he clenched his fists formidably. Then:

"Listen," he said in his hoarse voice. "It ain't your claim any more than mine. You've covered it different, that's all. Yours was always the petticoat lay. Mine's slower but safer. Is anyone else in with you?"

"No."

"Then we'll double up. Now I'll tell you something. I was backing out."

"What? You were going to quit?"

"I was."

"Why?"

"Because the thing's too dead easy, and a thing like that always looks like hell to me."

Freddy Cohen finished his glass of whisky.

"Wait while I get some more drinks," he said.

In this way, then, at about the hour of ten on a stuffy autumn night, in the crowded bar of that Wapping public-house, these two made a compact; and of its outcome and of the next appearance of Cohen, the Jewish-American cracksman, within the ken of man, I shall now proceed to tell.

II. THE END OF COHEN

"I've been expecting this," said Chief Inspector Kerry. He tilted his bowler hat farther forward over his brow and contemplated the ghastly exhibit which lay upon the slab of the mortuary. Two other police officers—one in uniform—were present, and they treated the celebrated Chief Inspector with the deference which he had not only earned but had always demanded from his subordinates.

Earmarked for important promotion, he was an interesting figure as he stood there in the gloomy, ill-lighted place, his pose that of an athlete about to perform a long jump, or perhaps, as it might have appeared to some, that of a dancing-master about to demonstrate a new step.

His close-cropped hair was brilliantly red, and so was his short, wiry, aggressive moustache. He was ruddy of complexion, and he looked out unblinkingly upon the world with a pair of steel-blue eyes. Neat he was to spruceness, and while of no more than medium height he had the shoulders of an acrobat.

The detective who stood beside him, by name John Durham, had one trait in common with his celebrated superior. This was a quick keenness, a sort of alert vitality, which showed in his eyes, and indeed in every line of his thin, clean-shaven face. Kerry had picked him out as the most promising junior in his department.

"Give me the particulars," said the Chief Inspector. "It isn't robbery. He's wearing a diamond ring worth two hundred pounds."

His diction was rapid and terse—so rapid as to create the impression that he bit off the ends of the longer words. He turned his fierce blue eyes upon the uniformed officer who stood at the end of the slab.

"They are very few, Chief Inspector," was the reply. "He was hauled out by the river police shortly after midnight, at the lower end of Limehouse Reach. He was alive then—they heard his cry—but he died while they were hauling him into the boat."

"Any statement?" rapped Kerry.

"He was past it, Chief Inspector. According to the report of the officer in charge, he mumbled something which sounded like: 'It has bitten me,' just before he became unconscious."

"'It has bitten me,'" murmured Kerry. "The divisional surgeon has seen him?"

"Yes, Chief Inspector. And in his opinion the man did not die from drowning, but from some form of virulent poisoning."

"Poisoning?"

"That's the idea. There will be a further examination, of course. Either a hypodermic injection or a bite."

"A bite?" said Kerry. "The bite of what?"

"That I cannot say, Chief Inspector. A venomous reptile, I suppose."

Kerry stared down critically at the swollen face of the victim, and then glanced sharply aside at Durham.

"Accounts for his appearance, I suppose," he murmured.

"Yes," said Durham quietly. "He hadn't been in the water long enough to look like that." He turned to the local officer. "Is there any theory as to the point at which he went in?"

"Well, an arrest has been made."

"By whom? of whom?" rapped Kerry.

"Two constables patrolling the Chinatown area arrested a man for suspicious loitering. He turned out to be a well-known criminal—Jim Poland, with a whole list of convictions against him. They're holding him at Limehouse Station, and the theory is that he was operating with———" He nodded in the direction of the body.

"Then who's the smart with the swollen face?" inquired Kerry. "He's a new one on me."

"Yes, but he's been identified by one of the K Division men. He is an American crook with a clean slate, so far as this side is concerned. Cohen is his name. And the idea seems to be that he went in at some point between where he was found by the river police and the point at which Jim Poland was arrested."

Kerry snapped his teeth together audibly, and:

"I'm open to learn," he said, "that the house of Huang Chow is within that area."

"It is."

"I thought so. He died the same way the Chinaman died awhile ago," snapped Kerry savagely.

"It looks very queer." He glanced aside at the local officer. "Cover him up," he ordered, and, turning, he walked briskly out of the mortuary, followed by Detective Durham.

Although dawn was not far off, this was the darkest hour of the night, so that even the sounds of dockland were muted and the riverside slept as deeply as the great port of London ever sleeps. Vague murmurings there were and distant clankings, with the hum of machinery which is never still.

Few of London's millions were awake at that hour, yet Scotland Yard was awake in the person of the fierce-eyed Chief Inspector and his subordinate. Perhaps those who lightly criticize the Metropolitan Force might have learned a new respect for the tireless vigilance which keeps London clean and wholesome, had they witnessed this scene on the borders of Limehouse, as Kerry, stepping into a waiting taxi-cab accompanied by Durham, proceeded to Limehouse Police Station in that still hour when the City slept.

The arrival of Kerry created something of a stir amongst the officials on duty. His reputation in these days was at least as great as that of the most garrulous Labour member.

The prisoner was in cells, but the Chief Inspector elected to interview him in the office; and accordingly, while the officer in charge sat at an extremely tidy writing-table, tapping the blotting-pad with a pencil, and Detective John Durham stood beside him, Kerry paced up and down the little room, deep in reflection, until the door opened and the prisoner was brought in.

One swift glance the Chief Inspector gave at the battle-scarred face, and recognized instantly that this was a badly frightened man. Crossing to the table he took up a typewritten slip which lay there, and:

"Your name is James Poland?" he said. "Four convictions; one, robbery with violence."

Jim Poland nodded sullenly.

"You were arrested at the corner of Pekin Street about midnight. What were you doing there?"

"Taking a walk."

"I'll say it again," rapped Kerry, fixing his fierce eyes upon the man's face. "What were you doing there?"

"I've told you."

"And I tell you you're a liar. Where did you leave the man Cohen?"

Poland blinked his small eyes, cleared his throat, and looked down at the floor uneasily. Then:

"Who's Cohen?" he grunted.

"You mean, who was Cohen?" cried Kerry.

The shot went home. The man clenched his fists and looked about the room from face to face.

"You don't tell me———" he began huskily.

"I've told you," said Kerry. "He's on the slab. Spit out the truth; it'll be good for your health."

The man hesitated, then looked up, his eyes half closed and a cunning expression upon his face.

"Make out your own case," he said. "You've got nothing against me."

Kerry snapped his teeth together viciously.

"I've told you what happened to your pal," he warned. "If you're a wise man you'll come in on our side, before the same thing happens to you."

"I don't know what you're talking about," growled Poland.

Kerry nodded to the constable at the doorway.

"Take him back," he ordered.

Jim Poland being returned to his cell, Kerry, as the door closed behind the prisoner and his guard, stared across at Durham where he stood beside the table.

"An old hand," he said. "But there's another way." He glanced at the officer in charge. "Hold him till the morning. He'll prove useful."

From his waistcoat pocket he took out a slip of chewing gum, unwrapped it, and placed the mint-flavoured wafer between his large white teeth. He bit upon it savagely, settled his hat upon his head, and, turning, walked toward the door. In the doorway he paused.

"Come with me, Durham," he said. "I am leaving the conduct of the case entirely in your hands from now onward."

Detective Durham looked surprised and not a little anxious.

"I am doing so for two reasons," continued the Chief Inspector. "These two reasons I shall now explain."

III. THE SECRET TREASURE-HOUSE

Unlike its sister colony in New York, there are no show places in Limehouse. The visitor sees nothing but mean streets and dark doorways.

The superficial inquirer comes away convinced that the romance of the Asiatic district has no existence outside the imaginations of writers of fiction. Yet here lies a secret quarter, as secret and as strange, in its smaller way, as its parent in China which is called the Purple Forbidden City.

On a morning when mist lay over the Thames reaches, softening the harshness of the dock buildings and lending an air of mystery to the vessels stealing out upon the tide, a man walked briskly along Limehouse Causeway, looking about him inquiringly, as one unfamiliar with the neighbourhood. Presently he seemed to recognize a turning to the right, and he pursued this for a time, now walking more slowly.

A European woman, holding a half-caste baby in her arms, stood in an open doorway, watching him uninterestedly. Otherwise, except for one neatly dressed young Chinaman, who passed him about halfway along the street, there was nothing which could have told the visitor that he had crossed the borderline dividing West from East and was now in an Oriental town.

A very narrow alleyway between two dingy houses proved to be the spot for which he was looking; and, having stared about him for a while, he entered this alleyway. At the farther end it was crossed T-fashion, by another alley, the only object of interest being an iron post at the crossing, and the scenery being made up entirely of hideous brick walls.

About halfway along on the left, set in one of these walls, were strong wooden gates, apparently those of a warehouse. Beside them was a door approached by two very dirty steps. There was a bell-push near the door, but upon neither of these entrances was there any plate to indicate the name of the proprietor of the establishment.

From his pocket-book the visitor extracted a card, consulted something written upon it, and then pressed the bell.

It was very quiet in this dingy little court. No sound of the busy thoroughfares penetrated here; and although the passage forming the top of the "T" practically marked the river bank, only dimly could one discern the sounds which belong to a seaport.

Presently the door was opened by a Chinese boy who wore the ordinary native working dress, and who regarded the man upon the step with oblique, tired-looking eyes.

"Mr Huang Chow?" asked the caller.

The boy nodded.

"You wantchee him see?"

"If he is at home."

The boy glanced at the card, which the visitor still held between finger and thumb, and extended his hand silently. The card was surrendered. It was that of an antique dealer of Dover Street, Piccadilly, and written upon the back was the following: "Mr Hampden would like to do business with you." The signature of the dealer followed.

The boy turned and passed along a dim and perfectly unfurnished passage which the opening of the door had revealed, while Mr Hampden stood upon the step and lighted a cigarette.

In less than a minute the boy returned and beckoned to him to come in. As he did so, and the door was closed, he almost stumbled, so dark was the passage.

Presently, guided by the boy, he found himself in a very business-like little office, where a girl sat at an American desk, looking up at him inquiringly.

She was of a dark and arresting type. Without being pretty in the European sense, there was something appealing in her fine, dark eyes, and she possessed the inviting smile which is the heritage of Eastern women. Her dress was not unlike that of any other business girl, except that the neck of her blouse was cut very low, a fashion affected by many Eurasians, and she wore a gaily coloured sash, and large and very costly pearl ear-rings. As Mr Hampden paused in the doorway:

"Good morning," said the girl, glancing down at the card which lay upon the desk before her. "You come from Mr Isaacs, eh?"

She looked at him with a caressing glance from beneath half- lowered lashes, but missed no detail of his appearance. She did not quite like his moustache, and thought that he would have looked better cleanshaven. Nevertheless, he was a well-set-up fellow, and her manner evidenced approval.

"Yes," he replied, smiling genially. "I have a small commission to execute, and I am told that you can help me."

The girl paused for a moment, and then:

"Yes, very likely," she said, speaking good English but with an odd intonation. "It is not jade? We have very little jade."

"No, no. I wanted an enamelled casket."

"What kind?"

"Cloisonne."

"Cloisonne? Yes, we have several."

She pressed a bell, and, glancing up at the boy who had stood throughout the interview at the visitor's elbow, addressed him rapidly in Chinese. He nodded his head and led the way through a second doorway. Closing this, he opened a third and ushered Mr Hampden into a room which nearly caused the latter to gasp with astonishment.

One who had blundered from Whitechapel into the Khan Khalil, who had been transported upon a magic carpet from a tube station to the Taj Mahal, or dropped suddenly upon Lebanon hills to find himself looking down upon the pearly domes and jewelled gardens of Damascus, could not well have been more surprised. This great treasure-house of old Huang Chow was one of Chinatown's secrets— a secret shared only by those whose commercial interests were identical with the interests of Huang Chow.

The place was artificially lighted by lamps which themselves were beautiful objects of art, and which swung from the massive beams of the ceiling. The floor of the warehouse, which was partly of stone, was covered with thick matting, and spread upon it were rugs and carpets of Karadagh, Kermanshah, Sultan-abad, and Khorassan, with lesser-known loomings of almost equal beauty. Skins of rare beasts overlay the divans. Furniture of ivory, of ebony and lemonwood, preciously inlaid, gave to the place an air of cunning confusion. There were tall cabinets, there were caskets and chests of exquisite lacquer and enamel, loot of an emperor's palace; robes heavy with gold; slippers studded with jewels; strange carven ivories; glittering weapons; pots, jars, and bowls, as delicate and as fragile as the petals of a lily.

Last, but not least, sitting cross-legged upon a low couch, was old Huang Chow, smoking a great curved pipe, and peering half blindly across the place through large horn-rimmed spectacles. This couch was set immediately beside a wide ascending staircase, richly carpeted, and on the other side of the staircase, in a corresponding recess, upon a gilded trestle carved to represent the four claws of a dragon, rested perhaps the strangest exhibit of that strange collection—a Chinese coffin of exquisite workmanship.

The boy retired, and Mr Hampden found himself alone with Huang Chow. No word had been exchanged between master and servant, but:

"Good morning, Mr Hampden," said the Chinaman in a high, thin voice. "Please be seated. It is from Mr Isaacs you come?"

IV. PERSONAL REPORT OF DETECTIVE JOHN DURHAM TO CHIEF INSPECTOR KERRY, OFFICER IN CHARGE OF LIMEHOUSE INQUIRY

Dear Chief Inspector,—Following your instructions I returned and interviewed the prisoner Poland in his cell. I took the line which you had suggested, pointing out to him that he had nothing to gain and everything to lose by keeping silent.

"Answer my questions," I said, "and you can walk straight out. Otherwise, you'll be up before the magistrate, and on your record alone it will mean a holiday which you probably don't want."

He was very truculent, but I got him in a good humour at last, and he admitted that he had been cooperating with the dead man, Cohen, in an attempt to burgle the house of Huang Chow. His reluctance to go into details seemed to be due rather to fear of Huang Chow than to fear of the law, and I presently gathered that he regarded Huang as responsible for the death not only of Cohen, but also of the Chinaman who was hauled out of the river about three weeks ago, as you well remember. The post-mortem showed that he had died of some kind of poisoning, and when we saw Cohen in the mortuary, his swollen appearance struck me as being very similar to that of the Chinaman. (See my report dated 31st ultimo.)

He finally agreed to talk if I would promise that he should not be charged and that his name should never be mentioned to anyone in connection with what he might tell me. I promised him that outside the ordinary official routine I would respect his request, and he told me some very curious things, which no doubt have a bearing on the case.

For instance, he had discovered—I don't know in what way—that the dead Chinaman, whose name was Pi Lung, had been in negotiation with Huang Chow for some sort of job in his warehouse. Poland had seen the

man talking to Huang's daughter, at the end of the alley which leads to the place. He seemed to attach extraordinary importance to this fact. At last:

"I'll tell you what it is," he said. "That Chink was a stranger to Limehouse; I can swear to it. He was a gent of his hands; I reckon they've got 'em in China as well as here. He went out for the old boy's money-box, and finished like Cohen finished."

"Make your meaning clearer," I said.

"My meaning's this: Old Huang Chow is the biggest dealer in stolen and smuggled valuables from overseas we've got in London. He's something else as well; he's a big swell in China. But here's the point. He's got business with buyers all over London, and they have to pay cash—no checks. He doesn't bank it: I've proved that. He's got it in gold, or diamonds, or something, being wise to present conditions, hidden there in the house. Pi Lung was after his hoard. He didn't get it. Cohen and me was after it. Where's Cohen?"

I agreed that it looked very suspicious, and presently:

"When I went in with Cohen," continued Poland, "I knew one thing he didn't know—a short cut into the warehouse. He's been playing pretty-like with Lala, old Huang's daughter, and it's my belief that he knew where the store was hidden; but he never told me. We knew there were special men on duty, and we'd arranged that I was to give a signal when the patrol had passed. Cohen all the time had planned to double on me. While I was watching down on the Causeway end he climbed up and got in through the skylight I'd shown him. When I got there he was missing, but the skylight was open. I started off after him."

Then Poland clutched me, and his fright was very real.

"I heard a shriek like nothing I ever heard in my life. I saw a light shine through the trap, and then I heard a sort of moaning. Last, I heard a bang, and the light went out. I staggered down the passage half silly, started to run, and ran straight into the arms of two coppers."

This evidence I thought was conclusive, and in accordance with your instructions I proceeded to Mr Isaacs in Dover Street. He didn't seem too pleased at my suggestion, but when I pointed out to him that one good turn deserved another, he agreed to give me an introduction to Huang Chow.

I adopted a very simple disguise, just altering my complexion and sticking on a moustache with spirit gum, hair by hair, and trimming it down

military fashion. Everything ran smoothly, and I seemed to make a fairly favourable impression upon Lala Huang, the Chinaman's daughter, who evidently interviews prospective customers before they are admitted to the warehouse.

She is a Eurasian and extremely good looking. But when I found myself in the room where old Huang keeps his treasures, I really thought I was dreaming. It's a collection that must be worth thousands. He showed me snuff-bottles, cut out of gems, and with a little opening no bigger than the hole in a pipe-stem, but with wonderful paintings done inside the bottles. He'd got a model of a pagoda made out of human teeth, and a big golden rug woven from the hair of Circassian slave girls. Excuse this, Chief Inspector; I know it is what you call the romantic stuff; but I think it would have impressed you if you had seen it.

Anyway, I bought a little enamelled box, in accordance with Mr Isaacs's instructions, although whether I succeeded in convincing Huang Chow that I knew anything about the matter is more than doubtful. He got up from a sort of throne he sits on, and led the way up a broad staircase to a private room above.

"Of course, you have brought the cash, Mr Hampden?" he said.

He speaks quite faultless English. He walked up three steps to a sort of raised writing-table in this upstairs room, and I counted out the money to him. When he sat at the table he faced toward the room, and I couldn't help thinking that, in his horn-rimmed spectacles, he looked like some old magistrate. He explained that he would pack the purchase for me, but that I must personally take it away. And:

"You understand," said he, "that you bought it from a gentleman who had purchased it abroad."

I said I quite understood. He bowed me out very politely, and presently I found myself back in the office with Lala Huang.

She seemed quite disposed to talk, and I chatted with her while the box was being packed for me to take away. I knew I must make good use of my time, but you have never given me a job I liked less. I mean, there is something very appealing about her, and I hated to think that I was playing a double game. However, without actually agreeing to see me again, she told me enough to enable me to meet her "accidentally," if I wanted to. Therefore, I am going to look out for her this evening, and probably take

her to a picture palace, or somewhere where we can have a quiet talk. She seems to be fancy free, and for some reason I feel sorry for the girl. I don't altogether like the job, but I hope to justify your faith in me, Chief.

I will prepare my official report this evening when I return.

Yours obediently,—JOHN DURHAM.

V. LALA HUANG

"No," said Lala Huang, "I don't like London—not this part of London."

"Where would you rather be?" asked Durham. "In China?"

Dusk had dropped its merciful curtain over Limehouse, and as the two paced slowly along West India Dock Road it seemed to the detective that a sort of glamour had crept into the scene.

He was a clever man within his limitations, and cultured up to a point; but he was not philosopher enough to know that he viewed the purlieus of Limehouse through a haze of Oriental mystery conjured up by the conversation of his companion. Temple bells there were in the clangour of the road cars. The smoke-stacks had a semblance of pagodas. Burma she had conjured up before him, and China, and the soft islands where she had first seen the light. For as well as a streak of European, there was Kanaka blood in Lala, which lent her an appeal quite new to Durham, insidious and therefore dangerous.

"Not China," she replied. "Somehow I don't think I shall ever see China again. But my father is rich, and it is dreadful to think that we live here when there are so many more beautiful places to live in."

"Then why does he stay?" asked Durham with curiosity.

"For money, always for money," answered Lala, shrugging her shoulders. "Yet if it is not to bring happiness, what good is it?"

"What good indeed?" murmured Durham.

"There is no fun for me," said the girl pathetically. "Sometimes someone nice comes to do business, but mostly they are Jews, Jews, always Jews, and———" Again she shrugged eloquently.

Durham perceived the very opening for which he had been seeking..

"You evidently don't like Jews," he said endeavouring to speak lightly.

"No," murmured the girl, "I don't think I do. Some are nice, though. I think it is the same with every kind of people—there are good and bad."

"Were you ever in America?" asked Durham.

"No."

"I was just thinking," he explained, "that I have known several American Jews who were quite good fellows."

"Yes?" said Lala, looking up at him naively, "I met one not long ago. He was not nice at all."

"Oh!" exclaimed Durham, startled by this admission, which he had not anticipated. "One of your father's customers?"

"Yes, a man named Cohen."

"Cohen?"

"A funny little chap," continued the girl. "He tried to make love to me." She lowered her lashes roguishly. "I knew all along he was pretending. He was a thief, I think. I was afraid of him."

Durham did some rapid thinking, then:

"Did you say his name was Cohen?" he asked.

"That was the name he gave."

"A man named Cohen, an American, was found dead in the river quite recently."

Lala stopped dead and clutched his arm.

"How do you know?" she demanded.

"There was a paragraph in this morning's paper."

She hesitated, then:

"Did it describe him?" she asked.

"No," replied Durham, "I don't think it did in detail. At least, the only part of the description which I remember is that he wore a large and valuable diamond on his left hand."

"Oh!" whispered Lala.

She released her grip of Durham's arm and went on.

"What?" he asked. "Did you think it was someone you knew?"

"I did know him," she replied simply. "The man who was found drowned. It is the same. I am sure now, because of the diamond ring. What paper did you read it in? I want to read it myself."

"I'm afraid I can't remember. It was probably the Daily Mail."

"Had he been drowned?"

"I presume so—yes," replied Durham guardedly.

Lala Huang was silent for some time while they paced on through the dusk. Then:

"How strange!" she said in a low voice.

"I am sorry I mentioned it," declared Durham. "But how was I to know it was your friend?"

"He was no friend of mine," returned the girl sharply. "I hated him. But it is strange nevertheless. I am sure he intended to rob my father."

"And is that why you think it strange?"

"Yes," she said, but her voice was almost inaudible.

They were come now to the narrow street communicating with the courtway in which the great treasure-house of Huang Chow was situated, and Lala stopped at the corner.

"It was nice of you to walk along with me," she said. "Do you live in Limehouse?"

"No," replied Durham, "I don't. As a matter of fact, I came down here to-night in the hope of seeing you again."

"Did you?"

The girl glanced up at him doubtfully, and his distaste for the task set him by his superior increased with the passing of every moment. He was a man of some imagination, a great reader, and ambitious professionally. He appreciated the fact that Chief Inspector Kerry looked for great things from him, but for this type of work he had little inclination.

There was too much chivalry in his make-up to enable him to play upon a woman's sentiments, even in the interests of justice. By whatever means the man Cohen had met his death, and whether or no the Chinaman Pi Lung had died by the same hand, Lala Huang was innocent of any complicity in these matters, he was perfectly well assured.

Doubts were to come later when he was away from her, when he had had leisure to consider that she might regard him in the light of a third potential rifler of her father's treasure-house. But at the moment, looking down into her dark eyes, he reproached himself and wondered where his true duty lay.

"It is so gray and dull and sordid here," said the girl, looking down the darkened street. "There is no one much to talk to."

"But you have your business interests to keep you employed during the day, after all."

"I hate it all. I hate it all."

"But you seem to have perfect freedom?"

"Yes. My mother, you see, was not Chinese."

"But you wish to leave Limehouse?"

"I do. I do. Just now it is not so bad, but in the winter how I tire of the gray skies, the endless drizzling rain. Oh!" She shrank back into the shadow of a doorway, clutching at Durham's arm. "Don't let Ah Fu see me."

"Ah Fu? Who is Ah Fu?" asked Durham, also drawing back as a furtive figure went slinking down the opposite side of the street.

"My father's servant. He let you in this morning."

"And why must he not see you?"

"I don't trust him. I think he tells my father things."

"What is it that he carries in his hand?"

"A birdcage, I expect."

"A birdcage?"

"Yes!"

He caught the gleam of her eyes as she looked up at him out of the shadow.

"Is he, then, a bird-fancier?"

"No, no, I can't explain because I don't understand myself. But Ah Fu goes to a place in Shadwell regularly and buys young birds, always very young ones and very little ones."

"For what or for whom?"

"I don't know."

"Have you an aviary in your house?"

"No."

"Do you mean that they disappear, these purchases of Ah Fu's?"

"I often see him carrying a cage of young birds, but we have no birds in the house."

"How perfectly extraordinary!" muttered Durham.

"I distrust Ah Fu," whispered the girl. "I am glad he did not see me with you."

"Young birds," murmured Durham absently. "What kind of young birds? Any particular breed?"

"No; canaries, linnets—all sorts. Isn't it funny?" The girl laughed in a childish way. "And now I think Ah Fu will have gone in, so I must say good

night."

But when presently Detective Durham found himself walking back along West India Dock Road, his mind's eye was set upon the slinking figure of a Chinaman carrying a birdcage.

VI. A HINT OF INCENSE

One Chinaman more or less does not make any very great difference to the authorities responsible for maintaining law and order in Limehouse. Asiatic settlers are at liberty to follow their national propensities, and to knife one another within reason. This is wisdom. Such recreations are allowed, if not encouraged, by all wise rulers of Eastern peoples.

"Found drowned," too, is a verdict which has covered many a dark mystery of old Thames, but "Found in the river, death having been due to the action of some poison unknown," is a finding which even in the case of a Chinaman is calculated to stimulate the jaded official mind.

New Scotland Yard had given Durham a roving commission, and had been justified in the fact that the second victim, and this time not a Chinaman, had been found under almost identical conditions. The link with the establishment of Huang Chow was incomplete, and Durham fully recognized that it was up to him to make it sound and incontestable.

Jim Poland was not the only man in the East End who knew that the dead Chinaman had been in negotiation with Huang Chow. Kerry knew it, and had passed the information on to Durham.

Some mystery surrounded the life of the old dealer, who was said to be a mandarin of high rank, but his exact association with the deaths first of the Chinaman Pi Lung, and second of Cohen, remained to be proved. Certain critics have declared the Metropolitan detective service to be obsolete and inefficient. Kerry, as a potential superintendent, resented these criticisms, and in his protege Durham, perceived a member of the new generation who was likely in time to produce results calculated to remove this stigma.

Durham recognized that a greater responsibility rested upon his shoulders than the actual importance of the case might have indicated; and now,

proceeding warily along the deserted streets, he found his brain to be extraordinarily active and his imagination very much alive.

There is a night life in Limehouse, as he had learned, but it is a mole life, a subterranean life, of which no sign appears above ground after a certain hour. Nevertheless, as he entered the area which harbours those strange, hidden resorts the rumour of which has served to create the glamour of Chinatown, he found himself to be thinking of the great influence said to be wielded by Huang Chow, and wondering if unseen spies watched his movements.

Lala was Oriental, and now, alone in the night, distrust leapt into being within him. He had been attracted by her and had pitied her. He told himself now that this was because of her dark beauty and the essentially feminine appeal which she made. She was perhaps a vampire of the most dangerous sort, one who lured men to strange deaths for some sinister object beyond reach of a Western imagination.

He found himself doubting the success of those tactics upon which, earlier in the day, he had congratulated himself. Perhaps beneath the guise of Hampden, who bought antique furniture on commission, those cunning old eyes beneath the horn-rimmed spectacles had perceived the detective hidden, or at least had marked subterfuge.

While he could not count Lala a conquest—for he had not even attempted to make love to her—the ease with which he had developed the acquaintance now, afforded matter for suspicion.

At the entrance to the court communicating with the establishment of Huang Chow he paused, looking cautiously about him. The men on the Limehouse beats had been warned of the investigation afoot tonight, and there was a plain-clothes man on point duty at no great distance away, although carefully hidden, so that Durham had quite failed to detect his presence.

Durham wore rough clothes and rubber-soled shoes; and now, as he entered the court, he was thinking of the official report of the police sergeant who, not so many hours before, had paid a visit to the house of Huang Chow in order to question him respecting his knowledge of the dead man Cohen, and to learn when last he had seen him.

Old Huang, who had received his caller in the large room upstairs, the room which boasted the presence of the writing- dais, had exhibited no

trace of confusion, assuring the sergeant that he had not seen the man Cohen for several days. Cohen had come to him with an American introduction, which he, Huang, believed to be forged, and had wanted him to undertake a shady agency, respecting the details of which he remained peculiarly reticent. In short, nothing had been gained by this official interrogation, and Huang blandly denied any knowledge of an attempted burglary of his establishment.

"What have I to lose?" he had asked the inquirer. "A lot of old lumber which I have accumulated during many years, and a reputation for being wealthy, due to my lonely habits and to the ignorance of those who live around me."

Durham, mentally reviewing the words of the report, reconstructed the scene in his mind; and now, having come to the end of the lane where the iron post rested, he stood staring up at a place in the ancient wall where several bricks had decayed, and where it was possible, according to the statement of the man Poland, to climb up on to a piece of sloping roof, and thence gain the skylight through which Cohen had obtained admittance on the night of his death.

He made sure that his automatic pistol was in his pocket, questioned the dull sounds of the riverside for a moment, looking about him anxiously, and then, using the leaning post as a stepping-stone, he succeeded in wedging his foot into a crevice in the wall. By the exercise of some agility he scrambled up to the top, and presently found himself lying upon a sloping roof.

The skylight remained well out of reach, but his rubber-soled shoes enabled him to creep up the slates until he could grasp the framework with his hands. Presently he found himself perched upon the trap which, if his information could be relied upon, possessed no fastener, or one so faulty that the trap could be raised by means of a brad-awl. He carried one in his pocket, and, screwing it into the framework, he lifted it cautiously, making very little noise.

The trap opened, and up to his nostrils there stole a queer, indefinable odour, partly that which belongs to old Oriental furniture and stuffs, but having mingled with it a hint of incense and of something else not so easily named. He recognized the smell of that strange store-room, which, as Mr Hampden, he had recently visited.

For one moment he thought he could detect the distant note of a bell. But, listening, he heard nothing, and was reassured.

He rested the trap back against the frame, and shone the ray of an electric torch down into the darkness beneath him. The light fell upon the top of a low carven table, dragon-legged and gilded. Upon it rested the model pagoda constructed of human teeth, and there was something in this discovery which made Durham feel inclined to shudder. However, the impulse was only a passing one.

He measured the distance with his eye. The little table stood beside a deep divan, and he saw that with care it would be possible to drop upon this divan without making much noise. He calculated its exact position before replacing the torch in his pocket, and then, resting back against one side of the frame, he clutched the other with his hands. He wriggled gradually down until further purchase became impossible. He then let himself drop, and swung for a moment by his hands before releasing his hold.

He fell, as he had calculated, upon the divan. It creaked ominously. Catching his foot in the cushions, he stumbled and lay forward for a moment upon his face, listening intently.

The room was very hot but nothing stirred.

VII. THE SCUFFLING SOUND

Detective Durham, as he lay there inhaling the peculiar perfume of the place, recognized that he had put himself outside the pale of official protection, and was become technically a burglar.

He wondered if Chief Inspector Kerry would have approved; but he had outlined this plan of investigation for himself, and knew well that, if it were crowned by success, the end would be regarded as having justified the means. On the other hand, in the event of detention he must personally bear the consequences of such irregular behaviour. He knew well, however, that his celebrated superior had achieved promotion by methods at least as irregular; and he knew that if he could but obtain evidence to account for the death of the man Cohen, and of the Chinaman Pi Lung, who had

preceded him by the same mysterious path, the way of his obtaining it would not be too closely questioned.

He was an ambitious man, and consequently one who took big chances. Nothing disturbed the silence; he sat upon the divan and again pressed the button of his torch, shining it all about the low-beamed apartment and peering curiously into the weird shadows of the place. He calculated he was now in the position which Cohen had occupied during the last moments of his life, and a sense of the uncanny touched him coldly.

As he thought of the unnatural screams spoken of by Poland, some strange instinct prompted him to curl up his feet upon the divan again, as though a secret menace crawled upon the floor amid its many rugs and carpets.

He must now endeavour to reconstruct the plan upon which the American cracksman had operated. Poland had a persistent belief that Cohen had known where the fabled hoard of Huang Chow was concealed.

Durham began a deliberate inspection of the place. He thought it unlikely that a wily old Chinaman, assuming that he possessed hidden wealth, would keep it in so accessible a spot as this. It was far more probable that he had a fireproof safe in the room upstairs, perhaps built into the wall. Yet, according to Poland's account, it was in this room and not in any other that death came to Diamond Fred.

The wall-hangings first engaged Durham's attention. He moved them aside systematically, one after another, seeking for any hiding-place, but failing to find one. The door communicating with the outer office he found to be locked, but he did not believe for a moment that the office would be worthy of inspection.

There were cases containing jewelled weapons and cups and goblets inlaid with precious stones, but none of these seemed to have been tampered with, and all were locked, as was the big cabinet filled with snuff bottles.

Many of the larger pieces about the place contained drawers and cupboards, and these he systematically opened one after another, without making any discovery of note. Some of the cupboards contained broken pieces of crockery, and more or less damaged curios of one kind and another, but none of them gave him the clue for which he was seeking.

He examined the couch upon which Huang Chow had been seated when first he had met him, but although he searched it scientifically he was rewarded by no discovery.

A very fusty and unpleasant smell was more noticeable at this point than elsewhere in the room, and he found himself staring speculatively up the wide, carpeted stairs. Next he turned his attention to the lacquered coffin which occupied the corresponding recess to that filled by the couch. It was an extraordinarily ornate piece of lacquer work and probably of great value.

The lid appeared to be screwed on, and Durham stood staring at the thing, half revolted and half fascinated. He failed to discover any means of opening it, however, and when he tried to move it bodily found it very heavy. He came to the conclusion that all the portable valuables were contained in locked cases or cabinets, and out of this discovery grew an idea.

The case containing the snuff bottles stood too close to the wall to enable him to test his new theory, but a square case near the office door, in which were five of six small but almost priceless pieces of porcelain, afforded the very evidence for which he was looking.

Thin electric flex descended from somewhere inside the case down one of the legs of the pedestal, and through a neatly drilled hole in the floor, evidently placed there to accommodate it.

"Burglar alarm!" he muttered.

The opening of this case, and doubtless of any of the others, would set alarm bells ringing. This was not an unimportant discovery, but it brought him very little nearer to a solution of the chief problem which engaged his mind. Assuming that Cohen had opened one of the cases and had alarmed old Huang Chow, what steps had the latter taken to deal with the intruder which had resulted in so ghastly a death? And how had he disposed of the body?

As Durham stood there musing and looking down through the plate- glass at the delicate porcelain beneath, a faint sound intruded itself upon the stillness. It gave him another idea. Part of the floor was stone-paved, but part was wood.

Upon a portion of the latter, where no carpet rested, Durham dropped flat, pressing his ear to the floor.

A faint swishing and trickling sound was perceptible from some place beneath.

"Ah!" he murmured.

Remembering that the premises almost overhung the Thames, he divined that the cellars were flooded at high tide, or that there was some kind of drain or cutting running underneath the house.

He stood up again, listening intently for any sound within the building. He thought he had detected something, and now, as he stood there alert, he heard it again—a faint scuffling, which might have been occasioned by rats or even mice, but which, in some subtle and very unpleasant way, did not suggest the movements of these familiar rodents.

Even as he perceived it, it ceased, leaving him wondering, and uncomfortably conscious of a sudden dread of his surroundings. He wondered in what part of this mysterious house Lala resided, and recognizing that his departure must leave traces, he determined to prosecute his inquiries as far as possible, since another opportunity might not arise.

He was baffled but still hopeful. Something there was in the smell of the place which threatened to unnerve him; or perhaps in its silence, which remained quite unbroken save when, by acute listening, one detected the dripping of water.

That unexplained scuffling sound, too, which he had failed to trace or identify, lingered in his memory insistently, and for some reason contained the elements of fear.

He crossed the room and began softly to mount the stair. It creaked only slightly, and the door at the top proved to be ajar. He peeped in, to find the place empty. It was a typical Chinese apartment, containing very little furniture, the raised desk being the most noticeable item, except for a small shrine which faced it on the other side of the room.

He mounted the steps to the desk and inspected a number of loose papers which lay upon it. Without exception they were written in Chinese. A sort of large, dull white blotting-pad lay upon the table, but its surface was smooth and glossy.

Over it was suspended what looked like a lampshade, but on inspection it proved to contain no lamp, but to communicate, by a sort of funnel, with the ceiling above.

At this contrivance Durham stared long and curiously, but without coming to any conclusion respecting its purpose. He might have investigated further, but he became aware of a dull and regular sound in the room behind him.

He turned in a flash, staring in the direction of two curtains draped before what he supposed to be a door.

On tiptoe he crossed and gently drew the curtains aside.

He looked into a small, cell-like room, lighted by one window, where upon a low bed Huang Chow lay sleeping peacefully!

Durham almost held his breath; then, withdrawing as quietly as he had approached, he descended the stair. At the foot his attention was again arrested by the faint scuffling sound. It ceased as suddenly as it had begun, leaving him wondering and conscious anew of a chill of apprehension.

He had already made his plans for departure, but knew that they must leave evidence, when discovered, of his visit.

A large and solid table stood near the divan, and he moved this immediately under the trap. Upon it he laid a leopard-skin to deaden any noise he might make, and then upon the leopard-skin he set a massive chair: he replaced his torch in his pocket and drew himself up on to the roof again. Reclosing the trap by means of the awl which he had screwed into it, he removed the awl and placed it in his pocket.

Then, sliding gently down the sloping roof, he dropped back into the deserted court.

VIII. A CAGE OF BIRDS

"No," said Lala, "we have never had robbers in the house." She looked up at Durham naively. "You are not a thief, are you?" she asked.

"No, I assure you I am not," he answered, and felt himself flushing to the roots of his hair.

They were seated in a teashop patronized by the workers of the district; and as Durham, his elbows resting on the marble-topped table, looked into the dark eyes of his companion, he told himself again that whatever might be the secrets of old Huang Chow, his daughter did not share them.

The Chinaman had made no report to the authorities, although the piled up furniture beneath the skylight must have afforded conclusive evidence that a burglarious entry had been made into the premises.

"I should feel very nervous," Durham declared, "with all those valuables in the house."

"I feel nervous about my father," the girl answered in a low voice. "His room opens out of the warehouse, but mine is shut away in another part of the building. And Ah Fu sleeps behind the office."

"Were you not afraid when you suspected that Cohen was a burglar? You told me yourself that you did suspect him."

"Yes, I spoke to my father about it."

"And what did he say?"

"Oh"—she shrugged her shoulders—"he just smiled and told me not to worry."

"And that was the last you heard about the matter?"

"Yes, until you told me he was dead."

Again he questioned the dark eyes and again was baffled. He felt tempted, and not for the first time, to throw up the case. After all, it rested upon very slender data—the mysterious death of a Chinaman whose history was unknown and the story of a crook whose word was worth nothing.

Finally he asked himself, as he had asked himself before, what did it matter? If old Huang Chow had disposed of these people in some strange manner, they had sought to rob him. The morality of the case was complicated and obscure, and more and more he was falling under the spell of Lala's dark eyes.

But always it was his professional pride which came to the rescue. Murder had been done, whether justifiably or otherwise, and to him had been entrusted the discovery of the murderer. It seemed that failure was to be his lot, for if Lala knew anything she was a most consummate actress, and if she did not, his last hope of information was gone.

He would have liked nothing better than to be rid of the affair, provided he could throw up the case with a clear conscience. But when presently he parted from the attractive Eurasian, and watched her slim figure as, turning, she waved her hand and disappeared round a corner, he knew that rest was not for him.

He had discovered the emporium of a Shadwell live-stock dealer with whom Ah Fu had a standing order for newly fledged birds of all descriptions. Purchases apparently were always made after dusk, and Ah Fu with his birdcage was due that evening.

A scheme having suggested itself to Durham, he now proceeded to put it into execution, so that when dusk came, and Ah Fu, carrying an empty birdcage, set out from the house of Huang Chow, a very dirty-looking loafer passed the corner of the street at about the time that the Chinaman came slinking out.

Durham had mentally calculated that Ah Fu would be gone about half an hour upon his mysterious errand, but the Chinaman travelled faster than he had calculated.

Just as he was about to climb up once more on to the sloping roof, he heard the pattering footsteps returning to the courtyard, although rather less than twenty minutes had elapsed since the man had set out.

Durham darted round the corner and waited until he heard the door closed; then, returning, he scrambled up on to the roof, creeping forward until he was lying looking down through the skylight into the darkened room below.

For ten minutes or more he waited, until he began to feel cramped and uncomfortable. Then that happened which he had hoped and anticipated would happen. The place beneath became illuminated, not fully, by means of the hanging lamps, but dimly so that distorted shadows were cast about the floor. Someone had entered carrying a lantern.

Durham's view-point limited his area of vision, but presently, as the light came nearer and nearer, he discerned Ah Fu, carrying a lantern in one hand and a birdcage in the other. He could hear nothing, for the trap fitted well and the glass was thick. Moreover, it was very dirty. He was afraid, however, to attempt to clean a space.

Ah Fu apparently had set the lantern upon a table, and into the radius of its light there presently moved a stooping figure. Durham recognized Huang Chow, and felt his heart beats increasing in rapidity.

Clutching the framework of the trap with his hands, he moved his head cautiously, so that presently he was enabled to see the two Chinamen. They were standing beside the lacquered coffin upon its dragon-legged pedestal. Durham stifled an exclamation.

One end of the ornate sarcophagus had been opened in some way!

Now, to the watcher's unbounded astonishment, Ah Fu placed the birdcage in the opening, and apparently reclosed the trap in the end of the coffin. He made other manipulations with his bony yellow fingers, which Durham failed to comprehend. Finally the birdcage was withdrawn again, and as it was passed before the light of the lantern he saw that it was empty, whereas previously it had contained a number of tiny birds all huddled up together!

The light gleamed upon the spectacles of Huang Chow. Watching him, Durham saw him take out from a hidden drawer in the pedestal a long, slender key, insert it in a lock concealed by the ornate carving, and then slightly raise the lid which had so recently defied his own efforts.

He raised it only a few inches, and then, taking up the lantern, peered into the interior of the coffin, at the same time waving his hand in dismissal to Ah Fu. For a while he stood there, peering into the interior, and then, lowering the lid again, he relocked this gruesome receptacle and, lantern in hand, began to mount the stair.

Durham inhaled deeply. He realized that during the last few seconds he had been holding his breath. Now, as he began to creep back down the slope, he discovered that his hands were shaking.

He dropped down into the court again, and for several minutes leaned against the wall, endeavouring to reason out an explanation of what he had seen, and in a measure to regain his composure.

There was a horror underlying it all which he was half afraid to face. But the real clue to the mystery still eluded him.

Whether what he had witnessed were some kind of obscene ceremony, or whether an explanation more vile must be sought, he remained undetermined. He must repeat his exploit, if possible, and once more gain access to the room which contained the lacquer coffin.

But the adventure was very distasteful. He recollected the smell of the place, and the memory brought with it a sense of nausea. He thought of Lala Huang, and his ideas became grotesque and chaotic. Yet the solution of the mystery lay at last within his grasp, and to the zest of the investigator everything else became subjugated.

He walked slowly away, silent in his rubber-soled shoes.

IX. THE PICTURE ON THE PAD

Lala Huang lay listening to the vague sounds which disturbed the silence of the night. Presently her thoughts made her sigh wearily. During the lifetime of her mother, who had died while Lala was yet a little girl, life had been different and so much brighter.

She imagined that in the mingled sounds of dock and river which came to her she could hear the roar of surf upon a golden beach. The stuffy air of Limehouse took on the hot fragrance of a tropic island, and she sighed again, but this time rapturously, for in spirit she was a child once more, lulled by the voice of the great Pacific.

Young as she was, the death of her mother had been a blow from which it had taken her several years to recover. Then had commenced those long travels with her father, from port to port, from ocean to ocean, sometimes settling awhile, but ever moving onward, onward.

He had had her educated after a fashion, and his love for her she did not doubt. But her mother's blood spoke more strongly than that part of her which was Chinese, and there was softness and a delicious languor in her nature which her father did not seem to understand, and of which he did not appear to approve.

She knew that he was wealthy. She knew that his ways were not straight ways, although that part of his business to which he had admitted her as an assistant, and an able one, was legitimate enough, or so it seemed.

Consignments of goods arrived at strange hours of the night at the establishment in Limehouse, and from this side of her father's transactions she was barred. The big double doors opening on the little courtyard would be opened by Ah Fu, and packing cases of varying sizes be taken in. Sometimes the sounds of these activities would reach her in her room in a distant part of the house; but only in the morning would she recognize their significance, when in the warehouse she would discover that some new and choice pieces had arrived.

She wondered with what object her father accumulated wealth, and hoped, against the promptings of her common sense, that he designed to

return East, there to seek a retirement amidst the familiar and the beautiful things of the Orient which belonged to Lala's dream of heaven.

Stories about her father often reached her ears. She knew that he had held high rank in China before she had been born; but that he had sacrificed his rights in some way had always been her theory. She had been too young to understand the stories which her mother had told her sometimes; but that there were traits in the character of Huang Chow which it was not good for his daughter to know she appreciated and accepted as a secret sorrow.

He allowed her all the freedom to which her education entitled her. Her life was that of a European and not of an Oriental woman. She loved him in a way, but also feared him. She feared the dark and cruel side of his character, of which, at various periods during their life together, she had had terrifying glimpses.

She had decided that cruelty was his vice. In what way he gratified it she had never learned, nor did she desire to do so. There were periodical visits from the police, but she had learned long ago that her father was too clever to place himself within reach of the law.

However crooked one part of his business methods might be, his dealings with his clients were straight enough, so that no one had any object in betraying him; and the legality or otherwise of his foreign relations evidently afforded no case against him upon which the authorities could act, or upon which they cared to act.

In America it had been graft which had protected him. She had learned this accidentally, but never knew whether he bought his immunity in the same way in London.

Some of the rumours which reached her were terrifying. Latterly she had met many strange glances in her comings and goings about Limehouse. This peculiar atmosphere had always preceded the break-up of every home which they had shared. She divined the fact that in some way Huang Chow had outstayed his welcome in Chinatown, London. Where their next resting-place would be she could not imagine, but she prayed that it might be in some more sunny clime.

She found herself to be thinking over much of John Hampden. His bona fides were not above suspicion, but she could scarcely expect to meet a really white man in such an environment.

Lala would have liked to think that he was white, but could not force herself to do so. She would have liked to think that he sought her company because she appealed to him personally; but she had detected the fact that another motive underlay his attentions. She wondered if he could be another of those moths drawn by the light of that fabled wealth of her father.

It was curious, she reflected, that Huang Chow never checked— indeed, openly countenanced—her friendship with the many chance acquaintances she had made, even when her own instincts told her that the men were crooked; so that, knowing the acumen of her father, she was well aware that he must know it too.

Several of these pseudo lovers of hers had died. It was a point which often occurred to her mind, but upon which she did not care to dwell even now. But John Hampden—John Hampden was different. He was not wholly sincere. She sighed wearily. But nevertheless he was not like some of the others.

She started up in bed, seized with a sudden dreadful idea. He was a detective!

She understood now why she had found so much that was white in him, but so much that was false. His presence seemed to be very near her. Something caressing in his voice echoed in her mind. She found herself to be listening to the muted sounds of Limehouse and of the waterway which flowed so close beside her.

That old longing for the home of her childhood returned tenfold, and tears began to trickle down her cheeks. She was falling in love with this man whose object was her father's ruin. A cold terror clutched at her heart. Even now, while their friendship was so new, so strange, there was a query, a stark, terrifying query, to stand up before her.

If put to the test, which would she choose?

She was unable to face that issue, and dropped back upon her pillow, stifling a sob.

Yes, he was a detective. In some way her father had at last attracted the serious attention of the law. Rumours of this were flying round Chinatown, to which she had not been entirely deaf. She thought of a hundred questions, a hundred silences, and grew more and more convinced of the truth.

What did he mean to do? Before her a ghostly company uprose—the shadows of some she had known with designs upon her father. John Hampden's design was different. But might he not join that mysterious company?

Now again she suddenly sprang upright, this time because of a definite sound which had reached her ears from within the house: a very faint, bell-like tinkling which ceased almost immediately. She had heard it one night before, and quite recently; indeed, on the night before she had met John Hampden. Cohen—Cohen, the Jew, had died that night!

She sprang lightly on to the floor, found her slippers, and threw a silk kimono over her nightrobe. She tiptoed cautiously to the door and opened it.

It was at this very moment that old Huang Chow, asleep in his cell-like apartment, was aroused by the tinkling of a bell set immediately above his head. He awoke instantly, raised his hand and stopped the bell. His expression, could anyone have been present to see it, was a thing unpleasant to behold. Triumph was in it, and cunning cruelty.

His long yellow fingers reached out for his hornrimmed spectacles which lay upon a little table beside him. Adjusting them, he pulled the curtains aside and shuffled silently across the large room.

Mounting the steps to the raised writing-table, he rested his elbows upon it, and peered down at that curious blotting-pad which had so provoked the curiosity of Durham. Could Durham have seen it now the mystery must have been solved. It was an ingenious camera obscura apparatus, and dimly depicted upon its surface appeared a reproduction of part of the storehouse beneath! The part of it which was visible was that touched by the light of an electric torch, carried by a man crossing the floor in the direction of the lacquered coffin upon the gilded pedestal!

Old Huang Chow chuckled silently, and his yellow fingers clutched the table edge as he moved to peer more closely into the picture.

"Poor fool!" he whispered in Chinese. "Poor fool!"

It was the man who had come with the introduction from Mr Isaacs—a new impostor who sought to rob him, who sought to obtain information from his daughter, who had examined his premises last night, and had even penetrated upstairs, so that he, old Huang Chow, had been compelled to

disconnect the apparatus and to feign sleep under the scrutiny of the intruder.

To-night it would be otherwise. To-night it would be otherwise.

X. THE LACQUERED COFFIN

Durham gently raised the trap in the roof of Huang Chow's treasure-house. He was prepared for snares and pitfalls. No sane man, on the evidence which he, Durham, had been compelled to leave behind, would have neglected to fasten the skylight which so obviously afforded a means of entrance into his premises.

Therefore, he was expected to return. The devilish mechanism was set ready to receive him. But the artist within him demanded that he should unmask the mystery with his own hands.

Moreover, he doubted that an official visit, even now, would yield any results. Old Huang Chow was too cunning for that. If he was to learn how the man Cohen had died, he must follow the same path to the bitter end. But there were men on duty round the house, and he believed that he had placed them so secretly as to deceive even this master of cunning with whom he was dealing.

He repeated his exploit, dropping with a dull thud upon the cushioned divan. Then, having lain there listening awhile, he pressed the button of his torch, and, standing up, crept across the room in the direction of the stairway.

Here he paused awhile, listening intently. The image of Lala Huang arose before his mind's eye reproachfully, but he crushed the reproach, and advanced until he stood beside the lacquered coffin.

He remembered where the key was hidden, and, stooping, he fumbled for a while and then found it. He was acutely conscious of an unnameable fear. He felt that he was watched, and yet was unwilling to believe it. The musty and unpleasant smell which he had noticed before became extremely perceptible.

He quietly sought for the hidden lock, and, presently finding it, inserted the key, then paused awhile. He rested his torch upon the cushions of the

divan where the light shone directly upon the coffin. Then, having his automatic in his left hand, he turned the key.

He had expected now to be able to raise the lid as he had seen Huang Chow do; but the result was far more surprising.

The lid, together with a second framework of fine netting, flew open with a resounding bang; and from the interior of the coffin uprose a most abominable stench.

Durham started back a step, and as he did so witnessed a sight which turned him sick with horror.

Out on to the edge of the coffin leapt the most gigantic spider which he had ever seen in his life! It had a body as big as a man's fist, jet black, with hairy legs like the legs of a crab and a span of a foot or more!

A moment it poised there, while he swayed, sick with horror. Then, unhesitatingly, it leapt for his face!

He groaned and fired, missed the horror, but diverted its leap, so that it fell with a sickening thud a yard behind him. He turned, staggering back towards the stair, and aware that a light had shone out from somewhere.

A door had been opened only a few yards from where he stood, and there, framed in the opening, was Lala Huang, her eyes wide with terror and her gaze set upon him across the room.

"You!" she whispered. "You!"

"Go back!" he cried hoarsely. "Go back! Close the door. You don't understand—close the door!"

Her gaze set wildly upon him, Lala staggered forward; stopped dead; looked down at her bare ankle, and then, seeing the thing which had fastened upon her, uttered a piercing shriek which rang throughout the place.

At which moment the floor slid away beneath Durham, and he found himself falling—falling—and then battling for life in evil- smelling water, amidst absolute darkness.

Police whistles were skirling around the house of Huang Chow. As the hidden men came running into the court:

"You heard the shot?" cried the sergeant in charge. "I warned him not to go alone. Don't waste time on the door. One man stay on duty there; the rest of you follow me."

In a few moments, led by the sergeant, the party came dropping heavily through the skylight into the treasure-house of Huang Chow, in which every lamp was now alight. A trap was open near the foot of the stairs, and from beneath it muffled cries proceeded. In this direction the sergeant headed. Craning over the trap:

"Hallo, Mr Durham!" he called. "Mr Durham!"

"Get a rope and a ladder," came a faint cry from below. "I can just touch bottom with my feet and keep my head above water, but the tide's coming in. Look to the girl, though, first. Look to the girl!"

The sergeant turned to where, stretched upon a tiger skin before a half-open door, Lala Huang lay, scantily clothed and white as death.

Upon one of her bare ankles was a discoloured mark.

As the sergeant and another of the men stooped over her a moaning sound drew their attention to the stair, and there, bent and tottering slowly down, was old Huang Chow, his eyes peering through the owl-like glasses vacantly across the room to where his daughter lay.

"My God!" whispered the sergeant, upon one knee beside her. He looked blankly into the face of the other man. "She's dead!"

Two plain-clothes men were busy knotting together tapestries and pieces of rare stuff with which to draw Durham out of the pit; but at these old Huang Chow looked not at all, but gropingly crossed the room, as if he saw imperfectly, or could not believe what he saw. At last he reached the side of the dead girl, stooped, touched her, laid a trembling yellow hand over her heart, and then stood up again, looking from face to face.

Ignoring the mingled activities about him, he crossed to the open coffin and began to fumble amongst the putrefying mass of bones and webbing which lay therein. Out from this he presently drew an iron coffer.

Carrying it across the room he opened the lid. It was full almost to the top with uncut gems of every variety—diamonds, rubies, sapphires, emeralds, topaz, amethysts, flashing greenly, redly, whitely. In handfuls he grasped them and sprinkled them upon the body of the dead girl.

"For you," he crooned brokenly in Chinese. "They were all for you!"

The extemporized rope had just been lowered to Durham, when:

"My God!" cried the sergeant, looking over Huang Chow's shoulder. "What's that?"

He had seen the giant spider, the horror from Surinam, which the Chinaman had reared and fed to guard his treasure and to gratify his lust for the strange and cruel. The insect, like everything else in that house, was unusual, almost unique. It was one of the Black Soldier spiders, by some regarded as a native myth, but actually existing in Surinam and parts of Brazil. A member of the family, Mygale, its sting was more quickly and certainly fatal than that of a rattle-snake. Its instinct was fearlessly to attack any creature, great or small, which disturbed it in its dark hiding-place.

Now, with feverish, horrible rapidity it was racing up the tapestries on the other side of the room.

"Merciful God!" groaned the sergeant.

Snatching a revolver from his pocket he fired shot after shot. The third hit the thing but did not kill it. It dropped back upon the floor and began to crawl toward the coffin. The sergeant ran across and at close quarters shot it again.

Red blood oozed out from the hideous black body and began to form a deep stain upon the carpet.

When Durham, drenched but unhurt, was hauled back into the treasure-house, he did not speak, but, scrambling into the room stood—pallid—staring dully at old Huang Chow.

Huang Chow, upon his knees beside his daughter, was engaged in sprinkling priceless jewels over her still body, and murmuring in Chinese:

"For you, for you, Lala. They were all for you."

KERRY'S KID

I. RED KERRY ON DUTY

Chief Inspector Kerry came down from the top of a motor-bus and stood on the sidewalk for a while gazing to right and left along Piccadilly. The night was humid and misty, now threatening fog and now rain. Many

travellers were abroad at this Christmas season, the pleasure seekers easily to be distinguished from those whom business had detained in town, and who hurried toward their various firesides. The theatres were disgorging their audiences. Streams of lighted cars bore parties supperward; less pretentious taxicabs formed links in the chain.

From the little huddled crowd of more economical theatre-goers who waited at the stopping place of the motor-buses, Kerry detached himself, walking slowly along westward and staring reflectively about him. Opposite the corner of Bond Street he stood still, swinging his malacca cane and gazing fixedly along this narrow bazaar street of the Baghdad of the West. His trim, athletic figure was muffled in a big, double-breasted, woolly overcoat, the collar turned up about his ears. His neat bowler hat was tilted forward so as to shade the fierce blue eyes. Indeed, in that imperfect light, little of the Chief Inspector's countenance was visible except his large, gleaming white teeth, which he constantly revealed in the act of industriously chewing mint gum.

He smiled as he chewed. Duty had called him out into the mist, and for once he had obeyed reluctantly. That very afternoon had seen the return of Dan Kerry, junior, home from school for the Christmas vacation, and Dan was the apple of his father's eye.

Mrs Kerry had reserved her dour Scottish comments upon the boy's school report for a more seemly occasion than the first day of his holidays; but Kerry had made no attempt to conceal his jubilation—almost immoral, his wife had declared it to be— respecting the lad's athletic record. His work on the junior left wing had gained the commendation of a celebrated international; and Kerry, who had interviewed the gymnasium instructor, had learned that Dan Junior bade fair to become an amateur boxer of distinction.

"He is faster on his feet than any boy I ever handled," the expert had declared. "He hasn't got the weight behind it yet, of course, but he's developing a left that's going to make history. I'm of opinion that there isn't a boy in the seniors can take him on, and I'll say that he's a credit to you."

Those words had fallen more sweetly upon the ears of Chief Inspector Kerry than any encomium of the boy's learning could have done. On the purely scholastic side his report was not a good one, admittedly. "But," murmured Kerry aloud, "he's going to be a man."

He remembered that he had promised, despite the lateness of the hour, to telephone the lad directly he had received a certain report, and to tell him whether he might wait up for his return or whether he must turn in. Kerry, stamping his small, neatly shod feet upon the pavement, smiled agreeably. He was thinking of the telephone which recently he had had installed in his house in Brixton. His wife had demanded this as a Christmas box, pointing out how many uneasy hours she would be spared by the installation. Kerry had consented cheerfully enough, for was he not shortly to be promoted to the exalted post of a superintendent of the Criminal Investigation Department?

These reflections were cheering and warming; and, waiting until a gap occurred in the stream of cabs and cars, he crossed Piccadilly and proceeded along Bond Street, swinging his shoulders in a manner which would have enabled any constable in the force to recognize "Red Kerry" at a hundred yards.

The fierce eyes scrutinized the occupants of all the lighted cars. At pedestrians also he stared curiously, and at another smaller group of travellers waiting for the buses on the left- hand side of the street he looked hard and long. He pursued his way, acknowledged the salutation of a porter who stood outside the entrance to the Embassy Club, and proceeded, glancing about him right and left and with some evident and definite purpose.

A constable standing at the corner of Conduit Street touched his helmet as Kerry passed and the light of an arc-lamp revealed the fierce red face. The Chief Inspector stopped, turned, and:

"What the devil's the idea?" he demanded.

He snapped out the words in such fashion that the unfortunate constable almost believed he could see sparks in the misty air.

"I'm sorry, sir, but recognizing you suddenly like, I——"

"You did?" the fierce voice interrupted. "How long in the force?"

"Six months, sir."

"Never salute an officer in plain clothes."

"I know, sir."

"Then why did you do it?"

"I told you, sir."

"Then tell me again."

"I forgot."

"You're paid to remember; bear it in mind."

Kerry tucked his malacca under his arm and walked on, leaving the unfortunate policeman literally stupefied by his first encounter with the celebrated Chief Inspector.

Presently another line of cars proclaimed the entrance to a club, and just before reaching the first of these Kerry paused. A man stood in a shadowy doorway, and:

"Good evening, Chief Inspector," he said quietly.

"Good evening, Durham. Anything to report?"

"Yes. Lou Chada is here again."

"With whom?"

"Lady Rourke."

Kerry stepped to the edge of the pavement and spat out a piece of chewing-gum. From his overcoat pocket he drew a fresh piece, tore off the pink wrapping and placed the gum between his teeth. Then:

"How long?" he demanded.

"Came to dinner. They are dancing."

"H'm!" The Chief Inspector ranged himself beside the other detective in the shadow of the doorway. "Something's brewing, Durham," he said. "I think I shall wait."

His subordinate stared curiously but made no reply. He was not wholly in his chief's confidence. He merely knew that the name of Lou Chada to Kerry was like a red rag to a bull. The handsome, cultured young Eurasian, fresh from a distinguished university career and pampered by a certain section of smart society, did not conform to Detective Sergeant Durham's idea of a suspect. He knew that Lou was the son of Zani Chada, and he knew that Zani Chada was one of the wealthiest men in Limehouse. But Lou had an expensive flat in George Street; Lou was courted by society butterflies, and in what way he could be connected with the case known as "the Limehouse inquiry," Durham could not imagine.

That the open indiscretion of Lady "Pat" Rourke might lead to trouble with her husband, was conceivable enough; but this was rather a matter for underhand private inquiry than for the attention of the Criminal Investigation Department of New Scotland Yard.

So mused Durham, standing cold and uncomfortable in the shadowy doorway, and dreaming of a certain cosy fireside, a pair of carpet slippers and a glass of hot toddy which awaited him. Suddenly:

"Great flames! Look!" he cried.

Kerry's fingers closed, steely, upon Durham's wrist. A porter was urgently moving the parked cars farther along the street to enable one, a French coupe, to draw up before the club entrance.

Two men came out, supporting between them a woman who seemed to be ill; a slender, blonde woman whose pretty face was pale and whose wide-open blue eyes stared strangely straight before her. The taller of her escorts, while continuing to support her, solicitously wrapped her fur cloak about her bare shoulders; the other, the manager of the club, stepped forward and opened the door of the car.

"Lady Rourke!" whispered Durham.

"With Lou Chada!" rapped Kerry. "Run for a cab. Brisk. Don't waste a second."

Some little conversation ensued between manager and patron, then the tall, handsome Eurasian, waving his hand protestingly, removed his hat and stepped into the coupe beside Lady Rourke. It immediately moved away in the direction of Piccadilly.

One glimpse Kerry had of the pretty, fair head lying limply back against the cushions. The manager of the club was staring after the car.

Kerry stepped out from his hiding place. Durham had disappeared, and there was no cab in sight, but immediately beyond the illuminated entrance stood a Rolls-Royce which had been fifth in the rank of parked cars before the adjustment had been made to enable the coupe to reach the door. Kerry ran across, and:

"Whose car, my lad?" he demanded of the chauffeur.

The latter, resenting the curt tone of the inquiry, looked the speaker up and down, and:

"Captain. Egerton's," he replied slowly. "But what business may it be of yours?"

"I'm Chief Inspector Kerry, of New Scotland Yard," came the rapid reply. "I want to follow the car that has just left."

"What about running?" demanded the man insolently.

Kerry shot out a small, muscular hand and grasped the speaker's wrist.

"I'll say one thing to you," he rapped. "I'm a police officer, and I demand your help. Refuse it, and you'll wake up in Vine Street."

The Chief Inspector was on the step now, bending forward so that his fierce red face was but an inch removed from that of the startled chauffeur. The quelling force of his ferocious personality achieved its purpose, as it rarely failed to do.

"I'm getting in," added the Chief Inspector, jumping back on to the pavement. "Lose that French bus, and I'll charge you with resisting and obstructing an officer of the law in the execution of his duty. Start."

Kerry leaped in and banged the door—and the Rolls-Royce started.

II. AT MALAY JACK'S

When Kerry left Bond Street the mistiness of the night was developing into definite fog. It varied in different districts. Thus, St. Paul's Churchyard had been clear of it at a time when it had lain impenetrably in Trafalgar Square. When, an hour and a half after setting out in the commandeered Rolls-Royce, Kerry groped blindly along Limehouse Causeway, it was through a yellow murk that he made his way—a vapour which could not only be seen, smelled and felt, but tasted.

He was in one of his most violent humours. He found some slight solace in the reflection that the impudent chauffeur, from whom he had parted in West India Dock Road, must experience great difficulty in finding his way back to the West End.

"Damn the fog!" he muttered, coughing irritably.

It had tricked him, this floating murk of London; for, while he had been enabled to keep the coupe in view right to the fringe of dockland, here, as if bred by old London's river, the fog had lain impenetrably.

Chief Inspector Kerry was a man who took many risks, but because of this cursed fog he had no definite evidence that Chada's car had gone to a certain house. Right of search he had not, and so temporarily he was baffled.

Now the nearest telephone was his objective, and presently, where a blue light dimly pierced the mist, he paused, pushed open a swing door, and

stepped into a long, narrow passage. He descended three stairs, and entered a room laden with a sickly perfume compounded of stale beer and spirits; of greasy humanity—European, Asiastic, and African; of cheap tobacco and cheaper scents; and, vaguely, of opium.

It was fairly well lighted, but the fog had penetrated here, veiling some of the harshness of its rough appointments. An unsavoury den was Malay Jack's, where flotsam of the river might be found. Yellow men there were, and black men and brown men. But all the women present were white.

Fan-tan was in progress at one of the tables, the four players being apparently the only strictly sober people in the room. A woman was laughing raucously as Kerry entered, and many coarse- voiced conversations were in progress; but as he pulled the rough curtain walls aside and walked into the room, a hush, highly complimentary to the Chief Inspector's reputation, fell upon the assembly. Only the woman's raucous laughter continued, rising, a hideous solo, above a sort of murmur, composed of the words "Red Kerry!" spoken in many tones.

Kerry ignored the sensation which his entrance had created, and crossed the room to a small counter, behind which a dusky man was standing, coatless and shirt sleeves rolled up. He had the skin of a Malay but the features of a stage Irishman of the old school. And, indeed, had he known his own pedigree, which is a knowledge beyond the ken of any man, partly Irish he might have found himself indeed to be.

This was Malay Jack, the proprietor of one of the roughest houses in Limehouse. His expression, while propitiatory, was not friendly, but:

"Don't get hot and bothered," snapped Kerry viciously. "I want to use your telephone, that's all."

"Oh," said the other, unable to conceal his relief, "that's easy. Come in."

He raised a flap in the counter, and Kerry, passing through, entered a little room behind the bar. Here a telephone stood upon a dirty, littered table, and, taking it up:

"City four hundred," called the Chief Inspector curtly. A moment later: "Hallo! Yes," he said. "Chief Inspector Kerry speaking. Put me through to my department, please."

He stood for a while waiting, receiver in hand, and smiled grimly to note that the uproar in the room beyond had been resumed. Evidently Malay Jack had given the "all clear" signal. Then:

"Chief Inspector Kerry speaking," he said again. "Has Detective Sergeant Durham reported?"

"Yes," was the reply, "half an hour ago. He's standing-by at Limehouse Station. He followed you in a taxi, but lost you on the way owing to the fog."

"I don't wonder," said Kerry. "His loss is not so great as mine. Anything else?"

"Nothing else."

"Good. I'll speak to Limehouse. Good-bye."

He replaced the receiver and paused for a moment, reflecting. Extracting a piece of tasteless gum from between his teeth, he deposited it in the grate, where a sickly fire burned; then, tearing the wrapper from a fresh slip, he resumed his chewing and stood looking about him with unseeing eyes. Fierce they were as ever, but introspective in expression.

Famous for his swift decisions, for once in a way he found himself in doubt. Malay Jack had keen ears, and there were those in the place who had every reason to be interested in the movements of a member of the Criminal Investigation Department, especially of one who had earned the right to be dreaded by the rats of Limehouse. London's peculiar climate fought against him, but he determined to make no more telephone calls but to proceed to Limehouse police station.

He stepped swiftly into the bar, and, as he had anticipated, nearly upset the proprietor, who was standing listening by the half-open door. Kerry smiled fiercely into the ugly face, lifted the flap, and walked down the room, through the aisle between the scattered tables, where the air was heavy with strange perfumes, touched now with the bite of London fog, and where slanting eyes and straight eyes, sober eyes and drunken eyes, regarded him furtively. Something of a second hush there was, but one not so complete as the first.

Kerry pulled the curtain aside, mounted the stair, walked along the passage and out through the swing door into the yellow gloom of the Causeway. Ten slow steps he had taken when he detected a sound of pursuit. Like a flash he turned, clenching his fists. Then:

"Inspector!" whispered a husky voice.

"Yes! Who are you? What do you want?"

A dim form loomed up through the fog.

"My name is Peters, sir. Inspector Preston knows me."

Kerry had paused immediately under a street lamp, and now he looked into the pinched, lean face of the speaker, and:

"I've heard of you," he snapped. "Got some information for me?"

"I think so; but walk on."

Chief Inspector Kerry hesitated. Peters belonged to a class which Kerry despised with all the force of his straightforward character. A professional informer has his uses from the police point of view; and while evidence of this kind often figured in reports made to the Chief Inspector, he personally avoided contact with such persons, as he instinctively and daintily avoided contact with personal dirt. But now, something so big was at stake that his hesitation was only momentary.

A vision of the pale face of Lady Rourke, of the golden head leaning weakly back upon the cushions of the coupe, as he had glimpsed it in Bond Street, rose before his mind's eye as if conjured up out of the fog. Peters shuffled along beside him, and:

"Young Chada's done himself in to-night," continued the husky voice. "He brought a swell girl to the old man's house an hour ago. I was hanging about there, thinking I might get some information. I think she was doped."

"Why?" snapped Kerry.

"Well, I was standing over on the other side of the street. Lou Chada opened the door with a key; and when the light shone out I saw him carry her in."

"Carry her in?"

"Yes. She was in evening dress, with a swell cloak."

"The car?"

"He came out again and drove it around to the garage at the back."

"Why didn't you report this at once?"

"I was on my way to do it when I saw you coming out of Malay Jack's."

The man's voice shook nervously, and:

"What are you scared about?" asked Kerry savagely. "Got anything else to tell me?"

"No, no," muttered Peters. "Only I've got an idea he saw me."

"Who saw you?"

"Lou Chada."

"What then?"

"Well, only—don't leave me till we get to the station."

Kerry blew down his nose contemptuously, then stopped suddenly.

"Stand still," he ordered. "I want to listen."

Silent, they stood in a place of darkness, untouched by any lamplight. Not a sound reached them through the curtain of fog. Asiatic mystery wrapped them about, but Kerry experienced only contempt for the cowardice of his companion, and:

"You need come no farther," he said coldly. "Good night."

"But———" began the man.

"Good night," repeated Kerry.

He walked on briskly, tapping the pavement with his malacca. The sneaking figure of the informer was swallowed up in the fog. But not a dozen paces had the Chief Inspector gone when he was arrested by a frenzied scream, rising, hollowly, in a dreadful, muffled crescendo. Words reached him.

"My God, he's stabbed me!"

Then came a sort of babbling, which died into a moan.

"Hell!" muttered Kerry, "the poor devil was right!"

He turned and began to run back, fumbling in his pocket for his electric torch. Almost in the same moment that he found it he stumbled upon Peters, who lay half in the road and half upon the sidewalk.

Kerry pressed the button, and met the glance of upturned, glazing eyes. Even as he dropped upon his knee beside the dying man, Peters swept his arm around in a convulsive movement, having the fingers crooked, coughed horribly, and rolled upon his face.

Switching off the light of the torch, Kerry clenched his jaws in a tense effort of listening, literally holding his breath. But no sound reached him through the muffling fog. A moment he hesitated, well knowing his danger, then viciously snapping on the light again, he quested in the blood-stained mud all about the body of the murdered man.

"Ah!"

It was an exclamation of triumph.

One corner hideously stained, for it had lain half under Peters's shoulder, Kerry gingerly lifted between finger and thumb a handkerchief of fine white silk, such as is carried in the breast pocket of an evening coat.

It bore an ornate monogram worked in gold, and representing the letters "L. C." Oddly enough, it was the corner that bore the monogram which was also bloodstained.

III. THE ROOM OF THE GOLDEN BUDDHA

It was a moot point whether Lady Pat Rourke merited condemnation or pity. She possessed that type of blonde beauty which seems to be a lodestone for mankind in general. Her husband was wealthy, twelve years her senior, and, far from watching over her with jealous care—an attitude which often characterizes such unions— he, on the contrary, permitted her a dangerous freedom, believing that she would appreciate without abusing it.

Her friendship with Lou Chada had first opened his eyes to the perils which beset the road of least resistance. Sir Noel Rourke was an Anglo-Indian, and his prejudice against the Eurasian was one not lightly to be surmounted. Not all the polish which English culture had given to this child of a mixed union could blind Sir Noel to the yellow streak. Courted though Chada was by some of the best people, Sir Noel remained cold.

The long, magnetic eyes, the handsome, clear-cut features, above all, that slow and alluring smile, appealed to the husband of the wilful Pat rather as evidences of Oriental, half-effeminate devilry than as passports to decent society. Oxford had veneered him, but scratch the veneer and one found the sandal-wood of the East, perfumed, seductive, appealing, but something to be shunned as brittle and untrustworthy.

Yet he hesitated, seeking to be true to his convictions. Knowing what he knew already, and what he suspected, it is certain that, could he have viewed Lou Chada through the eyes of Chief Inspector Kerry, the affair must have terminated otherwise. But Sir Noel did not know what Kerry knew. And the pleasure-seeking Lady Rourke, with her hair of spun gold and her provoking smile, found Lou Chada dangerously fascinating; almost she was infatuated—she who had known so much admiration.

Of those joys for which thousands of her plainer sisters yearn and starve to the end of their days she had experienced a surfeit. Always she sought for novelty, for new adventures. She was confident of herself, but yet—and

here lay the delicious thrill—not wholly confident. Many times she had promised to visit the house of Lou Chada's father—a mystery palace cunningly painted, a perfumed page from the Arabian poets dropped amid the interesting squalor of Limehouse.

Perhaps she had never intended to go. Who knows? But on the night when she came within the ken of Chief Inspector Kerry, Lou Chada had urged her to do so in his poetically passionate fashion, and, wanting to go, she had asked herself: "Am I strong enough? Dare I?"

They had dined, danced, and she had smoked one of the scented cigarettes which he alone seemed to be able to procure, and which, on their arrival from the East, were contained in queer little polished wooden boxes.

Then had come an unfamiliar nausea and dizziness, an uncomfortable recognition of the fact that she was making a fool of herself, and finally a semi-darkness through which familiar faces loomed up and were quickly lost again. There was the soft, musical voice of Lou Chada reassuring her, a sense of chill, of helplessness, and then for a while an interval which afterward she found herself unable to bridge.

Knowledge of verity came at last, and Lady Pat raised herself from the divan upon which she had been lying, and, her slender hands clutching the cushions, stared about her with eyes which ever grew wider.

She was in a long, rather lofty room, which was lighted by three silver lanterns swung from the ceiling. The place, without containing much furniture, was a riot of garish, barbaric colour. There were deep divans cushioned in amber and blood-red. Upon the floor lay Persian carpets and skins of beasts. Cunning niches there were, half concealing and half revealing long-necked Chinese jars; and odd little carven tables bore strangely fashioned vessels of silver. There was a cabinet of ebony inlaid with jade, there were black tapestries figured with dragons of green and gold. Curtains she saw of peacock-blue; and in a tall, narrow recess, dominating the room, squatted a great golden Buddha.

The atmosphere was laden with a strange perfume.

But, above all, this room was silent, most oppressively silent.

Lady Pat started to her feet. The whole perfumed place seemed to be swimming around her. Reclosing her eyes, she fought down her weakness. The truth, the truth respecting Lou Chada and herself, had uprisen starkly before her. By her own folly—and she could find no tiny excuse—she had

placed herself in the power of a man whom, instinctively, deep within her soul, she had always known to be utterly unscrupulous.

How cleverly he had concealed the wild animal which dwelt beneath that suave, polished exterior! Yet how ill he had concealed it! For intuitively she had always recognized its presence, but had deliberately closed her eyes, finding a joy in the secret knowledge of danger. Now at last he had discarded pretense.

The cigarette which he had offered her at the club had been drugged. She was in Limehouse, at the mercy of a man in whose veins ran the blood of ancestors to whom women had been chattels. Too well she recognized that his passion must have driven him insane, as he must know at what cost he took such liberties with one who could not lightly be so treated. But these reflections afforded poor consolation. It was not of the penalties that Lou Chada must suffer for this infringement of Western codes, but of the price that she must pay for her folly, of which Pat was thinking.

There was a nauseating taste upon her palate. She remembered having noticed it faintly while she was smoking the cigarette; indeed, she had commented upon it at the time.

"The dirty yellow blackguard!" she said aloud, and clenched her hands.

She merely echoed what many a man had said before her. She wondered at herself, and in doing so but wondered at the mystery of womanhood.

Clarity was returning. The room no longer swam around her. She crossed in the direction of a garish curtain, which instinctively she divined to mask a door. Dragging it aside, she tried the handle, but the door was locked. A second door she found, and this also proved to be locked.

There was one tall window, also covered by ornate draperies, but it was shuttered, and the shutters had locks. Another small window she discovered, glazed with amber glass, but set so high in the wall as to be inaccessible.

Dread assailed her, and dropping on to one of the divans, she hid her face in her hands.

"My God!" she whispered. "My God! Give me strength—give me courage."

For a long time she remained there, listening for any sound which should disperse the silence. She thought of her husband, of the sweet security of her home, of the things which she had forfeited because of this mad quest of adventure. And presently a key grated in a lock.

Lady Pat started to her feet with a wild, swift action which must have reminded a beholder of a startled gazelle. The drapery masking the door which she had first investigated was drawn aside. A man entered and dropped the curtain behind him.

Exactly what she had expected she could not have defined, but the presence of this perfect stranger was a complete surprise. The man, who wore embroidered slippers and a sort of long blue robe, stood there regarding her with an expression which, even in her frantic condition, she found to be puzzling. He had long, untidy gray hair brushed back from his low brow; eyes strangely like the eyes of Lou Chada, except that they were more heavy-lidded; but his skin was as yellow as a guinea, and his gaunt, cleanshaven face was the face of an Oriental.

The slender hands, too, which he held clasped before him, were yellow, and possessed a curiously arresting quality. Pat imagined them clasped about her white throat, and her very soul seemed to shrink from the man who stood there looking at her with those long, magnetic, inscrutable eyes.

She wondered why she was surprised, and suddenly realized that it was because of the expression in his eyes, for it was an expression of cold anger. Then the intruder spoke.

"Who are you?" he demanded, speaking with an accent which was unfamiliar to her, but in a voice which was not unlike the voice of Lou Chada. "Who brought you here?"

This was so wholly unexpected that for a moment she found herself unable to reply, but finally:

"How dare you!" she cried, her native courage reasserting itself. "I have been drugged and brought to this place. You shall pay for it. How dare you!"

"Ah!" The long, dark eyes regarded her unmovingly. "But who are you?"

"I am Lady Rourke. Open the door. You shall bitterly regret this outrage."

"You are Lady Rourke?" the man repeated. "Before you speak of regrets, answer the question which I have asked: Who brought you here?"

"Lou Chada."

"Ah!" There was no alteration of pose, no change of expression, but slightly the intonation had varied.

"I don't know who you are, but I demand to be released from this place instantly."

The man standing before the curtained door slightly inclined his head.

"You shall be released," he replied, "but not instantly. I will see the one who brought you here. He may not be entirely to blame. Before you leave we shall understand one another."

Tone and glance were coldly angry. Then, before the frightened woman could say another word, the man in the blue robe robe withdrew, the curtain was dropped again, and she heard the grating of a key in the lock. She ran to the door, beating upon it with her clenched hands.

"Let me go!" she cried, half hysterically. "Let me go! You shall pay for this! Oh, you shall pay for this!"

No one answered, and, turning, she leaned back against the curtain, breathing heavily and fighting for composure, for strength.

IV. ZANI CHADA, THE EURASIAN

"I can't help thinking, Chief Inspector," said the officer in charge at Limehouse Station, "that you take unnecessary risks."

"Can't you?" said Kerry, tilting his bowler farther forward and staring truculently at the speaker.

"No, I can't. Since you cleaned up the dope gang down here you've been a marked man. These murders in the Chinatown area, of which this one to-night makes the third, have got some kind of big influence behind them. Yet you wander about in the fog without even a gun in your pocket."

"I don't believe in guns," rapped Kerry. "My bare hands are good enough for any yellow smart in this area. And if they give out I can kick like a mule."

The other laughed, shaking his head.

"It's silly, all the same," he persisted. "The man who did the job out there in the fog to-night might have knifed you or shot you long before you could have got here."

"He might," snapped Kerry, "but he didn't."

Yet, remembering his wife, who would be waiting for him in the cosy sitting-room he knew a sudden pang. Perhaps he did take unnecessary chances. Others had said so. Hard upon the thought came the memory of his

boy, and of the telephone message which the episodes of the night had prevented him from sending.

He remembered, too, something which his fearless nature had prompted him to forget: he remembered how, just as he had arisen from beside the body of the murdered man, oblique eyes had regarded him swiftly out of the fog. He had lashed out with a boxer's instinct, but his knuckles had encountered nothing but empty air. No sound had come to tell him that the thing had not been an illusion. Only, once again, as he groped his way through the shuttered streets of Chinatown and the silence of the yellow mist, something had prompted him to turn; and again he had detected the glint of oblique eyes, and faintly had discerned the form of one who followed him.

Kerry chewed viciously, then:

"I think I'll 'phone the wife," he said abruptly. "She'll be expecting me."

Almost before he had finished speaking the 'phone bell rang, and a few moments later:

"Someone to speak to you, Chief Inspector," cried the officer in charge.

"Ah!" exclaimed Kerry, his fierce eyes lighting up. "That will be from home."

"I don't think so," was the reply. "But see who it is."

"Hello!" he called.

He was answered by an unfamiliar voice, a voice which had a queer, guttural intonation. It was the sort of voice he had learned to loathe.

"Is that Chief Inspector Kerry?"

"Yes," he snapped.

"May I take it that what I have to say will be treated in confidence?"

"Certainly not."

"Think again, Chief Inspector," the voice continued. "You are a man within sight of the ambition of years, and although you may be unaware of the fact, you stand upon the edge of a disaster. I appreciate your sense of duty and respect it. But there are times when diplomacy is a more potent weapon than force."

Kerry, listening, became aware that the speaker was a man of cultured intellect. He wondered greatly, but:

"My time is valuable," he said rapidly. "Come to the point. What do you want and who are you?"

"One moment, Chief Inspector. An opportunity to make your fortune without interfering with your career has come in your way. You have obtained possession of what you believe to be a clue to a murder."

The voice ceased, and Kerry remaining silent, immediately continued:

"Knowing your personal character, I doubt if you have communicated the fact of your possessing this evidence to anyone else. I suggest, in your own interests, that before doing so you interview me."

Kerry thought rapidly, and then:

"I don't say you're right," he rapped back. "But if I come to see you, I shall leave a sealed statement in possession of the officer in charge here."

"To this I have no objection," the guttural voice replied, "but I beg of you to bring the evidence with you."

"I'm not to be bought," warned Kerry. "Don't think it and don't suggest it, or when I get to you I'll break you in half."

His red moustache positively bristled, and he clutched the receiver so tightly that it quivered against his ear.

"You mistake me," replied the speaker. "My name is Zani Chada. You know where I live. I shall not detain you more than five minutes if you will do me the honour of calling upon me."

Kerry chewed furiously for ten momentous seconds, then:

"I'll come!" he said.

He replaced the receiver on the hook, and, walking across to the charge desk, took an official form and a pen. On the back of the form he scribbled rapidly, watched with curiosity by the officer in charge.

"Give me an envelope," he directed.

An envelope was found and handed to him. He placed the paper in the envelope, gummed down the lapel, and addressed it in large, bold writing to the Assistant Commissioner of the Criminal Investigation Department, who was his chief. Finally:

"I'm going out," he explained.

"After what I've said?"

"After what you've said. I'm going out. If I don't come back or don't telephone within the next hour, you will know what to do with this."

The Limehouse official stared perplexedly.

"But meanwhile," he protested, "what steps am I to take about the murder? Durham will be back with the body at any moment now, and you

say you've got a clue to the murderer."

"I have," said Kerry, "but I'm going to get definite evidence. Do nothing until you hear from me."

"Very good," answered the other, and Kerry, tucking his malacca cane under his arm, strode out into the fog.

His knowledge of the Limehouse area was extensive and peculiar, so that twenty minutes later, having made only one mistake in the darkness, he was pressing an electric bell set beside a door which alone broke the expanse of a long and dreary brick wall, lining a street which neither by day nor night would have seemed inviting to the casual visitor.

The door was opened by a Chinaman wearing national dress, revealing a small, square lobby, warmly lighted and furnished Orientally. Kerry stepped in briskly.

"I want to see Mr Zani Chada. Tell him I am here. Chief Inspector Kerry is my name."

The Chinaman bowed, crossed the lobby, and, drawing some curtains aside, walked up four carpeted stairs and disappeared into a short passage revealed by the raising of the tapestry. As he did so Kerry stared about him curiously.

He had never before entered the mystery house of Zani Chada, nor had he personally encountered the Eurasian, reputed to be a millionaire, but who chose, for some obscure reason, to make his abode in this old rambling building, once a country mansion, which to-day was closely invested by dockland and the narrow alleys of Chinatown. It was curiously still in the lobby, and, as he determined, curiously Eastern. He was conscious of a sense of exhilaration. That Zani Chada controlled powerful influences, he knew well. But, reviewing the precautions which he had taken, Kerry determined that the trump card was in his possession.

The Chinese servant descended the stairs again and intimated that the visitor should follow him. Kerry, carrying his hat and cane, mounted the stairs, walked along the carpeted passage, and was ushered into a queer, low room furnished as a library.

It was lined with shelves containing strange-looking books, none of which appeared to be English. Upon the top of the shelves were grotesque figures of gods, pieces of Chinese pottery and other Oriental ornaments. Arms there were in the room, and rich carpets, carven furniture, and an air

of luxury peculiarly exotic. Furthermore, he detected a faint smell of opium from which fact he divined that Zani Chada was addicted to the national vice of China.

Seated before a long narrow table was the notorious Eurasian. The table contained a number of strange and unfamiliar objects, as well as a small rack of books. An opium pipe rested in a porcelain bowl.

Zani Chada, wearing a blue robe, sat in a cushioned chair, staring toward the Chief Inspector. With one slender yellow hand he brushed his untidy gray hair. His long magnetic eyes were half closed.

"Good evening, Chief Inspector Kerry," he said. "Won't you be seated?"

"Thanks, I'm not staying. I can hear what you've got to say standing."

The long eyes grew a little more narrow—the only change of expression that Zani Chada allowed himself.

"As you wish. I have no occasion to detain you long."

In that queer, perfumed room, with the suggestion of something sinister underlying its exotic luxury, arose a kind of astral clash as the powerful personality of the Eurasian came in contact with that of Kerry. In a sense it was a contest of rapier and battle-axe; an insidious but powerful will enlisted against the bulldog force of the Chief Inspector.

Still through half-closed eyes Zani Chada watched his visitor, who stood, feet apart and chin thrust forward aggressively, staring with wide open, fierce blue eyes at the other.

"I'm going to say one thing," declared Kerry, snapping out the words in a manner little short of ferocious. He laid his hat and cane upon a chair and took a step in the direction of the narrow, laden table. "Make me any kind of offer to buy back the evidence you think I've got, and I'll bash your face as flat as a frying- pan."

The yellow hands of Zani Chada clutched the metal knobs which ornamented the arms of the chair in which he was seated. The long eyes now presented the appearance of being entirely closed; otherwise he remained immovable.

Following a short, portentous silence:

"How grossly you misunderstood me, Chief Inspector," Chada replied, speaking very softly. "You are shortly to be promoted to a post which no one is better fitted to occupy. You enjoy great domestic happiness, and you

possess a son in whom you repose great hopes. In this respect Chief Inspector, I resemble you."

Kerry's nostrils were widely dilated, but he did not speak.

"You see," continued the Eurasian, "I know many things about you. Indeed, I have watched your career with interest. Now, to be brief, a great scandal may be averted and a woman's reputation preserved if you and I, as men of the world, can succeed in understanding one another."

"I don't want to understand you," said Kerry bluntly. "But you've said enough already to justify me in blowing this whistle." He drew a police whistle from his overcoat pocket. "This house is being watched."

"I am aware of the fact," murmured Zani Chada.

"There are two people in it I want for two different reasons. If you say much more there may be three."

Chada raised his hand slowly.

"Put back your whistle, Chief Inspector."

There was a curious restraint in the Eurasian's manner which Kerry distrusted, but for which at the time he was at a loss to account. Then suddenly he determined that the man was waiting for something, listening for some sound. As if to confirm this reasoning, just at that moment a sound indeed broke the silence of the room.

Somewhere far away in the distance of the big house a gong was beaten three times softly. Kerry's fierce glance searched the face of Zani Chada, but it remained mask-like, immovable. Yet that this had been a signal of some kind the Chief Inspector did not doubt, and:

"You can't trick me," he said fiercely. "No one can leave this house without my knowledge, and because of what happened out there in the fog my hands are untied."

He took up his hat and cane from the chair.

"I'm going to search the premises," he declared.

Zani Chada stood up slowly.

"Chief Inspector," he said, "I advise you to do nothing until you have consulted your wife."

"Consulted my wife?" snapped Kerry. "What the devil do you mean?"

"I mean that any steps you may take now can only lead to disaster for many, and in your own case to great sorrow."

Kerry took a step forward, two steps, then paused. He was considering certain words which the Eurasian had spoken. Without fearing the man in the physical sense, he was not fool enough to underestimate his potentialities for evil and his power to strike darkly.

"Act as you please," added Zani Chada, speaking even more softly. "But I have not advised lightly. I will receive you, Chief Inspector, at any hour of the night you care to return. By to- morrow, if you wish, you may be independent of everybody."

Kerry clenched his fists.

"And great sorrow may be spared to others," concluded the Eurasian.

Kerry's teeth snapped together audibly; then, putting on his hat, he turned and walked straight to the door.

V. DAN KERRY, JUNIOR

Dan Kerry, junior, was humorously like his father, except that he was larger-boned and promised to grow into a much bigger man. His hair was uncompromisingly red, and grew in such irregular fashion that the comb was not made which could subdue it. He had the wide-open, fighting blue eyes of the Chief Inspector, and when he smiled the presence of two broken teeth lent him a very pugilistic appearance.

On his advent at the school of which he was now one of the most popular members, he had promptly been christened "Carrots." To this nickname young Kerry had always taken exception, and he proceeded to display his prejudice on the first day of his arrival with such force and determination that the sobriquet had been withdrawn by tacit consent of every member of the form who hitherto had favoured it.

"I'll take you all on," the new arrival had declared amidst a silence of stupefaction, "starting with you"—pointing to the biggest boy. "If we don't finish to-day, I'll begin again to- morrow."

The sheer impudence of the thing had astounded everybody. Young Kerry's treatment of his leading persecutor had produced a salutary change of opinion. Of such kidney was Daniel Kerry, junior; and when, some hours

after his father's departure on the night of the murder in the fog, the 'phone bell rang, it was Dan junior, and not his mother, who answered the call.

"Hallo!" said a voice. "Is that Chief Inspector Kerry's house?"

"Yes," replied Dan.

"It has begun to rain in town," the voice continued, "Is that the Chief Inspector's son speaking?"

"Yes, I'm Daniel Kerry."

"Well, my boy, you know the way to New Scotland Yard?"

"Rather."

"He says will you bring his overall? Do you know where to find it?"

"Yes, yes!" cried Dan excitedly, delighted to be thus made a party to his father's activities.

"Well, get it. Jump on a tram at the Town Hall and bring the overall along here. Your mother will not object, will she?"

"Of course not," cried Dan. "I'll tell her. Am I to start now?"

"Yes, right away."

Mrs Kerry was sewing by the fire in the dining room when her son came in with the news, his blue eyes sparkling excitedly. She nodded her head slowly.

"Ye'll want ye'r Burberry and ye'r thick boots," she declared, "a muffler, too, and ye'r oldest cap. I think it's madness for ye to go out on such a night, but——"

"Father said I could," protested the boy.

"He says so, and ye shall go, but I think it madness a' the same."

However, some ten minutes later young Kerry set out, keenly resenting the woollen muffler which he had been compelled to wear, and secretly determined to remove it before mounting the tram. Across one arm he carried the glistening overall which was the Chief Inspector's constant companion on wet nights abroad. The fog had turned denser, and ten paces from the door of the house took him out of sight of the light streaming from the hallway.

Mary Kerry well knew her husband's theories about coddling boys, but even so could not entirely reconcile herself to the present expedition. However, closing the door, she returned philosophically to her sewing, reflecting that little harm could come to Dan after all, for he was strong, healthy, and intelligent.

On went the boy through the mist, whistling merrily. Not twenty yards from the house a coupe was drawn up, and by the light of one of its lamps a man was consulting a piece of paper on which, presumably, an address was written; for, as the boy approached, the man turned, his collar pulled up about his face, his hat pulled down.

"Hallo!" he called. "Can you please tell me something?"

He spoke with a curious accent, unfamiliar to the boy. "A foreigner of some kind," young Kerry determined.

"What is it?" he asked, pausing.

"Will you please read and tell me if I am near this place?" the man continued, holding up the paper which he had been scrutinizing.

Dan stepped forward and bent over it. He could not make out the writing, and bent yet more, holding it nearer to the lamp. At which moment some second person neatly pinioned him from behind, a scarf was whipped about his head, and, kicking furiously but otherwise helpless, he felt himself lifted and placed inside the car.

The muffler had been thrown in such fashion about his face as to leave one eye partly free, and as he was lifted he had a momentary glimpse of his captors. With a thrill of real, sickly terror he realized that he was in the hands of Chinamen!

Perhaps telepathically this spasm of fear was conveyed to his father, for it was at about this time that the latter was interviewing Zani Chada, and at about this time that Kerry recognized, underlying the other's words, at once an ill- concealed suspense and a threat. Then, a few minutes later, had come the three strokes of the gong; and again that unreasonable dread had assailed him, perhaps because it signalized the capture of his son, news of which had been immediately telephoned to Limehouse by Zani Chada's orders.

Certain it is that Kerry left the Eurasian's house in a frame of mind which was not familiar to him. He was undecided respecting his next move. A deadly menace underlay Chada's words.

"Consult your wife," he kept muttering to himself. When the door was opened for him by the Chinese servant, he paused a moment before going out into the fog. There were men on duty at the back and at the front of the house. Should he risk all and raid the place? That Lady Rourke was captive here he no longer doubted. But it was equally certain that no further harm

would come to her at the hands of her captors, since she had been traced there and since Zani Chada was well aware of the fact. Of the whereabouts of Lou Chada he could not be certain. If he was in the house, they had him.

The door was closed by the Chinaman, and Kerry stood out in the darkness of the dismal, brick-walled street, feeling something as nearly akin to dejection as was possible in one of his mercurial spirit. Something trickled upon the brim of his hat, and, raising his head, Kerry detected rain upon his upturned face. He breathed a prayer of thankfulness. This would put an end to the fog.

He began to walk along by the high brick wall, but had not proceeded far before a muffled figure arose before him and the light of an electric torch was shone into his face.

"Oh, it's you, Chief Inspector!" came the voice of the watcher.

"It is," rapped Kerry. "Unless there are tunnels under this old rat-hole, I take it the men on duty can cover all the exits?"

"All the main exits," was the reply. "But, as you say, it's a strange house, and Zani Chada has a stranger reputation."

"Do nothing until you hear from me."

"Very good, Chief Inspector."

The rain now was definitely conquering the fog, and in half the time which had been occupied by the outward journey Kerry was back again in Limehouse police station. Unconsciously he had been hastening his pace with every stride, urged onward by an unaccountable anxiety, so that finally he almost ran into the office and up to the desk where the telephone stood.

Lifting it, he called his own number and stood tapping his foot, impatiently awaiting the reply. Presently came the voice of the operator: "Have they answered yet?"

"No."

"I will ring them again."

Kerry's anxiety became acute, almost unendurable; and when at last, after repeated attempts, no reply could be obtained from his home, he replaced the receiver and leaned for a moment on the desk, shaken with such a storm of apprehension as he had rarely known. He turned to the inspector in charge, and:

"Let me have that envelope I left with you," he directed. "And have someone 'phone for a taxi; they are to keep on till they get one. Where is

Sergeant Durham?"

"At the mortuary."

"Ah!"

"Any developments, Chief Inspector?"

"Yes. But apart from keeping a close watch upon the house of Zani Chada you are to do nothing until you hear from me again."

"Very good," said the inspector. "Are you going to wait for Durham's report?"

"No. Directly the cab arrives I am going to wait for nothing."

Indeed, he paced up and down the room like a wild beast caged, while call after call was sent to neighbouring cab ranks, for a long time without result. What did it mean, his wife's failure to answer the telephone? It might mean that neither she nor their one servant nor Dan was in the house. And if they were not in the house at this hour of the night, where could they possibly be? This it might mean, or—something worse.

A thousand and one possibilities, hideous, fantastic, appalling, flashed through his mind. He was beginning to learn what Zani Chada had meant when he had said: "I have followed your career with interest."

At last a taxi was found, and the man instructed over the 'phone to proceed immediately to Limehouse station. He seemed so long in coming that when at last the cab was heard to pause outside, Kerry could not trust himself to speak to the driver, but directed a sergeant to give him the address. He entered silently and closed the door.

A steady drizzle of rain was falling. It had already dispersed the fog, so that he might hope with luck to be home within the hour. As a matter of fact, the man performed the journey in excellent time, but it seemed to his passenger that he could have walked quicker, such was the gnawing anxiety within him and the fear which prompted him to long for wings.

Instructing the cabman to wait, Kerry unlocked the front door and entered. He had noted a light in the dining room window, and entering, he found his wife awaiting him there. She rose as he entered, with horror in her comely face.

"Dan!" she whispered. "Dan! where is ye'r mackintosh?"

"I didn't take it," he replied, endeavouring to tell himself that his apprehensions had been groundless. "But how was it that you did not answer the telephone?"

"What do ye mean, Dan?" Mary Kerry stared, her eyes growing wider and wider. "The boy answered, Dan. He set out wi' ye'r mackintosh full an hour and a half since."

"What!"

The truth leaped out at Kerry like an enemy out of ambush.

"Who sent that message?"

"Someone frae the Yard, to tell the boy to bring ye'r mackintosh alone at once. Dan! Dan———"

She advanced, hands outstretched, quivering, but Kerry had leaped out into the narrow hallway. He raised the telephone receiver, listened for a moment, and then jerked it back upon the hook.

"Dead line!" he muttered. "Someone has been at work with a wire- cutter outside the house!"

His wife came out to where he stood, and, clenching his teeth very grimly, he took her in his arms. She was shaking as if palsied.

"Mary dear," he said, "pray with all your might that I am given strength to do my duty."

She looked at him with haggard, tearless eyes.

"Tell me the truth: ha' they got my boy?"

His fingers tightened on her shoulders.

"Don't worry," he said, "and don't ask me to stay to explain. When I come back I'll have Dan with me!"

He trusted himself no further, but, clapping his hat on his head, walked out to the waiting cab.

"Back to Limehouse police station," he directed rapidly.

"Lor lumme!" muttered the taximan. "Where are you goin' to after that, guv'nor? It's a bit off the map."

"I'm going to hell!" rapped Kerry, suddenly thrusting his red face very near to that of the speaker. "And you're going to drive me!"

VI. THE KNIGHT ERRANT

Recognizing the superior strength of his captors, young Kerry soon gave up struggling. The thrill of his first real adventure entered into his blood. He

remembered that he was the son of his father, and he realized, being a quick-witted lad, that he was in the grip of enemies of his father. The panic which had threatened him when first he had recognized that he was in the hands of Chinese, gave place to a cold rage—a heritage which in later years was to make him a dangerous man.

He lay quite passively in the grasp of someone who held him fast, and learned, by breathing quietly, that the presence of the muffler about his nose and mouth did not greatly inconvenience him. There was some desultory conversation between the two men in the car, but it was carried on in an odd, sibilant language which the boy did not understand, but which he divined to be Chinese. He thought how every other boy in the school would envy him, and the thought was stimulating, nerving. On the very first day of his holidays he was become the central figure of a Chinatown drama.

The last traces of fear fled. His position was uncomfortable and his limbs were cramped, but he resigned himself, with something almost like gladness, and began to look forward to that which lay ahead with a zest and a will to be no passive instrument which might have surprised his captors could they have read the mind of their captive.

The journey seemed almost interminable, but young Kerry suffered it in stoical silence until the car stopped and he was lifted and carried down stone steps into some damp, earthy-smelling place. Some distance was traversed, and then many flights of stairs were mounted, some bare but others carpeted.

Finally he was deposited in a chair, and as he raised his hand to the scarf, which toward the end of the journey had been bound more tightly about his head so as to prevent him from seeing at all, he heard a door closed and locked.

The scarf was quickly removed. And Dan found himself in a low-ceilinged attic having a sloping roof and one shuttered window. A shadeless electric lamp hung from the ceiling. Excepting the cane-seated chair in which he had been deposited and a certain amount of nondescript lumber, the attic was unfurnished. Dan rapidly considered what his father would have done in the circumstances.

"Make sure that the door is locked," he muttered.

He tried it, and it was locked beyond any shadow of doubt.

"The window."

Shutters covered it, and these were fastened with a padlock.

He considered this padlock attentively; then, drawing from his pocket one of those wonderful knives which are really miniature tool-chests, he raised from a grove the screw-driver which formed part of its equipment, and with neatness and dispatch unscrewed the staple to which the padlock was attached!

A moment later he had opened the shutters and was looking out into the drizzle of the night.

The room in which he was confined was on the third floor of a dingy, brick-built house; a portion of some other building faced him; down below was a stone-paved courtyard. To the left stood a high wall, and beyond it he obtained a glimpse of other dingy buildings. One lighted window was visible—a square window in the opposite building, from which amber light shone out.

Somewhere in the street beyond was a standard lamp. He could detect the halo which it cast into the misty rain. The glass was very dirty, and young Kerry raised the sash, admitting a draught of damp, cold air into the room. He craned out, looking about him eagerly.

A rainwater-pipe was within reach of his hand on the right of the window and, leaning out still farther, young Kerry saw that it passed beside two other, larger, windows on the floor beneath him. Neither of these showed any light.

Dizzy heights have no terror for healthy youth. The brackets supporting the rain-pipe were a sufficient staircase for the agile Dan, a more slippery prisoner than the famous Baron Trenck; and, discarding his muffler and his Burberry, he climbed out upon the sill and felt with his thick-soled boots for the first of these footholds. Clutching the ledge, he lowered himself and felt for the next.

Then came the moment when he must trust all his weight to the pipe. Clenching his teeth, he risked it, felt for and found the third angle, and then, still clutching the pipe, stood for a moment upon the ledge of the window immediately beneath him. He was curious respecting the lighted window of the neighbouring house; and, twisting about, he bent, peering across—and saw a sight which arrested his progress.

The room within was furnished in a way which made him gasp with astonishment. It was like an Eastern picture, he thought. Her golden hair

dishevelled and her hands alternately clenching and unclenching, a woman whom he considered to be most wonderfully dressed was pacing wildly up and down, a look of such horror upon her pale face that Dan's heart seemed to stop beating for a moment!

Here was real trouble of a sort which appealed to all the chivalry in the boy's nature. He considered the window, which was glazed with amber-coloured glass, observed that it was sufficiently open to enable him to slip the fastening and open it entirely could he but reach it. And—yes!—there was a rain- pipe!

Climbing down to the yard, he looked quickly about him, ran across, and climbed up to the lighted window. A moment later he had pushed it widely open.

He was greeted by a stifled cry, but, cautiously transferring his weight from the friendly pipe to the ledge, he got astride of it, one foot in the room. Then, by exercise of a monkey-like agility, he wriggled his head and shoulders within.

"It's all right," he said softly and reassuringly; "I'm Dan Kerry, son of Chief Inspector Kerry. Can I be of any assistance?"

Her hands clasped convulsively together, the woman stood looking up at him.

"Oh, thank God!" said the captive. "But what are you going to do? Can you get me out?"

"Don't worry," replied Dan confidently. "Father and I can manage it all right!"

He performed a singular contortion, as a result of which his other leg and foot appeared inside the window. Then, twisting around, he lowered himself and dropped triumphantly upon a cushioned divan. At that moment he would have faced a cage full of man-eating tigers. The spirit of adventure had him in its grip. He stood up, breathing rapidly, his crop of red hair more dishevelled than usual.

Then, before he could stir or utter any protest, the golden- haired princess whom he had come to rescue stooped, threw her arms around his neck, and kissed him.

"You darling, brave boy!" she said. "I think you have saved me from madness."

Young Kerry, more flushed than ever, extricated himself, and:

"You're not out of the mess yet," he protested. "The only difference is that I'm in it with you!"

"But where is your father?"

"I'm looking for him."

"What!"

"Oh! he's about somewhere," Dan assured her confidently.

"But, but——" She was gazing at him wide-eyed, "Didn't he send you here?"

"You bet he didn't," returned young Kerry. "I came here on my own accord, and when I go you're coming with me. I can't make out how you got here, anyway. Do you know whose house this is?"

"Oh, I do, I do!"

"Whose?"

"It belongs to a man called Chada."

"Chada? Never heard of him. But I mean, what part of London is it in?"

"Whatever do you mean? It is in Limehouse, I believe. I don't understand. You came here."

"I didn't," said young Kerry cheerfully; "I was fetched!"

"By your father?"

"Not on your life. By a couple of Chinks! I'll tell you something." He raised his twinkling blue eyes. "We are properly up against it. I suppose you couldn't climb down a rain-pipe?"

VII. RETRIBUTION

It was that dark, still, depressing hour of the night, when all life is at its lowest ebb. In the low, strangely perfumed room of books Zani Chada sat before his table, his yellow hands clutching the knobs on his chair arms, his long, inscrutable eyes staring unseeingly before him.

Came a disturbance and the sound of voices, and Lou Chada, his son, stood at the doorway. He still wore his evening clothes, but he no longer looked smart. His glossy black hair was dishevelled, and his handsome, olive face bore a hunted look. Panic was betoken by twitching mouth and fear-bright eyes. He stopped, glaring at his father, and:

"Why are you not gone?" asked the latter sternly. "Do you wish to wreck me as well as yourself ?"

"The police have posted a man opposite Kwee's house. I cannot get out that way."

"There was no one there when the boy was brought in."

"No, but there is now. Father!" He took a step forward. "I'm trapped. They sha'n't take me. You won't let them take me?"

Zani Chada stirred not a muscle, but:

"To-night," he said, "your mad passion has brought ruin to both of us. For the sake of a golden doll who is not worth the price of the jewels she wears, you have placed yourself within reach of the hangman."

"I was mad, I was mad," groaned the other.

"But I, who was sane, am involved in the consequences," retorted his father.

"He will be silent at the price of the boy's life."

"He may be," returned Zani Chada. "I hate him, but he is a man. Had you escaped, he might have consented to be silent. Once you are arrested, nothing would silence him."

"If the case is tried it will ruin Pat's reputation."

"What a pity!" said Zani Chada.

In some distant part of the house a gong was struck three times.

"Go," commanded his father. "Remain at Kwee's house until I send for you. Let Ah Fang go to the room above and see that the woman is silent. An outcry would ruin our last chance."

Lou Chada raised his hands, brushing the hair back from his wet forehead, then, staring haggardly at his father, turned and ran from the room.

A minute later Kerry was ushered in by the Chinese servant. The savage face was set like a mask. Without removing his hat, he strode across to the table and bent down so that fierce, wide- open blue eyes stared closely into long, half-closed black ones.

"I've got one thing to say," explained Kerry huskily. "Whatever the hangman may do to your slimy son, and whatever happens to the little blonde fool he kidnapped, if you've laid a hand on my kid I'll kick you to death, if I follow you round the world to do it."

Zani Chada made no reply, but his knuckles gleamed, so tightly did he clutch the knobs on the chair arms. Kerry's savagery would have awed any man, even though he had supposed it to be the idle threat of a passionate man. But Zani Chada knew all men, and he knew this one. When Daniel Kerry declared that in given circumstances he would kick Zani Chada to death, he did not mean that he would shoot him, strangle him, or even beat him with his fists; he meant precisely what he said—that he would kick him to death—and Zani Chada knew it.

Thus there were some moments of tense silence during which the savage face of the Chief Inspector drew even closer to the gaunt, yellow face of the Eurasian. Finally:

"Listen only for one moment," said Zani Chada. His voice had lost its guttural intonation. He spoke softly, sibilantly. "I, too, am a father———"

"Don't mince words!" shouted Kerry. "You've kidnapped my boy. If I have to tear your house down brick by brick I'll find him. And if you've hurt one hair of his head—you know what to expect!"

He quivered. The effort of suppression which he had imposed upon himself was frightful to witness. Zani Chada, student of men, knew that in despite of his own physical strength and of the hidden resources at his beck, he stood nearer to primitive retribution than he had ever done. Yet:

"I understand," he continued. "But you do not understand. Your boy is not in this house. Oh! violence cannot avail! It can only make his loss irreparable."

Kerry, nostrils distended, eyes glaring madly, bent over him.

"Your scallywag of a son," he said hoarsely, "has gone one step too far. His adventures have twice before ended in murder—and you have covered him. This time you can't do it. I'm not to be bought. We've stood for the Far East in London long enough. Your cub hangs this time. Get me? There'll be no bargaining. The woman's reputation won't stop me. My kid's danger won't stop me. But if you try to use him as a lever I'll boot you to your stinking yellow paradise and they'll check you in as pulp."

"You speak of three deaths," murmured Zani Chada.

Kerry clenched his teeth so tightly that his maxillary muscles protruded to an abnormal degree. He thrust his clenched fists into his coat pockets.

"We all follow our vocations in life," resumed the Eurasian, "to the best of our abilities. But is professional kudos not too dearly bought at the price

of a loved one lost for ever? A far better bargain would be, shall we say, ten thousand pounds, as the price of a silk handkerchief———"

Kerry's fierce blue eyes closed for a fraction of a second. Yet, in that fraction of a second, he had visualized some of the things which ten thousand pounds—a sum he could never hope to possess—would buy. He had seen his home, as he would have it— and he had seen Dan there, safe and happy at his mother's side. Was he entitled to disregard the happiness of his wife, the life of his boy, the honourable name of Sir Noel Rourke, because an outcast like Peters had come to a fitting end—because a treacherous Malay and a renegade Chinaman had, earlier, gone the same way, sped, as he suspected, by the same hand?

"My resources are unusual," added Chada, speaking almost in a whisper. "I have cash to this amount in my safe———"

So far he had proceeded when he was interrupted; and the cause of the interruption was this:

A few moments earlier another dramatic encounter had taken place in a distant part of the house. Kerry Junior, having scientifically tested all the possible modes of egress from the room in which Lady Pat was confined, had long ago desisted, and had exhausted his ingenuity in plans which discussion had proved to be useless. In spite of the novelty and the danger of his situation, nature was urging her laws. He was growing sleepy. The crowning tragedy had been the discovery that he could not regain the small, square window set high in the wall from which he had dropped into this luxurious prison. Now, as the two sat side by side upon a cushioned divan, the woman's arm about the boy's shoulders, they were startled to hear, in the depths of the house, three notes of a gong.

Young Kerry's sleepiness departed. He leapt to his feet as though electrified.

"What was that?"

There was something horrifying in those gong notes in the stillness of the night. Lady Pat's beautiful eyes grew glassy with fear.

"I don't know," replied Dan. "It seemed to come from below."

He ran to the door, drew the curtain aside, and pressed his ear against one of the panels, listening intently. As he did so, his attitude grew tense, his expression changed, then:

"We're saved!" he cried, turning a radiant face to the woman. "I heard my father's voice!"

"Oh, are you sure, are you sure?"

"Absolutely sure!"

He bent to press his ear to the panel again, when a stifled cry from his companion brought him swiftly to his feet. The second door in the room had opened silently, and a small Chinaman, who carried himself with a stoop, had entered, and now, a menacing expression upon his face, was quickly approaching the boy.

What he had meant to do for ever remained in doubt, for young Kerry, knowing his father to be in the house and seeing an open door before him, took matters into his own hands. At the moment that the silent Chinaman was about to throw his arms about him, the pride of the junior school registered a most surprising left accurately on the point of Ah Fang's jaw, following it up by a wilful transgression of Queensberry rules in the form of a stomach punch which temporarily decided the issue. Then:

"Quick! quick!" he cried breathlessly, grasping Lady Pat's hand. "This is where we run!"

In such fashion was Zani Chada interrupted, the interruption taking the form of a sudden, shrill outcry:

"Dad! dad! Where are you, dad?"

Kerry spun about as a man galvanized. His face became transfigured.

"This way, Dan!" he cried. "This way, boy!"

Came a clatter of hurrying feet, and into the low, perfumed room burst Dan Kerry, junior, tightly clasping the hand of a pale- faced, dishevelled woman in evening dress. It was Lady Rourke; and although she seemed to be in a nearly fainting condition, Dan dragged her, half running, into the room.

Kerry gave one glance at the pair, then, instantly, he turned to face Zani Chada. The latter, like a man of stone, sat in his carved chair, eyes nearly closed. The Chief Inspector whipped out a whistle and raised it to his lips. He blew three blasts upon it.

From one—two—three—four points around the house the signal was answered.

Zani Chada fully opened his long, basilisk eyes.

"You win, Chief Inspector," he said. "But much may be done by clever counsel. If all fails———"

"Well?" rapped Kerry fiercely, at the same time throwing his arm around the boy.

"I may continue to take an interest in your affairs."

A tremendous uproar arose, within and without the house. The police were raiding the place. Lady Rourke sank down, slowly, almost at the Eurasian's feet.

But Chief Inspector Kerry experienced an unfamiliar chill as his uncompromising stare met the cold hatred which blazed out of the black eyes, narrowed, now, and serpentine, of Zani Chada.

THE PIGTAIL OF HI WING HO

I. HOW I OBTAINED IT

Leaving the dock gates behind me I tramped through the steady drizzle, going parallel with the river and making for the Chinese quarter. The hour was about half-past eleven on one of those September nights when, in such a locality as this, a stifling quality seems to enter the atmosphere, rendering it all but unbreathable. A mist floated over the river, and it was difficult to say if the rain was still falling, indeed, or if the ample moisture upon my garments was traceable only to the fog. Sounds were muffled, lights dimmed, and the frequent hooting of sirens from the river added another touch of weirdness to the scene.

Even when the peculiar duties of my friend, Paul Harley, called him away from England, the lure of this miniature Orient which I had first explored under his guidance, often called me from my chambers. In the house with the two doors in Wade Street, Limehouse, I would discard the armour of respectability, and, dressed in a manner unlikely to provoke comment in dockland, would haunt those dreary ways sometimes from

midnight until close upon dawn. Yet, well as I knew the district and the strange and often dangerous creatures lurking in its many burrows, I experienced a chill partly physical and partly of apprehension to-night; indeed, strange though it may sound, I hastened my footsteps in order the sooner to reach the low den for which I was bound—Malay Jack's—a spot marked plainly on the crimes-map and which few respectable travellers would have regarded as a haven of refuge.

But the chill of the adjacent river, and some quality of utter desolation which seemed to emanate from the deserted wharves and ramshackle buildings about me, were driving me thither now; for I knew that human companionship, of a sort, and a glass of good liquor—from a store which the Customs would have been happy to locate—awaited me there. I might chance, too, upon Durham or Wessex, of New Scotland Yard, both good friends of mine, or even upon the Terror of Chinatown, Chief Inspector Kerry, a man for whom I had an esteem which none of his ungracious manners could diminish.

I was just about to turn to the right into a narrow and nameless alley, lying at right angles to the Thames, when I pulled up sharply, clenching my fists and listening.

A confused and continuous sound, not unlike that which might be occasioned by several large and savage hounds at close grips, was proceeding out of the darkness ahead of me; a worrying, growling, and scuffling which presently I identified as human, although in fact it was animal enough. A moment I hesitated, then, distinguishing among the sounds of conflict an unmistakable, though subdued, cry for help, I leaped forward and found myself in the midst of the melee. This was taking place in the lee of a high, dilapidated brick wall. A lamp in a sort of iron bracket spluttered dimly above on the right, but the scene of the conflict lay in densest shadow, so that the figures were indistinguishable.

"Help! By Gawd! they're strangling me———"

From almost at my feet the cry arose and was drowned in Chinese chattering. But guided by it I now managed to make out that the struggle in progress waged between a burly English sailorman and two lithe Chinese. The yellow men seemed to have gained the advantage and my course was clear.

A straight right on the jaw of the Chinaman who was engaged in endeavouring to throttle the victim laid him prone in the dirty roadway. His companion, who was holding the wrist of the recumbent man, sprang upright as though propelled by a spring. I struck out at him savagely. He uttered a shrill scream not unlike that of a stricken hare, and fled so rapidly that he seemed to melt in the mist.

"Gawd bless you, mate!" came chokingly from the ground—and the rescued man, extricating himself from beneath the body of his stunned assailant, rose unsteadily to his feet and lurched toward me.

As I had surmised, he was a sailor, wearing a rough, blue-serge jacket and having his greasy trousers thrust into heavy seaboots—by which I judged that he was but newly come ashore. He stooped and picked up his cap. It was covered in mud, as were the rest of his garments, but he brushed it with his sleeve as though it had been but slightly soiled and clapped it on his head.

He grasped my hand in a grip of iron, peering into my face, and his breath was eloquent.

"I'd had one or two, mate," he confided huskily (the confession was unnecessary). "It was them two in the Blue Anchor as did it; if I 'adn't 'ad them last two, I could 'ave broke up them Chinks with one 'and tied behind me."

"That's all right," I said hastily, "but what are we going to do about this Chink here?" I added, endeavouring at the same time to extricate my hand from the vise-like grip in which he persistently held it. "He hit the tiles pretty heavy when he went down."

As if to settle my doubts, the recumbent figure suddenly arose and without a word fled into the darkness and was gone like a phantom. My new friend made no attempt to follow, but:

"You can't kill a bloody Chink," he confided, still clutching my hand; "it ain't 'umanly possible. It's easier to kill a cat. Come along o' me and 'ave one; then I'll tell you somethink. I'll put you on somethink, I will."

With surprising steadiness of gait, considering the liquid cargo he had aboard, the man, releasing my hand and now seizing me firmly by the arm, confidently led me by divers narrow ways, which I knew, to a little beerhouse frequented by persons of his class.

My own attire was such as to excite no suspicion in these surroundings, and although I considered that my acquaintance had imbibed more than enough for one night, I let him have his own way in order that I might learn the story which he seemed disposed to confide in me. Settled in the corner of the beerhouse—which chanced to be nearly empty—with portentous pewters before us, the conversation was opened by my new friend:

"I've been paid off from the Jupiter—Samuelson's Planet Line," he explained. "What I am is a fireman."

"She was from Singapore to London?" I asked.

"She was," he replied, "and it was at Suez it 'appened—at Suez."

I did not interrupt him.

"I was ashore at Suez—we all was, owin' to a 'itch with the canal company—a matter of money, I may say. They make yer pay before they'll take yer through. Do you know that?"

I nodded.

"Suez is a place," he continued, "where they don't sell whisky, only poison. Was you ever at Suez?"

Again I nodded, being most anxious to avoid diverting the current of my friend's thoughts.

"Well, then," he continued, "you know Greek Jimmy's—and that's where I'd been."

I did not know Greek Jimmy's, but I thought it unnecessary to mention the fact.

"It was just about this time on a steamin' 'ot night as I come out of Jimmy's and started for the ship. I was walkin' along the Waghorn Quay, same as I might be walkin' along to-night, all by myself—bit of a list to port but nothing much—full o' joy an' happiness, 'appy an' free—'appy an' free. Just like you might have noticed to-night, I noticed a knot of Chinks scrappin' on the ground all amongst the dust right in front of me. I rammed in, windmillin' all round and knocking 'em down like skittles. Seemed to me there was about ten of 'em, but allowin' for Jimmy's whisky, maybe there wasn't more than three. Anyway, they all shifted and left me standin' there in the empty street with this 'ere in my 'and."

At that, without more ado, he thrust his hand deep into some concealed pocket and jerked out a Chinese pigtail, which had been severed, apparently some three inches from the scalp, by a clean cut. My acquaintance, with

somewhat bleared eyes glistening in appreciation of his own dramatic skill—for I could not conceal my surprise—dangled it before me triumphantly.

"Which of 'em it belong to," he continued, thrusting it into another pocket and drumming loudly on the counter for more beer, "I can't say, 'cos I don't know. But that ain't all."

The tankards being refilled and my friend having sampled the contents of his own:

"That ain't all," he continued. "I thought I'd keep it as a sort of relic, like. What 'appened? I'll tell you. Amongst the crew there's three Chinks—see? We ain't through the canal before one of 'em, a new one to me—Li Ping is his name—offers me five bob for the pigtail, which he sees me looking at one mornin'. I give him a punch on the nose an' 'e don't renew the offer: but that night (we're layin' at Port Said) 'e tries to pinch it! I dam' near broke his neck, and 'e don't try any more. To-night"—he extended his right arm forensically—"a deppitation of Chinks waits on me at the dock gates; they explains as from a patriotic point of view they feels it to be their dooty to buy that pigtail off of me, and they bids a quid, a bar of gold—a Jimmy o' Goblin!"

He snapped his fingers contemptuously and emptied his pewter. A sense of what was coming began to dawn on me. That the "hold-up" near the riverside formed part of the scheme was possible, and, reflecting on my rough treatment of the two Chinamen, I chuckled inwardly. Possibly, however, the scheme had germinated in my acquaintance's mind merely as a result of an otherwise common assault, of a kind not unusual in these parts, but, whether elaborate or comparatively simple, that the story of the pigtail was a "plant" designed to reach my pocket, seemed a reasonable hypothesis.

"I told him to go to China," concluded the object of my suspicion, again rapping upon the counter, "and you see what come of it. All I got to say is this: If they're so bloody patriotic, I says one thing: I ain't the man to stand in their way. You done me a good turn to-night, mate; I'm doing you one. 'Ere's the bloody pigtail, 'ere's my empty mug. Fill the mug and the pigtail's yours. It's good for a quid at the dock gates any day!"

My suspicions vanished; my interest arose to boiling point. I refilled my acquaintance's mug, pressed a sovereign upon him (in honesty I must confess that he was loath to take it), and departed with the pigtail coiled neatly in an inner pocket of my jacket. I entered the house in Wade Street

by the side door, and half an hour later let myself out by the front door, having cast off my dockland disguise.

II. HOW I LOST IT

It was not until the following evening that I found leisure to examine my strange acquisition, for affairs of more immediate importance engrossed my attention. But at about ten o'clock I seated myself at my table, lighted the lamp, and taking out the pigtail from the table drawer, placed it on the blotting-pad and began to examine it with the greatest curiosity, for few Chinese affect the pigtail nowadays.

I had scarcely commenced my examination, however, when it was dramatically interrupted. The door bell commenced to ring jerkily. I stood up, and as I did so the ringing ceased and in its place came a muffled beating on the door. I hurried into the passage as the bell commenced ringing again, and I had almost reached the door when once more the ringing ceased; but now I could hear a woman's voice, low but agitated:

"Open the door! Oh, for God's sake be quick!"

Completely mystified, and not a little alarmed, I threw open the door, and in there staggered a woman heavily veiled, so that I could see little of her features, but by the lines of her figure I judged her to be young.

Uttering a sort of moan of terror she herself closed the door, and stood with her back to it, watching me through the thick veil, while her breast rose and fell tumultuously.

"Thank God there was someone at home!" she gasped.

I think I may say with justice that I had never been so surprised in my life; every particular of the incident marked it as unique—set it apart from the episodes of everyday life.

"Madam," I began doubtfully, "you seem to be much alarmed at something, and if I can be of any assistance to you———"

"You have saved my life!" she whispered, and pressed one hand to her bosom. "In a moment I will explain."

"Won't you rest a little after your evidently alarming experience?" I suggested.

My strange visitor nodded, without speaking, and I conducted her to the study which I had just left, and placed the most comfortable arm-chair close beside the table so that as I sat I might study this woman who so strangely had burst in upon me. I even tilted the shaded lamp, artlessly, a trick I had learned from Harley, in order that the light might fall upon her face.

She may have detected this device; I know not; but as if in answer to its challenge, she raised her gloved hands and unfastened the heavy veil which had concealed her features.

Thereupon I found myself looking into a pair of lustrous black eyes whose almond shape was that of the Orient; I found myself looking at a woman who, since she was evidently a Jewess, was probably no older than eighteen or nineteen, but whose beauty was ripely voluptuous, who might fittingly have posed for Salome, who, despite her modern fashionable garments, at once suggested to my mind the wanton beauty of the daughter of Herodias.

I stared at her silently for a time, and presently her full lips parted in a slow smile. My ideas were diverted into another channel.

"You have yet to tell me what alarmed you," I said in a low voice, but as courteously as possible, "and if I can be of any assistance in the matter."

My visitor seemed to recollect her fright—or the necessity for simulation. The pupils of her fine eyes seemed to grow larger and darker; she pressed her white teeth into her lower lips, and resting her hands upon the table leaned toward me.

"I am a stranger to London," she began, now exhibiting a certain diffidence, "and to-night I was looking for the chambers of Mr Raphael Philips of Figtree Court."

"This is Figtree Court," I said, "but I know of no Mr Raphael Philips who has chambers here."

The black eyes met mine despairingly.

"But I am positive of the address!" protested my beautiful but strange caller—from her left glove she drew out a scrap of paper, "here it is."

I glanced at the fragment, upon which, in a woman's hand the words were pencilled: "Mr Raphael Philips, 36-b Figtree Court, London."

I stared at my visitor, deeply mystified.

"These chambers are 36-b!" I said. "But I am not Raphael Philips, nor have I ever heard of him. My name is Malcolm Knox. There is evidently

some mistake, but"—returning the slip of paper—"pardon me if I remind you, I have yet to learn the cause of your alarm."

"I was followed across the court and up the stairs."

"Followed! By whom?"

"By a dreadful-looking man, chattering in some tongue I did not understand!"

My amazement was momentarily growing greater.

"What kind of a man?" I demanded rather abruptly.

"A yellow-faced man—remember I could only just distinguish him in the darkness on the stairway, and see little more of him than his eyes at that, and his ugly gleaming teeth—oh! it was horrible!"

"You astound me," I said; "the thing is utterly incomprehensible." I switched off the light of the lamp. "I'll see if there's any sign of him in the court below."

"Oh, don't leave me! For heaven's sake don't leave me alone!"

She clutched my arm in the darkness.

"Have no fear; I merely propose to look out from this window."

Suiting the action to the word, I peered down into the court below. It was quite deserted. The night was a very dark one, and there were many patches of shadow in which a man might have lain concealed.

"I can see no one," I said, speaking as confidently as possible, and relighting the lamp, "if I call a cab for you and see you safely into it, you will have nothing to fear, I think."

"I have a cab waiting," she replied, and lowering the veil she stood up to go.

"Kindly allow me to see you to it. I am sorry you have been subjected to this annoyance, especially as you have not attained the object of your visit."

"Thank you so much for your kindness; there must be some mistake about the address, of course."

She clung to my arm very tightly as we descended the stairs, and often glanced back over her shoulder affrightedly, as we crossed the court. There was not a sign of anyone about, however, and I could not make up my mind whether the story of the yellow man was a delusion or a fabrication. I inclined to the latter theory, but the object of such a deception was more difficult to determine.

Sure enough, a taxicab was waiting at the entrance to the court; and my visitor, having seated herself within, extended her hand to me, and even through the thick veil I could detect her brilliant smile.

"Thank you so much, Mr Knox," she said, "and a thousand apologies. I am sincerely sorry to have given you all this trouble."

The cab drove off. For a moment I stood looking after it, in a state of dreamy incertitude, then turned and slowly retraced my steps. Reopening the door of my chambers with my key, I returned to my study and sat down at the table to endeavour to arrange the facts of what I recognized to be a really amazing episode. The adventure, trifling though it seemed, undoubtedly held some hidden significance that at present was not apparent to me. In accordance with the excellent custom of my friend, Paul Harley, I prepared to make notes of the occurrence while the facts were still fresh in my memory. At the moment that I was about to begin, I made an astounding discovery.

Although I had been absent only a few minutes, and had locked my door behind me, the pigtail was gone!

I sat quite still, listening intently. The woman's story of the yellow man on the stairs suddenly assumed a totally different aspect—a new and sinister aspect. Could it be that the pigtail was at the bottom of the mystery?—could it be that some murderous Chinaman who had been lurking in hiding, waiting his opportunity, had in some way gained access to my chambers during that brief absence? If so, was he gone?

From the table drawer I took out a revolver, ascertained that it was fully loaded, and turning up light after light as I proceeded, conducted a room-to-room search. It was without result; there was absolutely nothing to indicate that anyone had surreptitiously entered or departed from my chambers.

I returned to the study and sat gazing at the revolver lying on the blotting-pad before me. Perhaps my mind worked slowly, but I think that fully fifteen minutes must have passed before it dawned on me that the explanation not only of the missing pigtail but of the other incidents of the night, was simple enough. The yellow man had been a fabrication, and my dark-eyed visitor had not been in quest of "Raphael Philips," but in quest of the pigtail: and her quest had been successful!

"What a hopeless fool I am!" I cried, and banged my fist down upon the table, "there was no yellow man at all—there was———-"

My door bell rang. I sprang nervously to my feet, glanced at the revolver on the table—and finally dropped it into my coat pocket ere going out and opening the door.

On the landing stood a police constable and an officer in plain clothes.

"Your name is Malcolm Knox?" asked the constable, glancing at a note-book which he held in his hand.

"It is," I replied.

"You are required to come at once to Bow Street to identify a woman who was found murdered in a taxi-cab in the Strand about eleven o'clock to-night."

I suppressed an exclamation of horror; I felt myself turning pale.

"But what has it to do———"

"The driver stated she came from your chambers, for you saw her off, and her last words to you were 'Good night, Mr Knox, I am sincerely sorry to have given you all this trouble.' Is that correct, sir?"

The constable, who had read out the information in an official voice, now looked at me, as I stood there stupefied.

"It is," I said blankly. "I'll come at once." It would seem that I had misjudged my unfortunate visitor: her story of the yellow man on the stair had apparently been not a fabrication, but a gruesome fact!

III. HOW I REGAINED IT

My ghastly duty was performed; I had identified the dreadful thing, which less than an hour before had been a strikingly beautiful woman, as my mysterious visitor. The police were palpably disappointed at the sparsity of my knowledge respecting her. In fact, had it not chanced that Detective Sergeant Durham was in the station, I think they would have doubted the accuracy of my story.

As a man of some experience in such matters, I fully recognized its improbability, but beyond relating the circumstances leading up to my possession of the pigtail and the events which had ensued, I could do no more in the matter. The weird relic had not been found on the dead woman, nor in the cab.

Now the unsavoury business was finished, and I walked along Bow Street, racking my mind for the master-key to this mystery in which I was become enmeshed. How I longed to rush off to Harley's rooms in Chancery Lane and to tell him the whole story! But my friend was a thousand miles away—and I had to see the thing out alone.

That the pigtail was some sacred relic stolen from a Chinese temple and sought for by its fanatical custodians was a theory which persistently intruded itself. But I could find no place in that hypothesis for the beautiful Jewess; and that she was intimately concerned I did not doubt. A cool survey of the facts rendered it fairly evident that it was she and none other who had stolen the pigtail from my rooms. Some third party—possibly the "yellow man" of whom she had spoken—had in turn stolen it from her, strangling her in the process.

The police theory of the murder (and I was prepared to accept it) was that the assassin had been crouching in hiding behind or beside the cab—or even within the dark interior. He had leaped in and attacked the woman at the moment that the taxi-man had started his engine; if already inside, the deed had proven even easier. Then, during some block in the traffic, he had slipped out unseen, leaving the body of the victim to be discovered when the cab pulled up at the hotel.

I knew of only one place in London where I might hope to obtain useful information, and for that place I was making now. It was Malay Jack's, whence I had been bound on the previous night when my strange meeting with the seaman who then possessed the pigtail had led to a change of plan. The scum of the Asiatic population always come at one time or another to Jack's, and I hoped by dint of a little patience to achieve what the police had now apparently despaired of achieving—the discovery of the assassin.

Having called at my chambers to obtain my revolver, I mounted an eastward-bound motor-bus. The night, as I have already stated, was exceptionally dark. There was no moon, and heavy clouds were spread over the sky; so that the deserted East End streets presented a sufficiently uninviting aspect, but one with which I was by no means unfamiliar and which certainly in no way daunted me.

Changing at Paul Harley's Chinatown base in Wade Street, I turned my steps in the same direction as upon the preceding night; but if my own will played no part in the matter, then decidedly Providence truly guided me.

Poetic justice is rare enough in real life, yet I was destined to-night to witness swift retribution overtaking a malefactor.

The by-ways which I had trodden were utterly deserted; I was far from the lighted high road, and the only signs of human activity that reached me came from the adjacent river; therefore, when presently an outcry arose from somewhere on my left, for a moment I really believed that my imagination was vividly reproducing the episode of the night before!

A furious scuffle—between a European and an Asiatic—was in progress not twenty yards away!

Realizing that such was indeed the case, and that I was not the victim of hallucination, I advanced slowly in the direction of the sounds, but my footsteps reechoed hollowly from wall to wall of the narrow passage-way, and my coming brought the conflict to a sudden and dramatic termination.

"Thought I wouldn't know yer ugly face, did yer?" yelled a familiar voice. "No good squealin'—I got yer! I'd bust you up if I could!" (a sound of furious blows and inarticulate chattering) "but it ain't 'umanly possible to kill a Chink———"

I hurried forward toward the spot where two dim figures were locked in deadly conflict.

"Take that to remember me by!" gasped the husky voice as I ran up.

One of the figures collapsed in a heap upon the ground. The other made off at a lumbering gait along a second and even narrower passage branching at right angles from that in which the scuffle had taken place.

The clatter of the heavy sea-boots died away in the distance. I stood beside the fallen man, looking keenly about to right and left; for an impression was strong upon me that another than I had been witness of the scene—that a shadowy form had slunk back furtively at my approach. But the night gave up no sound in confirmation of this, and I could detect no sign of any lurker.

I stooped over the Chinaman (for a Chinaman it was) who lay at my feet, and directed the ray of my pocket-lamp upon his yellow and contorted countenance. I suppressed a cry of surprise and horror.

Despite the human impossibility referred to by the missing fireman, this particular Chinaman had joined the shades of his ancestors. I think that final blow, which had felled him, had brought his shaven skull in such violent contact with the wall that he had died of the thundering concussion set up.

Kneeling there and looking into his upturned eyes, I became aware that my position was not an enviable one, particularly since I felt little disposed to set the law on the track of the real culprit. For this man who now lay dead at my feet was doubtless one of the pair who had attempted the life of the fireman of the Jupiter.

That my seafaring acquaintance had designed to kill the Chinaman I did not believe, despite his stormy words: the death had been an accident, and (perhaps my morality was over-broad) I considered the assault to have been justified.

Now my ideas led me further yet. The dead Chinaman wore a rough blue coat, and gingerly, for I found the contact repulsive, I inserted my hand into the inside pocket. Immediately my fingers closed upon a familiar object—and I stood up, whistling slightly, and dangling in my left hand the missing pigtail!

Beyond doubt Justice had guided the seaman's blows. This was the man who had murdered my dark-eyed visitor!

I stood perfectly still, directing the little white ray of my flashlight upon the pigtail in my hand. I realized that my position, difficult before, now was become impossible; the possession of the pigtail compromised me hopelessly. What should I do?

"My God!" I said aloud, "what does it all mean?"

"It means," said a gruff voice, "that it was lucky I was following you and saw what happened!"

I whirled about, my heart leaping wildly. Detective-Sergeant Durham was standing watching me, a grim smile upon his face!

I laughed rather shakily.

"Lucky indeed!" I said. "Thank God you're here. This pigtail is a nightmare which threatens to drive me mad!"

The detective advanced and knelt beside the crumpled-up figure on the ground. He examined it briefly, and then stood up.

"The fact that he had the missing pigtail in his pocket," he said, "is proof enough to my mind that he did the murder."

"And to mine."

"There's another point," he added, "which throws a lot of light on the matter. You and Mr Harley were out of town at the time of the Huang Chow

case; but the Chief and I outlined it, you remember, one night in Mr Harley's rooms?"

"I remember it perfectly; the giant spider in the coffin———"

"Yes; and a certain Ah Fu, confidential servant of the old man, who used to buy the birds the thing fed on. Well, Mr Knox, Huang Chow was the biggest dealer in illicit stuff in all the East End—and this battered thing at our feet is—Ah Fu!"

"Huang Chow's servant?"

"Exactly!"

I stared, uncomprehendingly, and:

"In what way does this throw light on the matter?" I asked.

Durham—a very intelligent young officer—smiled significantly.

"I begin to see light!" he declared. "The gentleman who made off just as I arrived on the scene probably had a private quarrel with the Chinaman and was otherwise not concerned in any way."

"I am disposed to agree with you," I said guardedly.

"Of course, you've no idea of his identity?"

"I'm afraid not."

"We may find him," mused the officer, glancing at me shrewdly, "by applying at the offices of the Planet Line, but I rather doubt it. Also I rather doubt if we'll look very far. He's saved us a lot of trouble, but"—peering about in the shadowy corners which abounded—"didn't I see somebody else lurking around here?"

"I'm almost certain there was someone else!" I cried. "In fact, I could all but swear to it."

"H'm!" said the detective. "He's not here now. Might I trouble you to walk along to Limehouse Police Station for the ambulance? I'd better stay here."

I agreed at once, and started off.

Thus a second time my plans were interrupted, for my expedition that night ultimately led me to Bow Street, whence, after certain formalities had been observed, I departed for my chambers, the mysterious pigtail in my pocket. Failing the presence of Durham, the pigtail must have been retained as evidence, but:

"We shall know where to find it if it's wanted, Mr Knox," said the Yard man, "and I can trust you to look after your own property."

The clock of St. Paul's was chiming the hour of two when I locked the door of my chambers and prepared to turn in. The clangour of the final strokes yet vibrated through the night's silence when someone set my own door bell loudly ringing.

With an exclamation of annoyance I shot back the bolts and threw open the door.

A Chinaman stood outside upon the mat!

IV. HOW IT ALL ENDED

"Me wishee see you," said the apparition, smiling blandly; "me comee in?"

"Come in, by all means," I said without enthusiasm, and, switching on the light in my study, I admitted the Chinaman and stood facing him with an expression upon my face which I doubt not was the reverse of agreeable.

My visitor, who wore a slop-shop suit, also wore a wide-brimmed bowler hat; now, the set bland smile still upon his yellow face, he removed the bowler and pointed significantly to his skull.

His pigtail had been severed some three inches from the root!

"You gotchee my pigtail," he explained; "me callee get it—thank you."

"Thank you," I said grimly. "But I must ask you to establish your claim rather more firmly."

"Yessir," agreed the Chinaman.

And thereupon in tolerable pidgin English he unfolded his tale. He proclaimed his name to be Hi Wing Ho, and his profession that of a sailor, or so I understood him. While ashore at Suez he had become embroiled with some drunken seamen: knives had been drawn, and in the scuffle by some strange accident his pigtail had been severed. He had escaped from the conflict, badly frightened, and had run a great distance before he realized his loss. Since Southern Chinamen of his particular Tong hold their pigtails in the highest regard, he had instituted inquiries as soon as possible, and had presently learned from a Chinese member of the crew of the S.S. Jupiter that the precious queue had fallen into the hands of a fireman on that vessel. He (Hi Wing Ho) had shipped on the first available steamer bound

for England, having in the meanwhile communicated with his friend on the Jupiter respecting the recovery of the pigtail.

"What was the name of your friend on the Jupiter?"

"Him Li Ping—yessir!"—without the least hesitation or hurry.

I nodded. "Go on," I said.

He arrived at the London docks very shortly after the Jupiter. Indeed, the crew of the latter vessel had not yet been paid off when Hi Wing Ho presented himself at the dock gates. He admitted that, finding the fireman so obdurate, he and his friend Li Ping had resorted to violence, but he did not seem to recognize me as the person who had frustrated their designs. Thus far I found his story credible enough, excepting the accidental severing of the pigtail at Suez, but now it became wildly improbable, for he would have me believe that Li Ping, or Ah Fu, obtaining possession of the pigtail (in what manner Hi Wing Ho protested that he knew not) he sought to hold it to ransom, knowing how highly Hi Wing Ho valued it.

I glared sternly at the Chinaman, but his impassive countenance served him well. That he was lying to me I no longer doubted; for Ah Fu could not have hoped to secure such a price as would justify his committing murder; furthermore, the presence of the unfortunate Jewess in the case was not accounted for by the ingenious narrative of Hi Wing Ho. I was standing staring at him and wondering what course to adopt, when yet again my restless door-bell clamoured in the silence.

Hi Wing Ho started nervously, exhibiting the first symptoms of alarm which I had perceived in him. My mind was made up in an instant. I took my revolver from the drawer and covered him.

"Be good enough to open the door, Hi Wing Ho," I said coldly.

He shrank from me, pouring forth voluble protestations.

"Open the door!"

I clenched my left fist and advanced upon him. He scuttled away with his odd Chinese gait and threw open the door. Standing before me I saw my friend Detective Sergeant Durham, and with him a remarkably tall and very large-boned man whose square-jawed face was deeply tanned and whose aspect was dourly Scottish.

When the piercing eyes of this stranger rested upon Hi Wing Ho an expression which I shall never forget entered into them; an expression coldly murderous. As for the Chinaman, he literally crumpled up.

"You rat!" roared the stranger.

Taking one long stride he stooped upon the Chinaman, seized him by the back of the neck as a terrier might seize a rat, and lifted him to his feet.

"The mystery of the pigtail, Mr Knox," said the detective, "is solved at last."

"Have ye got it?" demanded the Scotsman, turning to me, but without releasing his hold upon the neck of Hi Wing Ho.

I took the pigtail from my pocket and dangled it before his eyes.

"Suppose you come into my study," I said, "and explain matters."

We entered the room which had been the scene of so many singular happenings. The detective and I seated ourselves, but the Scotsman, holding the Chinaman by the neck as though he had been some inanimate bundle, stood just within the doorway, one of the most gigantic specimens of manhood I had ever set eyes upon.

"You do the talking, sir," he directed the detective; "ye have all the facts."

While Durham talked, then, we all listened—excepting the Chinaman, who was past taking an intelligent interest in anything, and who, to judge from his starting eyes, was being slowly strangled.

"The gentleman," said Durham—"Mr Nicholson—arrived two days ago from the East. He is a buyer for a big firm of diamond merchants, and some weeks ago a valuable diamond was stolen from him———"

"By this!" interrupted the Scotsman, shaking the wretched Hi Wing Ho terrier fashion.

"By Hi Wing Ho," explained the detective, "whom you see before you. The theft was a very ingenious one, and the man succeeded in getting away with his haul. He tried to dispose of the diamond to a certain Isaac Cohenberg, a Singapore moneylender; but Isaac Cohenberg was the bigger crook of the two. Hi Wing Ho only escaped from the establishment of Cohenberg by dint of sandbagging the moneylender, and quitted the town by a boat which left the same night. On the voyage he was indiscreet enough to take the diamond from its hiding-place and surreptitiously to examine it. Another member of the Chinese crew, one Li Ping— otherwise Ah Fu, the accredited agent of old Huang Chow!—was secretly watching our friend, and, knowing that he possessed this valuable jewel, he also learned where he kept it hidden. At Suez Ah Fu attacked Hi Wing Ho and secured possession of the diamond. It was to secure possession of the

diamond that Ah Fu had gone out East. I don't doubt it. He employed Hi Wing Ho—and Hi Wing Ho tried to double on him!

"We are indebted to you, Mr Knox, for some of the data upon which we have reconstructed the foregoing and also for the next link in the narrative. A fireman ashore from the Jupiter intruded upon the scene at Suez and deprived Ah Fu of the fruits of his labours. Hi Wing Ho seems to have been badly damaged in the scuffle, but Ah Fu, the more wily of the two, evidently followed the fireman, and, deserting from his own ship, signed on with the Jupiter."

While this story was enlightening in some respects, it was mystifying in others. I did not interrupt, however, for Durham immediately resumed:

"The drama was complicated by the presence of a fourth character—the daughter of Cohenberg. Realizing that a small fortune had slipped through his fingers, the old moneylender dispatched his daughter in pursuit of Hi Wing Ho, having learned upon which vessel the latter had sailed. He had no difficulty in obtaining this information, for he is in touch with all the crooks of the town. Had he known that the diamond had been stolen by an agent of Huang Chow, he would no doubt have hesitated. Huang Chow has an international reputation.

"However, his daughter—a girl of great personal beauty—relied upon her diplomatic gifts to regain possession of the stone, but, poor creature, she had not counted with Ah Fu, who was evidently watching your chambers (while Hi Wing Ho, it seems, was assiduously shadowing Ah Fu!). How she traced the diamond from point to point of its travels we do not know, and probably never shall know, but she was undeniably clever and unscrupulous. Poor girl! She came to a dreadful end. Mr Nicholson, here, identified her at Bow Street to-night."

Now the whole amazing truth burst upon me.

"I understand!" I cried. "This"—and I snatched up the pigtail—

"That my pigtail," moaned Hi Wing Ho feebly.

Mr Nicholson pitched him unceremoniously into a corner of the room, and taking the pigtail in his huge hand, clumsily unfastened it. Out from the thick part, some two inches below the point at which it had been cut from the Chinaman's head, a great diamond dropped upon the floor!

For perhaps twenty seconds there was perfect silence in my study. No one stooped to pick the diamond from the floor—the diamond which now

had blood upon it. No one, so far as my sense informed me, stirred. But when, following those moments of stupefaction, we all looked up—Hi Wing Ho, like a phantom, had faded from the room!

THE HOUSE OF GOLDEN JOSS

I. THE BLOOD-STAINED IDOL

"Stop when we pass the next lamp and give me a light for my pipe."

"Why?"

"No! don't look round," warned my companion. "I think someone is following us. And it is always advisable to be on guard in this neighbourhood."

We had nearly reached the house in Wade Street, Limehouse, which my friend used as a base for East End operations. The night was dark but clear, and I thought that presently when dawn came it would bring a cold, bright morning. There was no moon, and as we passed the lamp and paused we stood in almost total darkness.

Facing in the direction of the Council School I struck a match. It revealed my ruffianly looking companion—in whom his nearest friends must have failed to recognize Mr Paul Harley of Chancery Lane.

He was glancing furtively back along the street, and when a moment later we moved on, I too, had detected the presence of a figure stumbling toward us.

"Don't stop at the door," whispered Harley, for our follower was only a few yards away.

Accordingly we passed the house in which Harley had rooms, and had proceeded some fifteen paces farther when the man who was following us stumbled in between Harley and myself, clutching an arm of either. I scarcely knew what to expect, but was prepared for anything, when:

"Mates!" said a man huskily. "Mates, if you know where I can get a drink, take me there!"

Harley laughed shortly. I cannot say if he remained suspicious of the newcomer, but for my own part I had determined after one glance at the man that he was merely a drunken fireman newly recovered from a prolonged debauch.

"Where 'ave yer been, old son?" growled Harley, in that wonderful dialect of his which I had so often and so vainly sought to cultivate. "You look as though you'd 'ad one too many already."

"I ain't," declared the fireman, who appeared to be in a semi- dazed condition. "I ain't 'ad one since ten o'clock last night. It's dope wot's got me, not rum."

"Dope!" said Harley sharply; "been 'avin' a pipe, eh?"

"If you've got a corpse-reviver anywhere," continued the man in that curious, husky voice, "'ave pity on me, mate. I seen a thing to-night wot give me the jim-jams."

"All right, old son," said my friend good-humouredly; "about turn! I've got a drop in the bottle, but me an' my mate sails to-morrow, an' it's the last."

"Gawd bless yer!" growled the fireman; and the three of us—an odd trio, truly—turned about, retracing our steps.

As we approached the street lamp and its light shone upon the haggard face of the man walking between us, Harley stopped, and:

"Wot's up with yer eye?" he inquired.

He suddenly tilted the man's head upward and peered closely into one of his eyes. I suppressed a gasp of surprise for I instantly recognized the fireman of the Jupiter!

"Nothin' up with it, is there?" said the fireman.

"Only a lump o' mud," growled Harley, and with a very dirty handkerchief he pretended to remove the imaginary stain, and then, turning to me:

"Open the door, Jim," he directed.

His examination of the man's eyes had evidently satisfied him that our acquaintance had really been smoking opium.

We paused immediately outside the house for which we had been bound, and as I had the key I opened the door and the three of us stepped into a

little dark room. Harley closed the door and we stumbled upstairs to a low first-floor apartment facing the street. There was nothing in its appointments, as revealed in the light of an oil lamp burning on the solitary table, to distinguish it from a thousand other such apartments which may be leased for a few shillings a week in the neighbourhood. That adjoining might have told a different story, for it more closely resembled an actor's dressing-room than a seaman's lodging; but the door of this sanctum was kept scrupulously locked.

"Sit down, old son," said my friend heartily, pushing forward an old arm-chair. "Fetch out the grog, Jim; there's about enough for three."

I walked to a cupboard, as the fireman sank limply down in the chair, and took out a bottle and three glasses. When the man, who, as I could now see quite plainly, was suffering from the after effects of opium, had eagerly gulped the stiff drink which I handed to him, he looked around with dim, glazed eyes, and:

"You've saved my life, mates," he declared. "I've 'ad a 'orrible nightmare, I 'ave—a nightmare. See?"

He fixed his eyes on me for a moment, then raised himself from his seat, peering narrowly at me across the table.

"I seed you before, mate. Gaw, blimey! if you ain't the bloke wot I giv'd the pigtail to! And wot laid out that blasted Chink as was scraggin' me! Shake, mate!"

I shook hands with him, Harley eyeing me closely the while, in a manner which told me that his quick brain had already supplied the link connecting our doped acquaintance with my strange experience during his absence. At the same time it occurred to me that my fireman friend did not know that Ah Fu was dead, or he would never have broached the subject so openly.

"That's so," I said, and wondered if he required further information.

"It's all right, mate. I don't want to 'ear no more about blinking pigtails—not all my life I don't," and he sat back heavily in his chair and stared at Harley.

"Where have you been?" inquired Harley, as if no interruption had occurred, and then began to reload his pipe: "at Malay Jack's or at Number Fourteen?"

"Neither of 'em!" cried the fireman, some evidence of animation appearing in his face; "I been at Kwen Lung's."

"In Pennyfields?"

"That's 'im, the old bloke with the big joss. I allers goes to see Ma Lorenzo when I'm in Port o' London. I've seen 'er for the last time, mates."

He banged a big and dirty hand upon the table.

"Last night I see murder done, an' only that I know they wouldn't believe me, I'd walk across to Limehouse P'lice Station presently and put the splits on 'em, I would."

Harley, who was seated behind the speaker, glanced at me significantly.

"Sure you wasn't dreamin'?" he inquired facetiously.

"Dreamin'!" cried the man. "Dreams don't leave no blood be'ind, do they?"

"Blood!" I exclaimed.

"That's wot I said—blood! When I woke up this mornin' there was blood all on that grinnin' joss—the blood wot 'ad dripped from 'er shoulders when she fell."

"Eh!" said Harley. "Blood on whose shoulders? Wot the 'ell are you talkin' about, old son?"

"Ere"—the fireman turned in his chair and grasped Harley by the arm —"listen to me, and I'll tell you somethink, I will. I'm goin' in the Seahawk in the mornin' see? But if you want to know somethink, I'll tell yer. Drunk or sober I bars the blasted p'lice, but if you like to tell 'em I'll put you on somethink worth tellin'. Sure the bottle's empty, mates?"

I caught Harley's glance and divided the remainder of the whisky evenly between the three glasses.

"Good 'ealth," said the fireman, and disposed of his share at a draught. "That's bucked me up wonderful."

He lay back in his chair and from a little tobacco-box began to fill a short clay pipe.

"Look 'ere, mates, I'm soberin' up, like, after the smoke, an' I can see, I can see plain, as nobody'll ever believe me. Nobody ever does, worse luck, but 'ere goes. Pass the matches."

He lighted his pipe, and looking about him in a sort of vaguely aggressive way:

"Last night," he resumed, "after I was chucked out of the Dock Gates, I made up my mind to go and smoke a pipe with old Ma Lorenzo. Round I goes to Pennyfields, and she don't seem glad to see me. There's nobody

there only me. Not like the old days when you 'ad to book your seat in advance."

He laughed gruffly.

"She didn't want to let me in at first, said they was watched, that if a Chink 'ad an old pipe wot 'ad b'longed to 'is grandfather it was good enough to get 'im fined fifty quid. Anyway, me bein' an old friend she spread a mat for me and filled me a pipe. I asked after old Kwen Lung, but, of course, 'e was out gamblin', as usual; so after old Ma Lorenzo 'ad made me comfortable an' gone out I 'ad the place to myself, and presently I dozed off and forgot all about bloody ship's bunkers an' nigger-drivin' Scotchmen."

He paused and looked about him defiantly.

"I dunno 'ow long I slept," he continued, "but some time in the night I kind of 'alf woke up."

At that he twisted violently in his chair and glared across at Harley:

"You been a pal to me," he said; "but tell me I was dreamin' again and I'll smash yer bloody face!"

He glared for a while, then addressing his narrative more particularly to me, he resumed:

"It was a scream wot woke me—a woman's scream. I didn't sit up; I couldn't. I never felt like it before. It was the same as bein' buried alive, I should think. I could see an' I could 'ear, but I couldn't move one muscle in my body. Foller me? An' wot did I see, mates, an' wot did I 'ear? I'm goin' to tell yer. I see old Kwen Lung's daughter———"

"I didn't know 'e 'ad one," murmured Harley.

"Then you don't know much!" shouted the fireman. "I knew years ago, but 'e kept 'er stowed away somewhere up above, an' last night was the first time I ever see 'er. It was 'er shriek wot 'ad reached me, reached me through the smoke. I don't take much stock in Chink gals in general, but this one's mother was no Chink, I'll swear. She was just as pretty as a bloomin' ivory doll, an' as little an' as white, and that old swine Kwen Lung 'ad tore the dress off of 'er shoulders with a bloody great whip!"

Harley was leaning forward in his seat now, intent upon the man's story, and although I could not get rid of the idea that our friend was relating the events of a particularly unpleasant opium dream, nevertheless I was fascinated by the strange story and by the strange manner of its telling.

"I saw the blood drip from 'er bare shoulders, mates," the man continued huskily, and with his big dirty hands he strove to illustrate his words. "An' that old yellow devil lashed an' lashed until the poor gal was past screamin'. She just sunk down on the floor all of a 'cap, moanin' and moanin'—Gawd! I can 'ear 'er moanin' now!"

"Meanwhile, 'ere's me with murder in me 'eart lyin' there watchin', an' I can't speak, no! I can't even curse the yellow rat, an' I can't move—not a 'and, not a foot! Just as she fell there right up against the joss an' 'er blood trickled down on 'is gilded feet, old Ma Lorenzo comes staggerin' in. I remember all this as clear as print, mates, remember it plain, but wot 'appened next ain't so good an' clear. Somethink seemed to bust in me 'ead. Only just before I went off, the winder—there's only one in the room—was smashed to smithereens an' somebody come in through it."

"Are you sure?" said Harley eagerly. "Are you sure?"

That he was intensely absorbed in the story he revealed by a piece of bad artistry, very rare in him. He temporarily forgot his dialect. Our marine friend, however, was too much taken up with his own story to notice the slip, and:

"Dead sure!" he shouted.

He suddenly twisted around in his chair.

"Tell me I was dreamin', mate," he invited, "and if you ain't dreamin' in 'arf a tick it won't be because I 'aven't put yer to sleep!"

"I ain't arguin', old son," said Harley soothingly. "Get on with your yarn."

"Ho!" said the fireman, mollified, "so long as you ain't. Well, then, it's all blotted out after that. Somebody come in at the winder, but 'oo it was or wot it was I can't tell yer, not for fifty quid. When I woke up, which is about 'arf an hour before you see me, I'm all alone—see? There's no sign of Kwen Lung nor the gal nor old Ma Lorenzo nor anybody. I sez to meself, wot you keep on sayin'. I sez, 'You're dreamin', Bill.'"

"But I don't think you was," declared Harley. "Straight I don't."

"I know I wasn't!" roared the fireman, and banged the table lustily. "I see 'er blood on the joss an' on the floor where she lay!"

"This morning?" I interjected.

"This mornin', in the light of the little oil lamp where old Ma Lorenzo 'ad roasted the pills! It's all still an' quiet an' I feel more dead than alive. I'm goin' to give 'er a hail, see? When I sez to myself, 'Bill,' I sez, 'put out to

sea; you're amongst Kaffirs, Bill.' It occurred to me as old Kwen Lung might wonder 'ow much I knew. So I beat it. But when I got in the open air I felt I'd never make my lodgin's without a tonic. That's 'ow I come to meet you, mates.

"Listen—I'm away in the old Seahawk in the mornin', but I'll tell you somethink. That yellow bastard killed his daughter last night! Beat 'er to death. I see it plain. The sweetest, prettiest bit of ivory as Gawd ever put breath into. If 'er body ain't in the river, it's in the 'ouse. Drunk or sober, I never could stand the splits, but mates"—he stood up, and grasping me by the arm, he drew me across the room where he also seized Harley in his muscular grip—"mates," he went on earnestly, "she was the sweetest, prettiest little gal as a man ever clapped eyes on. One of yer walk into Limehouse Station an' put the koppers wise. I'd sleep easier at sea if I knew old Kwen Lung 'ad gone west on a bloody rope's end."

II. AT KWEN LUNG'S

For fully ten minutes after the fireman had departed Paul Harley sat staring abstractedly in front of him, his cold pipe between his teeth, and knowing his moods I intruded no words upon this reverie, until:

"Come on, Knox," he said, standing up suddenly, "I think this matter calls for speedy action."

"What! Do you think the man's story was true?"

"I think nothing. I am going to look at Kwen Lung's joss."

Without another word he led the way downstairs and out into the deserted street. The first gray halftones of dawn were creeping into the sky, so that the outlines of Limehouse loomed like dim silhouettes about us. There was abundant evidence in the form of noises, strange and discordant, that many workers were busy on dock and riverside, but the streets through which our course lay were almost empty. Sometimes a furtive shadow would move out of some black gully and fade into a dimly seen doorway in a manner peculiarly unpleasant and Asiatic. But we met no palpable pedestrian throughout the journey.

Before the door of a house in Pennyfields which closely resembled that which we had left in Wade Street, in that it was flatly uninteresting, dirty and commonplace, we paused. There was no sign of life about the place and no lights showed at any of the windows, which appeared as dim cavities—eyeless sockets in the gray face of the building, as dawn proclaimed the birth of a new day.

Harley seized the knocker and knocked sharply. There was no response, and he repeated the summons, but again without effect. Thereupon, with a muttered exclamation, he grasped the knocker a third time and executed a veritable tattoo upon the door. When this had proceeded for about half a minute or more:

"All right, all right!" came a shaky voice from within. "I'm coming."

Harley released the knocker, and, turning to me:

"Ma Lorenzo," he whispered. "Don't make any mistakes."

Indeed, even as he warned me, heralded by a creaking of bolts and the rattling of a chain, the door was opened by a fat, shapeless, half-caste woman of indefinite age; in whose dark eyes, now sunken in bloated cheeks, in whose full though drooping lips, and even in the whole overlaid contour of whose face and figure it was possible to recognize the traces of former beauty. This was Ma Lorenzo, who for many years had lived at that address with old Kwen Lung, of whom strange stories were told in Chinatown.

As Bill Jones, A.B., my friend, Paul Harley, was well known to Ma Lorenzo as he was well known to many others in that strange colony which clusters round the London docks. I sometimes enjoyed the privilege of accompanying my friend on a tour of investigation through the weird resorts which abound in that neighbourhood, and, indeed, we had been returning from one of these Baghdad nights when our present adventure had been thrust upon us. Assuming a wild and boisterous manner which he had at command:

"'Urry up, Ma!" said Harley, entering without ceremony; "I want to introduce my pal Jim 'ere to old Kwen Lung, and make it all right for him before I sail."

Ma Lorenzo, who was half Portuguese, replied in her peculiar accent:

"This no time to come waking me up out of bed!"

But Harley, brushing past her, was already inside the stuffy little room, and I hastened to follow.

"Kwen Lung!" shouted my friend loudly. "Where are you? Brought a friend to see you."

"Kwen Lung no hab," came the complaining tones of Ma Lorenzo from behind us.

It was curious to note how long association with the Chinese had resulted in her catching the infection of that pidgin-English which is a sort of esperanto in all Asiatic quarters.

"Eh!" cried my friend, pushing open a door on the right of the passage and stumbling down three worn steps into a very evil- smelling room. "Where is he?"

"Go play fan-tan. Not come back."

Ma Lorenzo, having relocked the street door, had rejoined us, and as I followed my friend down into the dim and uninviting apartment she stood at the top of the steps, hands on hips, regarding us.

The place, which was quite palpably an opium den, must have disappointed anyone familiar with the more ornate houses of Chinese vice in San Francisco and elsewhere. The bare floor was not particularly clean, and the few decorations which the room boasted were garishly European for the most part. A deep divan, evidently used sometimes as a bed, occupied one side of the room, and just to the left of the steps reposed the only typically Oriental object in the place.

It was a strange thing to see in so sordid a setting; a great gilded joss, more than life-size, squatting, hideous, upon a massive pedestal; a figure fit for some native temple but strangely out of place in that dirty little Limehouse abode.

I had never before visited Kwen Lung's, but the fame of his golden joss had reached me, and I know that he had received many offers for it, all of which he had rejected. It was whispered that Kwen Lung was rich, that he was a great man among the Chinese, and even that some kind of religious ceremony periodically took place in his house. Now, as I stood staring at the famous idol, I saw something which made me stare harder than ever.

The place was lighted by a hanging lamp from which depended bits of coloured paper and several gilded silk tassels; but dim as the light was it could not conceal those tell-tale stains.

There was blood on the feet of the golden idol!

All this I detected at a glance, but ere I had time to speak:

"You can't tell me that tale, Ma!" cried Harley. "I believe 'e was smokin' in 'ere when we knocked."

The woman shrugged her fat shoulders.

"No, hab," she repeated. "You two johnnies clear out. Let me sleep."

But as I turned to her, beneath the nonchalant manner I could detect a great uneasiness; and in her dark eyes there was fear. That Harley also had seen the bloodstains I was well aware, and I did not doubt that furthermore he had noted the fact that the only mat which the room boasted had been placed before the joss— doubtless to hide other stains upon the boards.

As we stood so I presently became aware of a current of air passing across the room in the direction of the open door. It came from a window before which a tawdry red curtain had been draped. Either the window behind the curtain was wide open, which is alien to Chinese habits, or it was shattered. While I was wondering if Harley intended to investigate further:

"Come on, Jim!" he cried boisterously, and clapped me on the shoulder; "the old fox don't want to be disturbed."

He turned to the woman:

"Tell him when he wakes up, Ma," he said, "that if ever my pal Jim wants a pipe he's to 'ave one. Savvy? Jim's square."

"Savvy," replied the woman, and she was wholly unable to conceal her relief. "You clear out now, and I tell Kwen Lung when he come in."

"Righto, Ma!" said Harley. "Kiss 'im on both cheeks for me, an' tell 'im I'll be 'ome again in a month."

Grasping me by the arm he lurched up the steps, and the two of us presently found ourselves out in the street again. In the growing light the squalor of the district was more evident than ever, but the comparative freshness of the air was welcome after the reek of that room in which the golden idol sat leering, with blood at his feet.

"You saw, Harley?" I exclaimed excitedly. "You saw the stains? And I'm certain the window was broken!"

Harley nodded shortly.

"Back to Wade Street!" he said. "I allow myself fifteen minutes to shed Bill Jones, able seaman, and to become Paul Harley, of Chancery Lane."

As we hurried along:

"What steps shall you take?" I asked.

"First step: search Kwen Lung's house from cellar to roof. Second step: entirely dependent upon result of first. The Chinese are subtle, Knox. If Kwen Lung has killed his daughter, it may require all the resources of Scotland Yard to prove it."

"But———"

"There is no 'but' about it. Chinatown is the one district of London which possesses the property of swallowing people up."

III. "CAPTAIN DAN"

Half an hour later, as I sat in the inner room before the great dressing-table laboriously removing my disguise—for I was utterly incapable of metamorphosing myself like Harley in seven minutes—I heard a rapping at the outer door. I glanced nervously at my face in the mirror.

Comparatively little of "Jim" had yet been removed, for since time was precious to my friend I had acted as his dresser before setting to work to remove my own make-up. There were two entrances to the establishment, by one of which Paul Harley invariably entered and invariably went out, and from the other of which "Bill Jones" was sometimes seen to emerge, but never Paul Harley. That my friend had made good his retirement I knew, but, nevertheless, if I had to open the door of the outer room it must be as "Jim."

Thinking it impolite not to do so, since the one who knocked might be aware that we had come in but not gone out again, I hastily readjusted that side of my moustache which I had begun to remove, replaced my cap and muffler, and carefully locking the door of the dressing-room, crossed the outer apartment and opened the door.

It was Harley's custom never to enter or leave these rooms except under the mantle of friendly night, but at so early an hour I confess I had not expected a visitor. Wondering whom I should find there I opened the door.

Standing on the landing was a fellow-lodger who permanently occupied the two top rooms of the house. Paul Harley had taken the trouble to

investigate the man's past, for "Captain Dan," the name by which he was known in the saloons and worse resorts which he frequented, was palpably a broken-down gentleman; a piece of flotsam caught in the yellow stream. Opium had been his downfall. How he lived I never knew, but Harley believed he had some small but settled income, sufficient to enable him to kill himself in comfort with the black pills.

As he stood there before me in the early morning light, I was aware of some subtle change in his appearance. It was fully six months since I had seen him last, but in some vague way he looked younger. Haggard he was, with an ugly cut showing on his temple, but not so lined as I remembered him. Some former man seemed to be struggling through the opium-scarred surface. His eyes were brighter, and I noted with surprise that he wore decent clothes and was clean shaved.

"Good morning, Jim," he said; "you remember me, don't you?"

As he spoke I observed, too, that his manner had altered. He who had consorted with the sweepings af the doss-houses now addressed me as a courteous gentleman addresses an inferior—not haughtily or patronizingly, but with a note of conscious superiority and self-respect wholly unfamiliar. Almost it threw me off my guard, but remembering in the nick of time that I was still "Jim":

"Of course I remember you, Cap'n," I said. "Step inside."

"Thanks," he replied, and followed me into the little room.

I placed for him the arm-chair which our friend the fireman had so recently occupied, but:

"I won't sit down," he said.

And now I observed that he was evidently in a condition of repressed excitement. Perhaps he saw the curiosity in my glance, for he suddenly rested both his hands on my shoulders, and:

"Yes, I have given up the dope, Jim," he said—-"done with it for ever. There's not a soul in this neighbourhood I can trust, yet if ever a man wanted a pal, I want one to-day. Now, you're square, my lad. I always knew that, in spite of the dope; and if I ask you to do a little thing that means a lot to me, I think you will do it. Am I right?"

"If it can be done, I'll do it," said I.

"Then, listen. I'm leaving England in the Patna for Singapore. She sails at noon to-morrow, and passengers go on board at ten o'clock. I've got my

ticket, papers in order, but"—he paused impressively, grasping my shoulders hard—"I must get on board to-night."

I stared him in the face.

"Why?" I asked.

He returned my look with one searching and eager; then:

"If I show you the reason," said he, "and trust you with all my papers, will you go down to the dock—it's no great distance— and ask to see Marryat, the chief officer? Perhaps you've sailed with him?"

"No," I replied guardedly. "I was never in the Patna."

"Never mind. When you give him a letter which I shall write he will make the necessary arrangements for me to occupy my state- room to-night. I knew him well," he explained, "in—the old days. Will you do it, Jim?"

"I'll do it with pleasure," I answered.

"Shake!" said Captain Dan.

We shook hands heartily, and:

"Now I'll show you the reason," he added. "Come upstairs."

Turning, he led the way upstairs to his own room, and wondering greatly, I followed him in. Never having been in Captain Dan's apartments I cannot say whether they, like their occupant, had changed for the better. But I found myself in a room surprisingly clean and with a note of culture in its appointments which was even more surprising.

On a couch by the window, wrapped in a fur rug, lay the prettiest half-caste girl I had ever seen, East or West. Her skin was like cream rose petals and her abundant hair was of wonderful lustrous black. Perhaps it was her smooth warm colour which suggested the idea, but as her cheeks flushed at sight of Captain Dan and the long dark eyes lighted up in welcome, I thought of a delicate painting on ivory and I wondered more and more what it all could mean.

"I have brought Jim to see you," said Captain Dan. "No, don't trouble to move dear."

But even before he had spoken I had seen the girl wince with pain as she had endeavoured to sit up to greet us. She lay on her side in a rather constrained attitude, but although her sudden movement had brought tears to her eyes she smiled bravely and extended a tiny ivory hand to me.

"This is my wife, Jim!" said Captain Dan.

I could find no words at all, but merely stood there looking very awkward and feeling almost awed by the indescribable expression of trust in the eyes of the little Eurasian, as with her tiny fingers hidden in her husband's clasp she lay looking up at him.

"Now you know, Jim," said he, "why we must get aboard the Patna to-night. My wife is really too ill to travel; in fact, I shall have to carry her down to the cab, and such a proceeding in daylight would attract an enormous crowd in this neighbourhood!"

"Give me the letters and the papers," I answered. "I will start now."

His wife disengaged her hand and extended it to me.

"Thank you," she said, in a queer little silver-bell voice; "you are good. I shall always love you."

IV. THE SECRET OF MA LORENZO

It must have been about eleven o'clock that night when Paul Harley rang me up. Since we had parted in the early morning I had had no word from him, and I was all anxiety to tell him of the quaint little romance which unknown to us had had its setting in the room above.

In accordance with my promise I had seen the chief officer of the Patna; and from the start of surprise which he gave on opening "Captain Dan's" letter, I judged that Mr Marryat and the man who for so long had sunk to the lowest rung of the ladder had been close friends in those "old days." At any rate, he had proceeded to make the necessary arrangements without a moment's delay, and the couple were to go on board the Patna at nine o'clock.

It was with a sense of having done at least one good deed that I finally quitted our Limehouse base and returned to my rooms. Now, at eleven o'clock at night:

"Can you come round to Chancery Lane at once?" said Harley. "I want you to run down to Pennyfields with me."

"Some development in the Kwen Lung business?"

"Hardly a development, but I'm not satisfied, Knox. I hate to be beaten."

Twenty minutes later I was sitting in Harley's study, watching him restlessly promenading up and down before the fire.

"The police searched Kwen Lung's place from foundation to tiles," he said. "I was there myself. Old Kwen Lung conveniently kept out of the way—still playing fan-tan, no doubt! But Ma Lorenzo was in evidence. She blandly declared that Kwen Lung never had a daughter! And in the absence of our friend the fireman, who sailed in the Seahawk, and whose evidence, by the way, is legally valueless—what could we do? They could find nobody in the neighbourhood prepared to state that Kwen Lung had a daughter or that Kwen Lung had no daughter. There are all sorts of fables about the old fox, but the facts about him are harder to get at."

"But," I explained, "the bloodstains on the joss!"

"Ma Lorenzo stumbled and fell there on the previous night, striking her skull against the foot of the figure."

"What nonsense!" I cried. "We should have seen the wound last night."

"We might have done," said Harley musingly; "I don't know when she inflicted it on herself; but I did see it this morning."

"What!"

"Oh, the gash is there all right, partly covered by her hair."

He stood still, staring at me oddly.

"One meets with cases of singular devotion in unexpected quarters sometimes," he said.

"You mean that the woman inflicted the wound upon herself in order _____"

"To save old Kwen Lung—exactly! It's marvellous."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed. "And the window?"

"Oh! it was broken right enough—by two drunken sailormen fighting in the court outside! Sash and everything smashed to splinters."

He began irritably to pace the carpet again.

"It must have been a devil of a fight!" he added savagely.

"Meanwhile," said I, "where is old Kwen Lung hiding?"

"But more particularly," cried Harley, "where has he hidden the poor victim? Come along, Knox! I'm going down there for a final look round."

"Of course the premises are being watched?"

"Of course—and also, of course, I shall be the laughing stock of Scotland Yard if nothing results."

It was close on midnight when once more I found myself in Pennyfields. Carried away by Harley's irritable excitement I had quite forgotten the romance of Captain Dan; and when, having exchanged greetings with the detective on duty hard by the house of Kwen Lung, we presently found ourselves in the presence of Ma Lorenzo, I scarcely knew for a moment if I were "Jim" or my proper self.

"Is Kwen Lung in?" asked Harley sternly.

The woman shook her head.

"No," she replied; "he sometimes stop away a whole week."

"Does he?" jerked Harley. "Come in, Knox; we'll take another look round."

A moment later I found myself again in the room of the golden joss. The red curtain had been removed from before the shattered window, but otherwise the place looked exactly as it had looked before. The atmosphere was much less stale, however, but there was something repellent about the great gilded idol smiling eternally from his pedestal beside the door.

I stared into the leering face, and it was the face of one who knew and who might have said: "Yes! this and other things equally strange have I beheld in many lands as well as England. Much I could tell. Many things grim and terrible, and some few joyous; for behold! I smile but am silent."

For a while Harley stared abstractedly at the bloodstains on the pedestal of the joss and upon the floor beneath from which the matting had been pulled back. Suddenly he turned to Ma Lorenzo:

"Where have you hidden the body?" he demanded.

Watching her, I thought I saw the woman flinch, but there was enough of the Oriental in her composition to save her from self- betrayal. She shook her head slowly, watching Harley through half-closed eyes.

"Nobody hab," she replied.

And I thought for once that her lapse into pidgin had been deliberate and not accidental.

When finally we quitted the house of the missing Kwen Lung, and when, Harley having curtly acknowledged "good night" from the detective on duty, we came out into Limehouse Causeway.

"You have not overlooked the possibility, Harley," I said, "that this woman's explanation may be true, and that the fireman of the Seahawk may have been entertaining us with an account of a weird dream?"

"No!" snapped Harley—"neither will Scotland Yard overlook it."

He was in a particularly impossible mood, for he so rarely made mistakes that to be detected in one invariably brought out those petulant traits of character which may have been due in some measure to long residence in the East. Recognizing that he would rather be alone I parted from him at the corner of Chancery Lane and returned to my own chambers. Furthermore, I was very tired, for it was close upon two o'clock, and on turning in I very promptly went to sleep, nor did I awaken until late in the morning.

For some odd reason, but possibly because the fact had occurred to me just as I was retiring, I remembered at the moment of waking that I had not told Harley about the romantic wedding of Captain Dan. As I had left my friend in very ill humour I thought that this would be a good excuse for an early call, and just before eleven o'clock I walked into his office. Innes, his invaluable secretary, showed me into the study at the back.

"Hallo, Knox," said Harley, looking up from a little silver Buddha which he was examining, "have you come to ask for news of the Kwen Lung case?"

"No," I replied. "Is there any?"

Harley shook his head.

"It seems like fate," he declared, "that this thing should have been sent to me this morning." He indicated the silver Buddha. "A present from a friend who knows my weakness for Chinese ornaments," he explained grimly. "It reminds me of that damned joss of Kwen Lung's!"

I took up the little image and examined it with interest. It was most beautifully fashioned in the patient Oriental way, and there was a little hinged door in the back which fitted so perfectly that when closed it was quite impossible to detect its presence. I glanced at Harley.

"I suppose you didn't find a jewel inside?" I said lightly.

"No," he replied; "there was nothing inside."

But even as he uttered the words his whole expression changed, and so suddenly as to startle me. He sprang up from the table, and:

"Have you an hour to spare, Knox?" he cried excitedly.

"I can spare an hour, but what for?"

"For Kwen Lung!"

Four minutes later we were speeding in the direction of Limehouse, and not a word of explanation to account for this sudden journey could I extract

from my friend. Therefore I beguiled the time by telling him of my adventure with Captain Dan.

Harley listened to the story in unbroken silence, but at its termination he brought his hand down sharply on my knee.

"I have been almost perfectly blind, Knox," he said; "but not quite so perfectly blind as you!"

I stared at him in amazement, but he merely laughed and offered no explanation of his words.

Presently, then, I found myself yet again in the familiar room of the golden joss. Ma Lorenzo, in whom some hidden anxiety seemed to have increased since I had last seen her, stood at the top of the stairs watching us. Upon what idea my friend was operating and what he intended to do I could not imagine; but without a word to the woman he crossed the room and grasping the great golden idol with both arms he dragged it forward across the floor!

As he did so there was a stifled shriek, and Ma Lorenzo, stumbling down the steps, threw herself on her knees before Harley! Raising imploring hands:

"No, no!" she moaned. "Not until I tell you—I tell you everything first!"

"To begin with, tell me how to open this thing," he said sternly.

Momentarily she hesitated, and did not rise from her knees, but:

"Do you hear me?" he cried.

The woman rose unsteadily and walking slowly round the joss manipulated some hidden fastening, whereupon the entire back of the thing opened like a door! From what was within she shudderingly averted her face, but Harley, stepping back against the wall, stopped and peered into the cavity.

"Good God!" he muttered. "Come and look, Knox."

Prepared by his manner for some gruesome spectacle, I obeyed—and from that which I saw I recoiled in horror.

"Harley," I whispered, "Harley! who is it?"

The spectacle had truly sickened me. Crouched within the narrow space enclosed by the figure of the idol was the body of an old and wrinkled Chinaman! His knees were drawn up to his chin, and his head so compressed upon them that little of his features could be seen.

"It is Kwen Lung!" murmured Ma Lorenzo, standing with clasped hands and wild eyes over by the window. "Kwen Lung—and I am glad he is dead!"

Such a note of hatred came into her voice as I had never heard in the voice of any woman.

"He is vile, a demon, a mocking cruel demon! Long, long years ago I would have killed him, but always I was afraid. I tell you everything, everything. This is how he comes to be dead. The little one"—again her voice changed and a note of almost grotesque tenderness came into it—"the lotus-flower, that is his own daughter's child, flesh of his flesh, he keeps a prisoner as the women of China are kept, up there"—she raised one fat finger aloft—"up above. He does not know that someone comes to see her—someone who used to come to smoke but who gave it up because he had looked into the dear one's eye. He does not know that she goes with me to see her man. Ah! we think he does not know! I—I arrange it all. A week ago they were married. Tuesday night, when Kwen Lung die, I plan for her to steal away for ever, for ever."

Tears now were running down the woman's fat cheeks, and her voice quivered emotionally.

"For me it is the end, but for her it is the beginning of life. All right! I don't matter a damn! She is young and beautiful. Ah, God! so beautiful! A drunken pig comes here and finds his way in, so I give him the smoke and presently he sleeps, but it makes delay, and I don't know how soon Kwen Lung, that yellow demon, will wake. For he is like the bats who sleep all day and wake at night.

"At last the sailor pig sleeps and I call softly to my dear little one that the time has come. I have gone out into the street, locking the door behind me, to see if her man is waiting, and I hear her shrieks—her shrieks! I hurry back. My hands tremble so much that I can scarcely unlock the door. At last I enter, and I see and I know—that yellow devil has learned all and has been playing with us like cat and mouse! He is lashing her, with a great whip! Lashing her—that tiny, sweet flower. Ah!"

She choked in her utterance, and turning to the gilded joss which contained the dead Chinaman she shook her clenched hands at it, and the expression on her face I can never forget. Then:

"As I shriek curses at him, crash goes the window—and I see her husband spring into the room! The tender one had fallen, there at the foot of the joss, and Kwen Lung, his teeth gleaming—like a rat—like a devil—turns to meet him. So he is when her man strike him, once. Just once, here." She rested her hand upon her heart. "And he falls—and he coughs. He lie still. For him it is finished. That devil heart has ceased to beat. Ah!"

She threw up her hands, and:

"That is all. I tell you no more."

"One thing more," said Harley sternly; "the name of the man who killed Kwen Lung?"

At that Ma Lorenzo slowly raised her head and folded her arms across her bosom. There was something one could never forget in the expression of her fat face.

"Not if you burn me alive!" she answered in a low voice. "No one ever knows that—from me."

She sank on to the divan and buried her face in her hands. Her fat shoulders shook grotesquely; and Harley stood perfectly still staring across at her for fully a minute. I could hear voices in the street outside and the hum of traffic in Limehouse Causeway.

Then my friend did a singular thing. Walking over to the gilded joss he reclosed the opening and not without a great effort pushed the great idol back against the wall.

"There are times, Knox," he said, staring at me oddly, "when I'm glad that I am not an official agent of the law."

While I watched him dumfounded he walked across to the woman and touched her on the shoulder. She raised her tear-stained face.

"All right," she whispered. "I am ready."

"Get ready as soon as you like," said he tersely.

"I'll have the man removed who is watching the house, and you can reckon on forty-eight hours to make yourself scarce."

With never another word he seized me by the arm and hurried me out of the place! Ten paces along the street a shabby-looking fellow was standing, leaning against a pillar. Harley stopped, and:

"Even the greatest men make mistakes sometimes, Hewitt," he remarked. "I'm throwing up the case; probably Inspector Wessex will do the same. Good morning."

On towards the Causeway he led me—for not a word was I capable of uttering; and just before we reached that artery of Chinatown, from down-river came the deep, sustained note of a steamer's siren, the warning of some big liner leaving dock.

"That will be the Patna," said Harley. "She sails at twelve o'clock, I think you said?"

MAN WITH THE SHAVEN SKULL

I. A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE

"Pull that light lower," ordered Inspector Wessex. "There you are, Mr Harley; what do you make of it?"

Paul Harley and I bent gingerly over the ghastly exhibit to which the C.I.D. official had drawn our attention, and to view which we had journeyed from Chancery Lane to Wapping.

This was the body of a man dressed solely in ragged shirt and trousers. But the remarkable feature of his appearance lay in the fact that every scrap of hair from chin, lip, eyebrows and skull had been shaved off!

There was another facial disfigurement, peculiarly and horribly Eastern, which my pen may not describe.

"Impossible to identify!" murmured Harley. "Yes, you were right, Inspector; this is a victim of Oriental deviltry. Look here, too!"

He indicated three small wounds, one situated on the left shoulder and the others on the forearm of the dead man.

"The divisional surgeon cannot account for them," replied Wessex. "They are quite superficial, and he thinks they may be due to the fact that the body got entangled with something in the river."

"They are due to the fact that the man had a birthmark on his shoulder and something—probably a name or some device—tattooed on his arm,"

said Harley quietly. "Some few years ago, I met with a similar case in the neighbourhood of Stambul. A woman," he added, significantly.

Detective-Inspector Wessex listened to my companion with respect, for apart from his established reputation as a private inquiry- agent which had made his name familiar in nearly every capital of the civilized world, Paul Harley's work in Constantinople during the six months preceding war with Turkey had merited higher reward than it had ever received. Had his recommendations been adopted the course of history must have been materially changed.

"You think it's a Chinatown case, then, Mr Harley?"

"Possibly," was the guarded answer.

Paul Harley nodded to the constable in charge, and the ghastly figure was promptly covered up again. My friend stood staring vacantly at Wessex, and presently:

"The chief actor, I think, will prove to be not Chinese," he said, turned, and walked out.

"If there's any development," remarked Wessex as the three of us entered Harley's car, which stood at the door, "I will, of course, report to you, Mr Harley. But in the absence of any clue or mark of identification, I fear the verdict will be, 'Body of a man unknown,' etc., which has marked the finish of a good many in this cheerful quarter of London."

"Quite so," said Harley, absently. "It presents extraordinary features, though, and may not end as you suppose. However—where do you want me to drop you, Wessex, at the Yard?"

"Oh no," answered Wessex. "I made a special visit to Wapping just to get your opinion on the shaven man. I'm really going down to Deepbrow to look into that new disappearance case; the daughter of the gamekeeper. You'll have read of it?"

"I have," said Harley shortly.

Indeed, readers of the daily press were growing tired of seeing on the contents bills: "Another girl missing." The circumstance (which might have been no more than coincidence) that three girls had disappeared within the last eight weeks leaving no trace behind, had stimulated the professional scribes to link the cases, although no visible link had been found, and to enliven a somewhat dull journalistic season with theories about "a new Mormon menace."

The vanishing of this fourth girl had inspired them to some startling headlines, and the case had interested me personally for the reason that I was acquainted with Sir Howard Hepwell, one of whose gamekeepers was the stepfather of the missing Molly Clayton. Moreover, it was hinted that she had gone away in the company of Captain Ronald Vane, at that time a guest of Sir Howard's at the Manor.

In fact, Sir Howard had 'phoned to ask me if I could induce Harley to run down, but my friend had expressed himself as disinterested in a common case of elopement. Now, as Wessex spoke, I glanced aside at Harley, wondering if the fact that so celebrated a member of the C.I.D. as Detective-Inspector Wessex had been put in charge would induce him to change his mind.

We were traversing a particularly noisy and unsavoury section of the Commercial Road, and although I could see that Wessex was anxious to impart particulars of the case to Harley, so loud was the din that I recognized the impossibility of conversing, and therefore:

"Have you time to call at my rooms, Wessex?" I asked.

"Well," he replied, "I have three-quarters of an hour."

"You can do it in the car," said Harley suddenly. "I have been asked to look into this case myself, and before I definitely decline I should like to hear your version of the matter."

Accordingly, we three presently gathered in my chambers, and Wessex, with one eye on the clock, outlined the few facts at that time in his possession respecting the missing girl.

Two days before the news of the disappearance had been published broadcast under such headings as I have already indicated, a significant scene had been enacted in the gamekeeper's cottage.

Molly Clayton, a girl whose remarkable beauty had made her a central figure in numerous scandalous stories, for such is the charity of rural neighbours, was detected by her stepfather, about eight in the evening, slipping out of the cottage.

"Where be ye goin', hussy?" he demanded, grasping her promptly by the arm.

"For a walk!" she replied defiantly.

"A walk wi' that fine soger from t' Manor!" roared Bramber furiously. "You'll be sorry yet, you barefaced gadabout! Must I tell you again that t'

man's a villain?"

The girl wrenched her arm from Bramber's grasp, and blazed defiance from her beautiful eyes.

"He knows how to respect a woman—what you don't!" she retorted hotly.

"So I don't respect you, my angel?" shouted her stepfather. "Then you know what you can do! The door's open and there's few'll miss you!"

Snatching her hat, the girl, very white, made to go out. Whereat the gamekeeper, a brutal man with small love for Molly, and maddened by her taking him at his word, seized her suddenly by her abundant fair hair and hauled her back into the room.

A violent scene followed, at the end of which Molly fainted and Bramber came out and locked the door.

When he came back about half-past nine the girl was missing. She did not reappear that night, and the police were advised in the morning. Their most significant discovery was this:

Captain Ronald Vane, on the night of Molly's disappearance, had left the Manor House, after dining alone with his host, Sir Howard Hepwell, saying that he proposed to take a stroll as far as the Deep Wood.

He never returned!

From the moment that Gamekeeper Bramber left his cottage, and the moment when Sir Howard Hepwell parted from his guest after dinner, the world to which these two people, Molly Clayton and Captain Vane, were known, knew them no more!

I was about to say that they were never seen again. But to me has fallen the task of relating how and where Paul Harley and I met with Captain Vane and Molly Clayton.

At the end of the Inspector's account:

"H'm," said Harley, glancing under his thick brows in my direction, "could you spare the time, Knox?"

"To go to Deepbrow?" I asked with interest.

"Yes; we have ten minutes to catch the train."

"I'll come," said I. "Sir Howard will be delighted to see you, Harley."

II. THE CLUE OF THE PHOTOGRAPHS

"What do you make of it, Inspector?" asked my friend. Detective-Inspector Wessex smiled, and scratched his chin.

"There was no need for me to come down!" he replied. "And certainly no need for you, Mr Harley!"

Harley bowed, smiling, at the implied compliment.

"It's a common or garden elopement!" continued the detective. "Vane's reputation is absolutely rotten, and the girl was clearly infatuated. He must have cared a good bit, too. He'll be cashiered, as sure as a gun!"

Leaving Sir Howard at the Manor, we had joined Inspector Wessex at a spot where the baronet's preserves bordered a narrow lane. Here the ground was soft, and the detective drew Harley's attention to a number of footprints by a stile.

"I've got evidence that he was seen here with the girl on other occasions. Now, Mr Harley, I'll ask you to look over these footprints."

Harley dropped to his knees and made a brief but close examination of the ground round about. One particularly clear imprint of a pointed toe he noticed especially; and Wessex, diving into the pocket of his light overcoat, produced a patent- leather shoe, such as is used for evening wear.

"He had a spare pair in his bag," he explained nonchalantly, "and his man did not prove incorruptible!"

Harley took the shoe and placed it in the impression. It fitted perfectly!

"This is Molly Clayton, I take it?" he said, indicating the prints of a woman's foot.

"Yes," assented Wessex. "You'll notice that they stood for some little time and then walked off, very close together."

Harley nodded absently.

"We lose them along here," continued Wessex, leading up the lane; "but at the corner by the big haystack they join up with the tracks of a motor-car! I ask for nothing clearer! There was rain that afternoon, but there's been none since."

"What does the Captain's man think?"

"The same as I do! He's not surprised at any madness on Vane's part, with a pretty woman in the case!"

"The girl left nothing behind—no note?"

"Nothing."

"Traced the car?"

"No. It must have been hired or borrowed from a long distance off."

Where the tracks of the tires were visible we stopped, and Harley made a careful examination of the marks.

"Seems to have had a struggle with her," he said, dryly.

"Very likely!" agreed Wessex, without interest.

Harley crawled about on the ground for some time, to the great detriment of his Harris tweeds, but finally arose, a curious expression on his face—which, however, the detective evidently failed to observe.

We returned to the Manor House where Sir Howard was awaiting us, his good-humoured red face more red than usual; and in the library, with its sporting prints and its works for the most part dealing with riding, hunting, racing, and golf (except for a sprinkling of Nat Gould's novels and some examples of the older workmanship of Whyte-Melville), we were presently comfortably ensconced. On a side table were placed a generous supply of liquid refreshments, cigars and cigarettes; so that we made ourselves quite comfortable, and Sir Howard restrained his indignation, until each had a glass before him and all were smoking.

"Now," he began, "what have you got to report, gentlemen? You, Inspector," he pointed with his cigar toward Wessex, "have seen Vane's man and all of you have been down to look at these damned tracks. I only want to hear one thing; that you expect to trace the disgraceful couple. I'll see to it"—his voice rose almost to a shout—"that Vane is kicked out of the service, and as to that shameless brat of Bramber's, I wish her no worse than the blackguard's company!"

"One moment, Sir Howard, one moment," said Harley quietly; "there are always two sides to a case."

"What do you mean, Mr Harley? There's only one side that interests me—the outrage inflicted upon my hospitality by this dirty guest of mine. For the girl I don't give twopence; she was bound to come to a bad end."

"Well," said Harley, "before we pronounce the final verdict upon either of them I should like to interview Bramber. Perhaps," he added, turning to Wessex, "it would be as well if Mr Knox and I went alone. The presence of an official detective sometimes awes this class of witness."

"Quite right, quite right!" agreed Sir Howard, waving his cigar vigorously. "Go and see Bramber, Mr Harley; tell him that no blame

attaches to himself whatever; also, tell him with my compliments that his stepdaughter is———"

"Quite so, quite so," interrupted Harley, endeavouring to hide a smile. "I understand your feelings, Sir Howard, but again I ask you to reserve your verdict until all the facts are before us."

As a result, Harley and I presently set out for the gamekeeper's cottage, and as the man had been warned that we should visit him, he was on the porch smoking his pipe. A big, dark, ugly fellow he proved to be, of a very forbidding cast of countenance. Having introduced ourselves:

"I always knowed she'd come to a bad end!" declared Gamekeeper Bramber, almost echoing Sir Howard's words. "One o' these gentlemen o' hers was sure to be the finish of her!"

"She had other admirers—before Captain Vane?"

"Aye! the hussy! There was a black-faced villain not six months since! He got t' vain cat to go to London an' have her photograph done in a dress any decent woman would 'a' blushed to look at! Like one o' these Venuses up at t' Manor! Good riddance! She took after her mother!"

The violent old ruffian was awkward to examine, but Harley persevered.

"This previous admirer caused her to be photographed in that way, did he? Have you a copy?"

"No!" blazed Bramber. "What I found I burnt! He ran off, like I told her he would—an' her cryin' her eyes out! But the pretty soger dried her tears quick enough!"

"Do you know this man's name?"

"No. A foreigner, he was."

"Where were the photographs done—in London, you say?"

"Aye."

"Do you know by what photographer?"

"I don't! An' I don't care! Piccadilly they had on 'em, which was good enough for me."

"Have you her picture?"

"No!"

"Did she receive a letter on the day of her disappearance?"

"Maybe."

"Good day!" said Harley. "And let me add that the atmosphere of her home was hardly conducive to ideal conduct!"

Leaving Bramber to digest this rebuke, we came out of the cottage. Dusk was falling now, and by the time that we regained the Manor the place was lighted up. Inspector Wessex was waiting for us in the library, and:

"Well?" he said, smiling slightly as we entered.

"Nothing much," replied Harley dryly, "except that I don't wonder at the girl's leaving such a home."

"What's that! What!" roared a big voice, and Sir Howard came into the room. "I tell you, Bramber only had one fault as a stepfather; he wasn't heavy-handed enough. A bad lot, sir, a bad lot!"

"Well, sir," said Inspector Wessex, looking from one to another, "personally, beyond the usual inquiries at railway stations, etc., I cannot see that we can do much here. Don't you agree with me, Mr Harley?"

Harley nodded.

"Quite," he replied. "There is a late train to town which I think we could catch if we started at once."

"Eh?" roared Sir Howard; "you're not going back to-night? Your rooms are ready for you, damn it!"

"I quite appreciate the kindness, Sir Howard," replied Harley; "but I have urgent business to attend to in London. Believe me, my departure is unavoidable."

The blue eyes of the baronet gleamed with the simple cunning of his kind.

"You've got something up your sleeve," he roared. "I know you have, I know you have!"

Inspector Wessex looked at me significantly, but I could only shrug my shoulders in reply; for in these moods Harley was as inscrutable as the Sphinx.

However, he had his way, and Sir Howard hurriedly putting a car in commission, we raced for the local station and just succeeded in picking up the express at Claybury.

Wessex was rather silent throughout the journey, often glancing in my friend's direction, but Harley made no further reference to the case beyond outlining the interview with Bramber, until, as we were parting at the London terminus, Wessex to report to Scotland Yard and I to go to Harley's rooms:

"How long do you think it will take you to find that photographer, Wessex?" he asked. "Piccadilly is a sufficient clue."

"Well," replied the Inspector, "nothing can be done to-night, of course, but I should think by mid-day tomorrow the matter should be settled."

"Right," said Harley shortly. "May I ask you to report the result to me, Wessex?"

"I will report without fail."

III. ALI OF CAIRO

It was not until the evening of the following day that Harley rang me up, and:

"I want you to come round at once," he said urgently. "The Deepbrow case is developing along lines which I confess I had anticipated, but which are dramatic nevertheless."

Knowing that Harley did not lightly make such an assertion, I put aside the work upon which I was engaged and hurried around to Chancery Lane. I found my friend, pipe in mouth, walking up and down his smoke-laden study in a state which I knew to betoken suppressed excitement, and:

"Did Wessex find your photographer?" I asked on entering.

"Yes," he replied. "A first-class man, as I had anticipated. As I had further anticipated he did a number of copies of the picture for the foreign gentleman—about fifty, in fact!"

"Fifty!"

"Yes! Does the significance of that fact strike you?" asked Harley, a queer smile stealing across his tanned, clean-shaven face.

"It is an extraordinary thing for even an ardent admirer to have so many reproductions done of the same picture!"

"It is! I will show you now what I found trodden into one of the footprints where the struggle took place beside the car."

Harley produced a piece of thick silk twine.

"What is it?"

"It is a link, Knox—a link to seek which I really went down to Deepbrow." He stared at me quizzically, but my answering look must have

been a blank one. "It is part of the tassel of one of those red cloth caps commonly called in England, a fez!"

He continued to stare at me and I to stare at the piece of silk; then:

"What is the next move?" I demanded. "Your new clue rather bewilders me."

"The next move," he said, "is to retire to the adjoining room and make ourselves look as much like a couple of Oriental commercial travellers as our correctly British appearance will allow!"

"What!" I cried.

"That's it!" laughed Harley. "I have a perpetual tan, and I think I can give you a temporary one which I keep in a bottle for the purpose."

Twenty minutes later, then, having quitted Harley's chambers by a back way opening into one of those old-world courts which abound in this part of the metropolis, two quietly attired Eastern gentlemen got into a cab at the corner of Chancery Lane and proceeded in the direction of Limehouse.

There are haunts in many parts of London whose very existence is unsuspected by all but the few; haunts unvisited by the tourist and even unknown to the copy-hunting pressman. Into a quiet thoroughfare not three minutes' walk from the busy life of West India Dock Road, Harley led the way. Before a door sandwiched in between the entrance to a Greek tobacconist's establishment and a boarded shop-front, he paused and turned to me.

"Whatever you see or hear," he cautioned, "express no surprise. Above all, show no curiosity."

He rang the bell beside the door, and almost immediately it was opened by a Negress, grossly and repellently ugly.

Harley pattered something in what sounded like Arabic, whereat the Negress displayed the utmost servility, ushering us into an ill-lighted passage with every evidence of respect. Following this passage to its termination, an inner door was opened, and a burst of discordant music greeted us, together with a wave of tobacco smoke. We entered.

Despite my friend's particular injunctions to the contrary I gave a start of amazement.

We stood in the doorway of a fairly large apartment having a divan round three of its sides. This divan was occupied by ten or a dozen men of mixed nationalities—Arabs, Greeks, lascars, and others. They smoked cigarettes

for the most part and sipped Mokha from little cups. A girl was performing a wriggling dance upon the square carpet occupying the centre of the floor, accompanied by a Nubian boy who twanged upon a guitar, and by most of the assembled company, who clapped their hands to the music or droned a low, tuneless dirge.

Shortly after our entrance the performance terminated, and the girl retired through a curtained doorway at the farther end of the room. Our presence being now observed, suspicious glances were cast in our direction, and a very aged man, who sat smoking a narghli near the door by which the girl had made her exit, gravely waved towards us the amber mouthpiece which he held in his hand.

Harley walked straight across to him, I close at his heels. The light of a lamp which hung close by fell fully upon my friend's face; and, rising from his seat, the old man greeted him with the dignified and graceful salutation of the East. At his request we seated ourselves beside him, and, while we all three smoked excellent Turkish cigarettes, Harley and he conversed in a low tone. Suddenly, at some remark of my friend's, our strange host rose to his feet, an angry frown contracting his heavy eyebrows.

Silence fell upon the company.

In a loud and peremptory voice he called out something in Arabic.

Instantly I detected a fellow near the entrance door, and whom I had not hitherto observed, slipping furtively into the shadow, with a view, as I thought, to secret departure. He seemed to be deformed in some way and had the most evil, pock-marked face I had ever beheld in my life. Angrily, the majestic old man recalled him. Whereupon, with a sort of animal snarl quite indescribable, the fellow plucked out a knife! Two men who had been on the point of seizing him fell back, and:

"Hold him!" shouted Harley, springing forward—"hold him! It's Ali of Cairo!"

But Harley was too late. Turning, the strange and formidable- looking Oriental ran like the wind! Ere hand could be raised to stay him he was through the doorway!

"That settles it," said Harley grimly, as once more I found myself in a cab beside him. "I was right; but he'll forestall us!"

"Who will forestall us?" I asked in bewilderment.

"The biggest villain in Europe, Asia, or Africa!" cried my companion. "I have wasted precious time to-day. I might have known." He drummed irritably upon his knees. "The place we have just left is a sort of club, you understand, Knox, and Hakim is the proprietor or host as well as being an old gentleman of importance and authority in the Moslem world. I told him of my suspicions—which step I should have taken earlier—and they were instantly confirmed. My man was there—recognized me—and bolted! He'll forestall us."

"But my dear fellow," I said patiently—"who is this man, and what has he to do with the Deepbrow case?"

"He is the blackest scoundrel breathing!" answered Harley bitterly. "As to what he has to do with the case—why did he bolt? At any rate, I know where to find him now—and we may not be too late after all."

"But who and what is this man?"

"He is Ali of Cairo! As to what he is—you will soon learn."

IV. THE HOUSE BY THE RIVER

On quitting the singular Oriental club, Harley had first raced off to a public telephone, where he had spoken for some time—as I now divined—to Scotland Yard. For when we presently arrived at the headquarters of the Metropolitan Police, I was surprised to find Inspector Wessex awaiting us. Leaning out of the cab window:

"Yes?" called Harley excitedly. "Was I right?"

"You were, Mr Harley," answered Wessex, who seemed to be no less excited than my companion. "I got the man's reply an hour ago."

"I knew it!" said Harley shortly. "Get in, Wessex; we haven't a minute to waste."

The Inspector joined us in the cab, having first given instructions to the chauffeur. As we set out once more:

"You have had very little time to make the necessary arrangements," continued my friend.

"Time enough," replied Wessex. "They will not be expecting us."

"I'm not so sure of it. One of the biggest villains in the civilized world recognized me three minutes before I called you up and then made good his escape. However, there is at least a fighting chance."

Little more was said from that moment until the end of the drive, both my companions seeming to be consumed by an intense eagerness to reach our destination. At last the cab drew up in a deserted street. I had rather lost my bearings; but I knew that we were once more somewhere in the Chinatown area, and:

"Follow us until we get into the house," Harley said to Inspector Wessex, "and wait out of sight. If you hear me blow this whistle, bring up the men you have posted—as quick as you like! But make it your particular business to see that no one gets out!"

Into a pitch-dark yard we turned, and I felt a shudder of apprehension upon observing that it was the entrance to a wharf. Dully gleaming in the moonlight, the Thames, that grave of many a ghastly secret, flowed beneath us. Emerging from the shadow of the archway, we paused before a door in the wall on our left.

At that moment something gleamed through the air, whizzed past my ear, and fell with a metallic jingle on the stones!

Instinctively we both looked up.

At an unlighted window on the first floor I caught a fleeting glimpse of a dark face.

"You were right!" I said. "Ali of Cairo has forestalled us!"

Harley stooped and picked up a knife with a broad and very curious blade. He slipped it into his pocket, nonchalantly.

"All evidence!" he said. "Keep in the shadow and bend down. I am going to stand on your shoulders and get into that window!"

Wondering at his daring, I nevertheless obeyed; and Harley succeeded, although not without difficulty, in achieving his purpose. A moment after he had disappeared in the blackness of the room above.

"Stand clear, Knox!" I heard.

Two of the cushion seats sometimes called "poof-ottomans" were thrown down, and:

"Up you come!" called Harley. "I'll grasp your hands if you can reach."

It proved no easy task, but I finally managed to scramble up beside my friend—to find myself in a dark and stuffy little room.

"This way!" said Harley rapidly—"upstairs."

He led the way without more ado, but it was with serious misgivings that I stumbled up a darkened stair in the rear of my greatly daring friend.

A pistol cracked in the darkness—and my fez was no longer on my head!

Harley's repeater answered, and we stumbled through a heavily curtained door into a heated room, the air of which was laden with some Eastern perfume. In the dim light from a silken-shaded lantern a figure showed, momentarily, darting across the place before us.

Again Harley's pistol spoke, but, as it seemed, ineffectively.

I had little enough opportunity to survey my surroundings; yet even in those brief, breathless moments I saw enough of the place wherein we stood to make me doubt the evidence of my senses! Outside, I knew, lay a dingy wharf, amid a maze of mean streets; here was an opulently furnished apartment with a strong Oriental note in the decorations!

Snatching an electric torch from his pocket, Harley leaped through a doorway draped with rich Persian tapestry, and I came close on his heels. Outside was darkness. A strong draught met us; and, passing along a carpeted corridor, we never halted until we came to a room filled with the weirdest odds and ends, apparently collected from every quarter of the globe.

Crack!

A bullet flattened itself on the wall behind us!

"Good job he can't shoot straight!" rapped Harley.

The ray of the torch suddenly picked out the head and shoulders of a man who was descending through a trap in the floor! Ere we had time to shoot he was gone! I saw his brown fingers relax their hold—and a bundle which he had evidently hoped to take with him was left lying upon the floor.

Together we ran to the trap and looked down.

Slowly moving tidal water flowed darkly beneath us! For twenty breathless seconds we watched—but nothing showed upon the surface.

"I hope his swimming is no better than his shooting," I said.

"It can avail him little," replied Harley grimly; "a river-police boat is waiting for anyone who tries to escape from that side of the house. We are by no means alone in this affair, Knox. But, firstly, what have we here!" He took up the bundle which the fugitive had deserted. "Something incriminating when Ali of Cairo dared not stay to face it out! He would

never have deserted this place in the ordinary way. That fellow who was such a bad shot was left behind, when the news of our approach reached here, to make a desperate attempt to remove some piece of evidence! I'll swear to it. But we were too soon for him!"

All the time he was busily removing the pieces of sacking and scraps of Oriental stuff with which the bundle was fastened; and finally he drew out a dress-suit, together with the linen, collar, shoes, and underwear—a complete outfit, in fact—and on top of the whole was a soft gray felt hat!

Eagerly Harley searched the garments for some name of a maker by which their owner might be identified. Presently, inside the lining of the breast pocket, where such a mark is usually found, he discovered the label of a well-known West End firm.

"The police can confirm it, Knox!" he said, looking up, his face slightly flushed with triumph; "but I, personally, have no doubt!"

"You may have no doubt, Harley," I retorted, "but I am full of doubt! What is the significance of this discovery to which you seem to attach so much importance?"

"At the moment," replied my friend, "never mind; I still have hopes—although they have grown somewhat slender—of making a much more important discovery."

"Why not permit the police to aid in the search?"

"The police are more useful in their present occupation," he replied. "We are dealing with the most cunning knave produced by East or West, and I don't mean to let him slip through my fingers if he is in this house! Nevertheless, Knox, I am submitting you to rather an appalling risk, I know; for our man is desperate, and if he is still in the place will prove as dangerous as a cornered rat."

"But the man who dropped through the trap?"

"The man who dropped through the trap," said Harley, "was not Ali of Cairo—and it is Ali of Cairo for whom I am looking!"

"The hunchback we saw to-night?"

Harley nodded, and having listened intently for a few moments, proceeded again to search the singular apartments of the abode. In each was evidence of Oriental occupancy; indeed, some of the rooms possessed a sort of Arabian Nights atmosphere. But no living creature was to be seen or heard anywhere. It was while the two of us, having examined every inch of

wall, I should think, in the building, were standing staring rather blankly at each other in the room with the lighted lantern, that I saw Harley's expression change.

"Why," he muttered, "is this one room illuminated—and all the others in darkness?"

Even then the significance of this circumstance was not apparent to me. But Harley stared critically at an electric switch which was placed on the immediate right of the door and then up at the silk-shaded lantern which lighted the room. Crossing, he raised and lowered the switch rapidly, but the lamp continued to burn uninterruptedly!

"Ah!" he said—"a good trick!"

Grasping the wooden block to which the switch was attached, he turned it bodily—and I saw that it was a masked knob; for in the next moment he had pulled open the narrow section of wall—which proved to be nothing less than a cunningly fitted door!

A small, dimly lighted apartment was revealed, the Oriental note still predominant in its appointments, which, however, were few, and which I scarcely paused to note. For lying upon a mattress in this place was a pretty, fair-haired girl!

She lay on her side, having one white arm thrown out and resting limply on the floor, and she seemed to be in a semi-conscious condition, for although her fine eyes were widely opened, they had a glassy, witless look, and she was evidently unaware of our presence.

"Look at her pupils," rapped Harley. "They have drugged her with bhang! Poor, pretty fool!"

"Good God!" I cried. "Who is this, Harley?"

"Molly Clayton!" he answered. "Thank heaven we have saved one victim from Ali of Cairo."

V. THE HAREM AGENCY

Owing to the instrumentality of Paul Harley, the public never learned that the awful riverside murder called by the Press in reference to the victim's shaven skull "the barber atrocity" had any relation to the Deepbrow case. It

was physically impossible to identify the victim, and Harley had his own reasons for concealing the truth. The house on the wharf with its choice Oriental furniture was seized by the police; but, strange to relate, no arrest was made in connection with this most gruesome outrage. The man who dropped through the trap had been wounded by one of Harley's shots, and he sank for the last time under the very eyes of the crew of the police cutter.

It was at a late hour on the night of this concluding tragedy that I learned the amazing truth underlying the case. Wessex was still at work in the East End upon the hundred and one formalities which attached to his office, and Harley and I sat in the study of my friend's chambers in Chancery Lane.

"You see," Harley was explaining. "I got my first clue down at Deepbrow. The tracks leading to the motor-car. They showed—to anyone not hampered by a preconceived opinion—that the girl and Vane had not gone on together (since the man's footprints proved him to have been running), but that she had gone first and that he had run after her! Arguments: (a) He heard the approach of the car; or (b) he heard her call for help. In fact, it almost immediately became evident to me that someone else had met her at the end of the lane; probably someone who expected her, and whom she was going to meet when she, accidentally, encountered Vane! The captain was not attired for an elopement, and, more significant still, he said he should stroll to the Deep Wood, and that was where he did stroll to; for it borders the road at this point!

"I had privately ascertained, from the postman, that Molly Clayton actually received a letter on that morning! This resolved my last doubt. She was not going to meet Vane on the night of her disappearance.

"Then whom?"

"The old love! He who some months earlier had had over fifty seductive pictures of this undoubtedly pretty girl prepared for a purpose of his own!"

"Vane interfered?"

"When the girl saw that they meant to take her away, she no doubt made a fuss! He ran to the rescue! They had not reckoned on his being there, but these are clever villains, who leave no clues— except for one who has met them on their own ground!"

"On their own ground! What do you mean, Harley? Who are these people?"

"Well—where do you suppose those fifty photographs went?"

"I cannot conjecture!"

"Then I will tell you. The turmoil in the East has put wealth and power into unscrupulous hands. But even before the war there were marts, Knox—open marts—at which a Negro girl might be purchased for some 30 pounds, and a Circassian for anything from 250 pounds to 500 pounds! Ah! You stare! But I assure you it was so. Here is the point, though: there were, and still are, private dealers! Those photographs were circulated among the nouveaux riches of the East! They were employed in the same way that any other merchant employs a catalogue. They reached the hands of many an opulent and abandoned 'profiteer' of Damascus, Stambul—where you will. Molly's picture would be one of many. Remember that hundreds of pretty girls disappear from their homes—taking the whole of the world—every year. Clearly, English beauty is popular at the moment! And," he added bitterly, "the arch-villain has escaped!"

"Ali of Cairo!" I cried. "Then Ali of Cairo———"

"Is the biggest slave-dealer in the East!"

"Good God! Harley—at last I understand!"

"I was slow enough to understand it myself, Knox. But once the theory presented itself I asked Wessex to get into immediate touch with the valet he had already interviewed at Deepbrow. It was the result of his inquiry to which he referred when we met him at Scotland Yard to-night. Captain Vane had a large mole on his shoulder and a girl's name, together with a small device, tattooed on his forearm—a freak of his Sandhurst days———"

"Then 'the man with the shaven skull'———"

"Is Captain Ronald Vane! May he rest in peace. But I never shall until the crook-back dealer in humanity has met his just deserts."

THE WHITE HAT

I. MAJOR JACK RAGSTAFF

"Hallo! Innes," said Paul Harley as his secretary entered. "Someone is making a devil of a row outside."

"This is the offender, Mr Harley," said Innes, and handed my friend a visiting card.

Glancing at the card, Harley read aloud:

"Major J. E. P. Ragstaff, Cavalry Club."

Meanwhile a loud harsh voice, which would have been audible in a full gale, was roaring in the lobby.

"Nonsense!" I could hear the Major shouting. "Balderdash! There's more fuss than if I had asked for an interview with the Prime Minister. Piffle! Balderdash!"

Innes's smile developed into a laugh, in which Harley joined, then:

"Admit the Major," he said.

Into the study where Harley and I had been seated quietly smoking, there presently strode a very choleric Anglo-Indian. He wore a horsy check suit and white spats, and his tie closely resembled a stock. In his hand he carried a heavy malacca cane, gloves, and one of those tall, light-gray hats commonly termed white. He was below medium height, slim and wiry; his gait and the shape of his legs, his build, all proclaimed the dragoon. His complexion was purple, and the large white teeth visible beneath a bristling gray moustache added to the natural ferocity of his appearance. Standing just within the doorway:

"Mr Paul Harley?" he shouted.

It was apparently an inquiry, but it sounded like a reprimand.

My friend, standing before the fireplace, his hands in his pockets and his pipe in his mouth, nodded brusquely.

"I am Paul Harley," he said. "Won't you sit down?"

Major Ragstaff, glancing angrily at Innes as the latter left the study, tossed his stick and gloves on to a settee, and drawing up a chair seated himself stiffly upon it as though he were in a saddle. He stared straight at Harley, and:

"You are not the sort of person I expected, sir," he declared. "May I ask if it is your custom to keep clients dancin' on the mat and all that—on the blasted mat, sir?"

Harley suppressed a smile, and I hastily reached for my cigarette-case which I had placed upon the mantelshelf.

"I am always naturally pleased to see clients, Major Ragstaff," said Harley, "but a certain amount of routine is necessary even in civilian life. You had not advised me of your visit, and it is contrary to my custom to discuss business after five o'clock."

As Harley spoke the Major glared at him continuously, and then:

"I've seen you in India!" he roared; "damme! I've seen you in India!—and, yes! in Turkey! Ha! I've got you now sir!" He sprang to his feet. "You're the Harley who was in Constantinople in 1912."

"Quite true."

"Then I've come to the wrong shop."

"That remains to be seen, Major."

"But I was told you were a private detective, and all that."

"So I am," said Harley quietly. "In 1912 the Foreign Office was my client. I am now at the service of anyone who cares to employ me."

"Hell!" said the Major.

He seemed to be temporarily stricken speechless by the discovery that a man who had acted for the British Government should be capable of stooping to the work of a private inquiry agent. Staring all about the room with a sort of naive wonderment, he drew out a big silk handkerchief and loudly blew his nose, all the time eyeing Harley questioningly. Replacing his handkerchief he directed his regard upon me, and:

"This is my friend, Mr Knox," said Harley; "you may state your case before him without hesitation, unless———"

I rose to depart, but:

"Sit down, Mr Knox! Sit down, sir!" shouted the Major. "I have no dirty linen to wash, no skeletons in the cupboard or piffle of that kind. I simply want something explained which I am too thick-headed—too damned thick-headed, sir—to explain myself."

He resumed his seat, and taking out his wallet extracted from it a small newspaper cutting which he offered to Harley.

"Read that, Mr Harley," he directed. "Read it aloud."

Harley read as follows:

"Before Mr Smith, at Marlborough Street Police Court, John Edward Bampton was charged with assaulting a well-known clubman in Bond

Street on Wednesday evening. It was proved by the constable who made the arrest that robbery had not been the motive of the assault, and Bampton confessed that he bore no grudge against the assailed man, indeed, that he had never seen him before. He pleaded intoxication, and the police surgeon testified that although not actually intoxicated, his breath had smelled strongly of liquor at the time of his arrest. Bampton's employers testified to a hitherto blameless character, and as the charge was not pressed the man was dismissed with a caution."

Having read the paragraph, Harley glanced at the Major with a puzzled expression.

"The point of this quite escapes me," he confessed.

"Is that so?" said Major Ragstaff. "Is that so, sir? Perhaps you will be good enough to read this."

From his wallet he took a second newspaper cutting, smaller than the first, and gummed to a sheet of club notepaper. Harley took it and read as follows:

"Mr De Lana, a well-known member of the Stock Exchange, who met with a serious accident recently, is still in a precarious condition."

The puzzled look on Harley's face grew more acute, and the Major watched him with an expression which I can only describe as one of fierce enjoyment.

"You're thinkin' I'm a damned old fool, ain't you?" he shouted suddenly.

"Scarcely that," said Harley, smiling slightly, "but the significance of these paragraphs is not apparent, I must confess. The man Bampton would not appear to be an interesting character, and since no great damage has been done, his drunken frolic hardly comes within my sphere. Of Mr De Lana, of the Stock Exchange, I never heard, unless he happens to be a member of the firm of De Lana and Day?"

"He's not a member of that firm, sir," shouted the Major. "He was, up to six o'clock this evenin'."

"What do you mean exactly?" inquired Harley, and the tone of his voice suggested that he was beginning to entertain doubts of the Major's sanity or sobriety; then:

"He's dead!" declared the latter. "Dead as the Begum of Bangalore! He died at six o'clock. I've just spoken to his widow on the telephone."

I suppose I must have been staring very hard at the speaker, and certainly Harley was doing so, for suddenly directing his fierce gaze toward me:

"You're completely treed, sir, and so's your friend!" shouted Major Ragstaff.

"I confess it," replied Harley quietly; "and since my time is of some little value I would suggest, without disrespect, that you explain the connection, if any, between yourself, the drunken Bampton, and Mr De Lana, of the Stock Exchange, who died, you inform us, at six o'clock this evening as the result, presumably, of injuries received in an accident."

"That's what I'm here for!" cried Major Ragstaff. "In the first place, then, I am the party, although I saw to it that my name was kept out of print, whom the drunken lunatic assaulted."

Harley, pipe in hand, stared at the speaker perplexedly.

"Understand me," continued the Major, "I am the person—I, Jack Ragstaff—he assaulted. I was walkin' down from my quarters in Maddox Street on my way to dine at the club, same as I do every night o' my life, when this flamin' idiot sprang upon me, grabbed my hat"—he took up his white hat to illustrate what had occurred—"not this one, but one like it—pitched it on the ground and jumped on it!"

Harley was quite unable to conceal his smiles as the excited old soldier dropped his conspicuous head-gear on the floor and indulged in a vigorous pantomime designed to illustrate his statement.

"Most extraordinary," said Harley. "What did you do?"

"What did I do?" roared the Major. "I gave him a crack on the head with my cane, and I said things to him which couldn't be repeated in court. I punched him, and likewise hoofed him, but the hat was completely done in. Damn crowd collected, hearin' me swearin' and bellowin'. Police and all that; names an' addresses and all that balderdash. Man lugged away to guard-room and me turnin' up at the club with no hat. Damn ridiculous spectacle at my time of life."

"Quite so," said Harley soothingly; "I appreciate your annoyance, but I am utterly at a loss to understand why you have come here, and what all this has to do with Mr De Lana, of the Stock Exchange."

"He fell out of the window!" shouted the Major.

"Fell out of a window?"

"Out of a window, sir, a second floor window ten yards up a side street! Pitched on his skull—marvel he wasn't killed outright!"

A faint expression of interest began to creep into Harley's glance, and:

"I understand you to mean, Major Ragstaff," he said deliberately, "that while your struggle with the drunken man was in progress Mr De Lana fell out of a neighbouring window into the street?"

"Right!" shouted the Major. "Right, sir!"

"Do you know this Mr De Lana?"

"Never heard of him in my life until the accident occurred. Seems to me the poor devil leaned out to see the fun and overbalanced. Felt responsible, only natural, and made inquiries. He died at six o'clock this evenin', sir."

"H'm," said Harley reflectively. "I still fail to see where I come in. From what window did he fall?"

"Window above a sort of teashop, called Cafe Dame—damn silly name. Place on a corner. Don't know name of side street."

"H'm. You don't think he was pushed out, for instance?"

"Certainly not!" shouted the Major; "he just fell out, but the point is, he's dead!"

"My dear sir," said Harley patiently, "I don't dispute that point; but what on earth do you want of me?"

"I don't know what I want!" roared the Major, beginning to walk up and down the room, "but I know I ain't satisfied, not easy in my mind, sir. I wake up of a night hearin' the poor devil's yell as he crashed on the pavement. That's all wrong. I've heard hundreds of death-yells, but"—he took up his malacca cane and beat it loudly on the table—"I haven't woke up of a night dreamin' I heard 'em again."

"In a word, you suspect foul play?"

"I don't suspect anything!" cried the other excitedly, "but someone mentioned your name to me at the club—said you could see through concrete, and all that—and here I am. There's something wrong, radically wrong. Find out what it is and send the bill to me. Then perhaps I'll be able to sleep in peace."

He paused, and again taking out the large silk handkerchief blew his nose loudly. Harley glanced at me in rather an odd way, and then:

"There will be no bill, Major Ragstaff," he said; "but if I can see any possible line of inquiry I will pursue it and report the result to you."

II. A CURIOUS OUTRAGE

"What do you make of it, Harley?" I asked. Paul Harley returned a work of reference to its shelf and stood staring absently across the study.

"Our late visitor's history does not help us much," he replied. "A somewhat distinguished army career, and so forth, and his only daughter, Sybil Margaret, married the fifth Marquis of Ireton. She is, therefore, the noted society beauty, the Marchioness of Ireton. Does this suggest anything to your mind?"

"Nothing whatever," I said blankly.

"Nor to mine," murmured Harley.

The telephone bell rang.

"Hallo!" called Harley. "Yes. That you, Wessex? Have you got the address? Good. No, I shall remember it. Many thanks. Good-bye."

He turned to me.

"I suggest, Knox," he said, "that we make our call and then proceed to dinner as arranged."

Since I was always glad of an opportunity of studying my friend's methods I immediately agreed, and ere long, leaving the lights of the two big hotels behind, our cab was gliding down the long slope which leads to Waterloo Station. Thence through crowded, slummish high-roads we made our way via Lambeth to that dismal thoroughfare, Westminster Bridge Road, with its forbidding, often windowless, houses, and its peculiar air of desolation.

The house for which we were bound was situated at no great distance from Kensington Park, and telling the cabman to wait, Harley and I walked up a narrow, paved path, mounted a flight of steps, and rang the bell beside a somewhat time-worn door, above which was an old-fashioned fanlight dimly illuminated from within.

A considerable interval elapsed before the door was opened by a marvellously untidy servant girl who had apparently been interrupted in the act of black-leading her face. Partly opening the door, she stared at us

agape, pushing back wisps of hair from her eyes and with every movement daubing more of some mysterious black substance upon her countenance.

"Is Mr Bampton in?" asked Harley.

"Yus, just come in. I'm cookin' his supper."

"Tell him that two friends of his have called on rather important business."

"All right," said the black-faced one. "What name is it?"

"No name. Just say two friends of his."

Treating us to a long, vacant stare and leaving us standing on the step, the maid (in whose hand I perceived a greasy fork) shuffled along the passage and began to mount the stairs. An unmistakable odour of frying sausages now reached my nostrils. Harley glanced at me quizzically, but said nothing until the Cinderella came stumbling downstairs again. Without returning to where we stood:

"Go up," she directed. "Second floor, front. Shut the door, one of yer."

She disappeared into gloomy depths below as Harley and I, closing the door behind us, proceeded to avail ourselves of the invitation. There was very little light on the staircase, but we managed to find our way to a poorly furnished bed-sitting-room where a small table was spread for a meal. Beside the table, in a chintz-covered arm-chair, a thick-set young man was seated smoking a cigarette and having a copy of the Daily Telegraph upon his knees.

He was a very typical lower middle-class, nothing-in-particular young man, but there was a certain truculence indicated by his square jaw, and that sort of self-possession which sometimes accompanies physical strength was evidenced in his manner as, tossing the paper aside, he stood up.

"Good evening, Mr Bampton," said Harley genially. "I take it"— pointing to the newspaper—"that you are looking for a new job?"

Bampton stared, a suspicion of anger in his eyes, then, meeting the amused glance of my friend, he broke into a smile very pleasing and humorous. He was a fresh-coloured young fellow with hair inclined to redness, and smiling he looked very boyish indeed.

"I have no idea who you are," he said, speaking with a faint north-country accent, "but you evidently know who I am and what has happened to me."

"Got the boot?" asked Harley confidentially.

Bampton, tossing the end of his cigarette into the grate, nodded grimly.

"You haven't told me your name," he said, "but I think I can tell you your business." He ceased smiling. "Now look here, I don't want any more publicity. If you think you are going to make a funny newspaper story out of me change your mind as quick as you like. I'll never get another job in London as it is. If you drag me any further into the limelight I'll never get another job in England."

"My dear fellow," replied Harley soothingly, at the same time extending his cigarette-case, "you misapprehend the object of my call. I am not a reporter."

"What!" said Bampton, pausing in the act of taking a cigarette, "then what the devil are you?"

"My name is Paul Harley, and I am a criminal investigator."

He spoke the words deliberately, having his eyes fixed upon the other's face; but although Bampton was palpably startled there was no trace of fear in his straightforward glance. He took a cigarette from the case, and:

"Thanks, Mr Harley," he said. "I cannot imagine what business has brought you here."

"I have come to ask you two questions," was the reply. "Number one: Who paid you to smash Major Ragstaff's white hat? Number two: How much did he pay you?"

To these questions I listened in amazement, and my amazement was evidently shared by Bampton. He had been in the act of lighting his cigarette, but he allowed the match to burn down nearly to his fingers and then dropped it with a muttered exclamation in the fire. Finally:

"I don't know how you found out," he said, "but you evidently know the truth. Provided you assure me that you are not out to make a silly-season newspaper story, I'll tell you all I know."

Harley laid his card on the table, and:

"Unless the ends of justice demand it," he said, "I give you my word that anything you care to say will go no further. You may speak freely before my friend, Mr Knox. Simply tell me in as few words as possible what led you to court arrest in that manner."

"Right," replied Bampton, "I will." He half closed his eyes, reflectively. "I was having tea in the Lyons' cafe, to which I always go, last Monday

afternoon about four o'clock, when a man sat down facing me and got into conversation."

"Describe him!"

"He was a man rather above medium height. I should say about my own build; dark, going gray. He had a neat moustache and a short beard, and the look of a man who had travelled a lot. His skin was very tanned, almost as deeply as yours, Mr Harley. Not at all the sort of chap that goes in there as a rule. After a while he made an extraordinary proposal. At first I thought he was joking, then when I grasped the idea that he was serious I concluded he was mad. He asked me how much a year I earned, and I told him Peters and Peters paid me 150 pounds. He said: 'I'll give you a year's salary to knock a man's hat off!'"

As Bampton spoke the words he glanced at us with twinkling eyes, but although for my own part I was merely amused, Harley's expression had grown very stern.

"Of course, I laughed," continued Bampton, "but when the man drew out a fat wallet and counted ten five-pound notes on the table I began to think seriously about his proposal. Even supposing he was cracked, it was absolutely money for nothing.

"'Of course,' he said, 'you'll lose your job and you may be arrested, but you'll say that you had been out with a few friends and were a little excited, also that you never could stand white hats. Stick to that story and the balance of a hundred pounds will reach you on the following morning.'

"I asked him for further particulars, and I asked him why he had picked me for the job. He replied that he had been looking for some time for the right man; a man who was strong enough physically to accomplish the thing, and someone"—Bampton's eyes twinkled again—"with a dash of the devil in him, but at the same time a man who could be relied upon to stick to his guns and not to give the game away.

"You asked me to be brief, and I'll try to be. The man in the white hat was described to me, and the exact time and place of the meeting. I just had to grab his white hat, smash it, and face the music. I agreed. I don't deny that I had a couple of stiff drinks before I set out, but the memory of that fifty pounds locked up here in my room and the further hundred promised, bucked me up wonderfully. It was impossible to mistake my man; I could see him coming toward me as I waited just outside a sort of little restaurant

called the Cafe Dame. As arranged, I bumped into him, grabbed his hat and jumped on it."

He paused, raising his hand to his head reminiscently.

"My man was a bit of a scrapper," he continued, "and he played hell. I've never heard such language in my life, and the way he laid about me with his cane is something I am not likely to forget in a hurry. A crowd gathered, naturally, and (also naturally) I was 'pinched.' That didn't matter much. I got off lightly; and although I've been dismissed by Peters and Peters, twenty crisp fivers are locked in my trunk there, with the ten which I received in the City."

Harley checked him, and:

"May I see the envelope in which they arrived?" he asked.

"Sorry," replied Bampton, "but I burned it. I thought it was playing the game to do so. It wouldn't have helped you much, though," he added; "It was an ordinary common envelope, posted in the City, address typewritten, and not a line enclosed."

"Registered?"

"No."

Bampton stood looking at us with a curious expression on his face, and suddenly:

"There's one point," he said, "on which my conscience isn't easy. You know about that poor devil who fell out of a window? Well, it would never have happened if I hadn't kicked up a row in the street. There's no doubt he was leaning out to see what the disturbance was about when the accident occurred."

"Did you actually see him fall?" asked Harley.

"No. He fell from a window several yards behind me in the side street, but I heard him cry out, and as I was lugged off by the police I heard the bell of the ambulance which came to fetch him."

He paused again and stood rubbing his head ruefully.

"H'm," said Harley; "was there anything particularly remarkable about this man in the Lyons' cafe?"

Bampton reflected silently for some moments, and then:

"Nothing much," he confessed. "He was evidently a gentleman, wore a blue top-coat, a dark tweed suit, and what looked like a regimental tie, but I didn't see much of the colours. He was very tanned, as I have said, even to

the backs of his hands—and oh, yes! there was one point: He had a gold-covered tooth."

"Which tooth?"

"I can't remember, except that it was on the left side, and I always noticed it when he smiled."

"Did he wear any ring or pin which you would recognize?"

"No."

"Had he any oddity of speech or voice?"

"No. Just a heavy, drawling manner. He spoke like thousands of other cultured Englishmen. But wait a minute—yes! There was one other point. Now I come to think of it, his eyes very slightly slanted upward."

Harley stared.

"Like a Chinaman's?"

"Oh, nothing so marked as that. But the same sort of formation."

Harley nodded briskly and buttoned up his overcoat.

"Thanks, Mr Bampton," he said; "we will detain you no longer!"

As we descended the stairs, where the smell of frying sausages had given place to that of something burning—probably the sausages:

"I was half inclined to think that Major Ragstaff's ideas were traceable to a former touch of the sun," said Harley. "I begin to believe that he has put us on the track of a highly unusual crime. I am sorry to delay dinner, Knox, but I propose to call at the Cafe Dame."

III. A CRIMINAL GENIUS

On entering the doorway of the Cafe Dame we found ourselves in a narrow passage. In front of us was a carpeted stair, and to the right a glass-panelled door communicating with a discreetly lighted little dining room which seemed to be well patronized. Opening the door Harley beckoned to a waiter, and:

"I wish to see the proprietor," he said.

"Mr Meyer is engaged at the moment, sir," was the reply.

"Where is he?"

"In his office upstairs, sir. He will be down in a moment."

The waiter hurried away, and Harley stood glancing up the stairs as if in doubt what to do.

"I cannot imagine how such a place can pay," he muttered. "The rent must be enormous in this district."

But even before he ceased speaking I became aware of an excited conversation which was taking place in some apartment above.

"It's scandalous!" I heard, in a woman's shrill voice. "You have no right to keep it! It's not your property, and I'm here to demand that you give it up."

A man's voice replied in voluble broken English, but I could only distinguish a word here and there. I saw that Harley was interested, for catching my questioning glance, he raised his finger to his lips enjoining me to be silent.

"Oh, that's the game, is it?" continued the female voice. "Of course you know it's blackmail?"

A flow of unintelligible words answered this speech, then:

"I shall come back with someone," cried the invisible woman, "who will make you give it up!"

"Knox," whispered Harley in my ear, "when that woman comes down, follow her! I'm afraid you will bungle the business, and I would not ask you to attempt it if big things were not at stake. Return here; I shall wait."

As a matter of fact, his sudden request had positively astounded me, but ere I had time for any reply a door suddenly banged open above and a respectable-looking woman, who might have been some kind of upper servant, came quickly down the stairs. An expression of intense indignation rested upon her face, and without seeming to notice our presence she brushed past us and went out into the street.

"Off you go, Knox!" said Harley.

Seeing myself committed to an unpleasant business, I slipped out of the doorway and detected the woman five or six yards away hurrying in the direction of Piccadilly. I had no difficulty in following her, for she was evidently unsuspicious of my presence, and when presently she mounted a westward-bound 'bus I did likewise, but while she got inside I went on top, and occupied a seat on the near side whence I could observe anyone leaving the vehicle.

If I had not known Paul Harley so well I should have counted the whole business a ridiculous farce, but recognizing that something underlay these seemingly trivial and disconnected episodes, I lighted a cigarette and resigned myself to circumstance.

At Hyde Park Corner I saw the woman descending, and when presently she walked up Hamilton Place I was not far behind her. At the door of an imposing mansion she stopped, and in response to a ring of the bell the door was opened by a footman, and the woman hurried in. Evidently she was an inmate of the establishment; and conceiving that my duty was done when I had noted the number of the house, I retraced my steps to the corner; and, hailing a taxicab, returned to the Cafe Dame.

On inquiring of the same waiter whom Harley had accosted whether my friend was there:

"I think a gentleman is upstairs with Mr Meyer," said the man.

"In his office?"

"Yes, sir."

Thereupon I mounted the stairs and before a half-open door paused. Harley's voice was audible within, and therefore I knocked and entered.

I discovered Harley standing by an American desk. Beside him in a revolving chair which, with the desk, constituted the principal furniture of a tiny office, sat a man in a dress-suit which had palpably not been made for him. He had a sullen and suspiciously Teutonic cast of countenance, and he was engaged in a voluble but hardly intelligible speech as I entered.

"Ha, Knox!" said Harley, glancing over his shoulder, "did you manage?"

"Yes," I replied.

Harley nodded shortly and turned again to the man in the chair.

"I am sorry to give you so much trouble, Mr Meyer," he said, "but I should like my friend here to see the room above."

At this moment my attention was attracted by a singular object which lay upon the desk amongst a litter of bills and accounts. This was a piece of rusty iron bar somewhat less than three feet in length, and which once had been painted green.

"You are looking at this tragic fragment, Knox," said Harley, taking up the bar. "Of course"—he shrugged his shoulders—"it explains the whole unfortunate occurrence. You see there was a flaw in the metal at this end,

here"—he indicated the spot—"and the other end had evidently worn loose in its socket."

"But I don't understand."

"It will all be made clear at the inquest, no doubt. A most unfortunate thing for you, Mr Meyer."

"Most unfortunate," declared the proprietor of the restaurant, extending his thick hands pathetically. "Most ruinous to my business."

"We will go upstairs now," said Harley. "You will kindly lead the way, Mr Meyer, and the whole thing will be quite clear to you, Knox."

As the proprietor walked out of the office and upstairs to the second floor Harley whispered in my ear:

"Where did she go?"

"No.——— Hamilton Place," I replied in an undertone.

"Good God!" muttered my friend, and clutched my arm so tightly that I winced. "Good God! The master touch, Knox! This crime was the work of a genius—of a genius with slightly, very slightly, oblique eyes."

Opening a door on the second landing, Mr Meyer admitted us to a small supper-room. Its furniture consisted of a round dining table, several chairs, a couch, and very little else. I observed, however, that the furniture, carpet, and a few other appointments were of a character much more elegant than those of the public room below. A window which overlooked the street was open, so that the plush curtains which had been drawn aside moved slightly to and fro in the draught.

"The window of the tragedy, Knox," explained Harley.

He crossed the room.

"If you will stand here beside me you will see the gap in the railing caused by the breaking away of the fragment which now lies on Mr Meyer's desk. Some few yards to the left in the street below is where the assault took place, of which we have heard, and the unfortunate Mr De Lana, who was dining here alone—an eccentric custom of his—naturally ran to the window upon hearing the disturbance and leaned out, supporting his weight upon the railing. The rail collapsed, and—we know the rest."

"It will ruin me," groaned Meyer; "it will give bad repute to my establishment."

"I fear it will," agreed Harley sympathetically, "unless we can manage to clear up one or two little difficulties which I have observed. For instance"—

he tapped the proprietor on the shoulder confidentially —"have you any idea, any hazy idea, of the identity of the woman who was dining here with Mr De Lana on Wednesday night?"

The effect of this simple inquiry upon the proprietor was phenomenal. His fat yellow face assumed a sort of leaden hue, and his already prominent eyes protruded abnormally. He licked his lips.

"I tell you—already I tell you," he muttered, "that Mr De Lana he engage this room every Wednesday and sometimes also Friday, and dine here by himself."

"And I tell you," said Harley sweetly, "that you are an inspired liar. You smuggled her out by the side entrance after the accident."

"The side entrance?" muttered Meyer. "The side entrance?"

"Exactly; the side entrance. There is something else which I must ask you to tell me. Who had engaged this room on Tuesday night, the night before the accident?"

The proprietor's expression remained uncomprehending, and:

"A gentleman," he said. "I never see him before."

"Another solitary diner?" suggested Harley.

"Yes, he is alone all the evening waiting for a friend who does not arrive."

"Ah," mused Harley—"alone all the evening, was he? And his friend disappointed him. May I suggest that he was a dark man? Gray at the temples, having a dark beard and moustache, and a very tanned face? His eyes slanted slightly upward?"

"Yes! yes!" cried Meyer, and his astonishment was patently unfeigned. "It is a friend of yours?"

"A friend of mine, yes," said Harley absently, but his expression was very grim. "What time did he finally leave?"

"He waited until after eleven o'clock. The dinner is spoilt. He pays, but does not complain."

"No," said Harley musingly, "he had nothing to complain about. One more question, my friend. When the lady escaped hurriedly on Wednesday night, what was it that she left behind and what price are you trying to extort from her for returning it?"

At that the man collapsed entirely.

"Ah, Gott!" he cried, and raised his hand to his clammy forehead. "You will ruin me. I am a ruined man. I don't try to extort anything. I run an honest business———"

"And one of the most profitable in the world," added Harley, "since the days of Thais to our own. Even at Bond Street rentals I assume that a house of assignation is a golden enterprise."

"Ah!" groaned Meyer, "I am ruined, so what does it matter? I tell you everything. I know Mr De Lana who engages my room regularly, but I don't know who the lady is who meets him here. No! I swear it! But always it is the same lady. When he falls I am downstairs in my office, and I hear him cry out. The lady comes running from the room and begs of me to get her away without being seen and to keep all mention of her out of the matter."

"What did she pay you?" asked Harley.

"Pay me?" muttered Meyer, pulled up thus shortly in the midst of his statement.

"Pay you. Exactly. Don't argue; answer."

The man delivered himself of a guttural, choking sound, and finally:

"She promised one hundred pounds," he confessed hoarsely.

"But you surely did not accept a mere promise? Out with it. What did she give you?"

"A ring," came the confession at last.

"A ring. I see. I will take it with me if you don't mind. And now, finally, what was it that she left behind?"

"Ah, Gott!" moaned the man, dropping into a chair and resting his arms upon the table. "It is all a great panic, you see. I hurry her out by the back stair from this landing and she forgets her bag."

"Her bag? Good."

"Then I clear away the remains of dinner so I can say Mr De Lana is dining alone. It is as much my interest as the lady's."

"Of course! I quite understand. I will trouble you no more, Mr Meyer, except to step into your office and to relieve you of that incriminating evidence, the lady's bag and her ring."

IV. THE SLANTING EYES

"Do you understand, Knox?" said Harley as the cab bore us toward Hamilton Place. "Do you grasp the details of this cunning scheme?"

"On the contrary," I replied, "I am hopelessly at sea."

Nevertheless, I had forgotten that I was hungry in the excitement which now claimed me. For although the thread upon which these seemingly disconnected things hung was invisible to me, I recognized that Bampton, the city clerk, the bearded stranger who had made so singular a proposition to him, the white-hatted major, the dead stockbroker, and the mysterious woman whose presence in the case the clear sight of Harley had promptly detected, all were linked together by some subtle chain. I was convinced, too, that my friend held at least one end of that chain in his grip.

"In order to prepare your mind for the interview which I hope to obtain this evening," continued Harley, "let me enlighten you upon one or two points which may seem obscure. In the first place you recognize that anyone leaning out of the window on the second floor would almost automatically rest his weight upon the iron bar which was placed there for that very purpose, since the ledge is unusually low?"

"Quite," I replied, "and it also follows that if the bar gave way anyone thus leaning on it would be pitched into the street."

"Your reasoning is correct."

"But, my dear fellow," said I, "how could such an accident have been foreseen?"

"You speak of an accident. This was no accident! One end of the bar had been filed completely through, although the file marks had been carefully concealed with rust and dirt; and the other end had been wrenched out from its socket and then replaced in such a way that anyone leaning upon the bar could not fail to be precipitated into the street!"

"Good heavens! Then you mean———"

"I mean, Knox, that the man who occupied the supper room on the night before the tragedy—the dark man, tanned and bearded, with slightly oblique eyes—-spent his time in filing through that bar—in short, in preparing a death trap!"

I was almost dumbfounded.

"But, Harley," I said, "assuming that he knew his victim would be the next occupant of the room, how could he know———?"

I stopped. Suddenly, as if a curtain had been raised, the details of what I now perceived to be a fiendishly cunning murder were revealed to me.

"According to his own account, Knox," resumed Harley, "Major Ragstaff regularly passed along that street with military punctuality at the same hour every night. You may take it for granted that the murderer was well aware of this. As a matter of fact, I happen to know that he was. We must also take it for granted that the murderer knew of these little dinners for two which took place in the private room above the Cafe Dame every Wednesday—and sometimes on Friday. Around the figure of the methodical major—with his conspicuous white hat as a sort of focus—was built up one of the most ingenious schemes of murder with which I have ever come in contact. The victim literally killed himself."

"But, Harley, the victim might have ignored the disturbance."

"That is where I first detected the touch of genius, Knox. He recognized the voice of one of the combatants—or his companion did. Here we are."

The cab drew up before the house in Hamilton Place. We alighted, and Harley pressed the bell. The same footman whom I had seen admit the woman opened the door.

"Is Lady Ireton at home?" asked Harley.

As he uttered the name I literally held my breath. We had come to the house of Major Ragstaff's daughter, the Marchioness of Ireton, one of society's most celebrated and beautiful hostesses!—the wife of a peer famed alike as sportsman, soldier, and scholar.

"I believe she is dining at home, sir," said the man. "Shall I inquire?"

"Be good enough to do so," replied Harley, and gave him a card. "Inform her that I wish to return to her a handbag which she lost a few days ago."

The man ushered us into an anteroom opening off the lofty and rather gloomy hall, and as the door closed:

"Harley," I said in a stage whisper, "am I to believe———"

"Can you doubt it?" returned Harley with a grim smile.

A few moments later we were shown into a charmingly intimate little boudoir in which Lady Ireton was waiting to receive us. She was a strikingly handsome brunette, but to-night her face, which normally, I think, possessed rich colouring, was almost pallid, and there was a hunted look in her dark eyes which made me wish to be anywhere rather than where I found myself. Without preamble she rose and addressed Harley:

"I fail to understand your message, sir," she said, and I admired the imperious courage with which she faced him. "You say you have recovered a handbag which I had lost?"

Harley bowed, and from the pocket of his greatcoat took out a silken-tasselled bag.

"The one which you left in the Cafe Dame, Lady Ireton," he replied. "Here also I have"—from another pocket he drew out a diamond ring—"something which was extorted from you by the fellow Meyer."

Without touching her recovered property, Lady Ireton sank slowly down into the chair from which she had arisen, her gaze fixed as if hypnotically upon the speaker.

"My friend, Mr Knox, is aware of all the circumstances," continued the latter, "but he is as anxious as I am to terminate this painful interview. I surmise that what occurred on Wednesday night was this—(correct me if I am wrong): While dining with Mr De Lana you heard sounds of altercation in the street below. May I suggest that you recognized one of the voices?"

Lady Ireton, still staring straight before her at Harley, inclined her head in assent.

"I heard my father's voice," she said hoarsely.

"Quite so," he continued. "I am aware that Major Ragstaff is your father." He turned to me: "Do you recognize the touch of genius at last?" Then, again addressing Lady Ireton: "You naturally suggested to your companion that he should look out of the window in order to learn what was taking place. The next thing you knew was that he had fallen into the street below?"

Lady Ireton shuddered and raised her hands to her face.

"It is retribution," she whispered. "I have brought this ruin upon myself. But he does not deserve———"

Her voice faded into silence, and:

"You refer to your husband, Lord Ireton?" said Harley.

Lady Ireton nodded, and again recovering power of speech:

"It was to have been our last meeting," she said, looking up at Harley.

She shuddered, and her eyes blazed into sudden fierceness. Then, clenching her hands, she looked aside.

"Oh, God, the shame of this hour!" she whispered.

And I would have given much to have been spared the spectacle of this proud, erring woman's humiliation. But Paul Harley was scientifically remorseless. I could detect no pity in his glance.

"I would give my life willingly to spare my husband the knowledge of what has been," said Lady Ireton in a low, monotonous voice. "Three times I sent my maid to Meyer to recover my bag, but he demanded a price which even I could not pay. Now it is all discovered, and Harry will know."

"That, I fear, is unavoidable, Lady Ireton," declared Harley. "May I ask where Lord Ireton is at present?"

"He is in Africa after big game."

"H'm," said Harley, "in Africa, and after big game? I can offer you one consolation, Lady Ireton. In his own interests Meyer will stick to his first assertion that Mr De Lana was dining alone."

A strange, horribly pathetic look came into the woman's haunted eyes.

"You—you—are not acting for———?" she began.

"I am acting for no one," replied Harley tersely. "Upon my friend's discretion you may rely as upon my own."

"Then why should he ever know?" she whispered.

"Why, indeed," murmured Harley, "since he is in Africa?"

As we descended the stair to the hall my friend paused and pointed to a life-sized oil painting by London's most fashionable portrait painter. It was that of a man in the uniform of a Guards officer, a dark man, slightly gray at the temples, his face very tanned as if by exposure to the sun.

"Having had no occasion for disguise when the portrait was painted," said Harley, "Lord Ireton appears here without the beard; and as he is not represented smiling one cannot see the gold tooth. But the painter, if anything, has accentuated the slanting eyes. You see, the fourth marquis—the present Lord Ireton's father—married one of the world-famous Yen Sun girls, daughters of the mandarin of that name by an Irish wife. Hence, the eyes. And hence———"

"But, Harley—it was murder!"

"Not within the meaning of the law, Knox. It was a recrudescence of Chinese humour! Lord Ireton is officially in Africa (and he went actually after 'big game'). The counsel is not born who could secure a conviction. We are somewhat late, but shall therefore have less difficulty in finding a table at Prince's."

TCHERIAPIN

I. THE ROSE

"Examine it closely," said the man in the unusual caped overcoat. "It will repay examination."

I held the little object in the palm of my hand, bending forward over the marble-topped table and looking down at it with deep curiosity. The babel of tongues so characteristic of Malay Jack's, and that mingled odour of stale spirits, greasy humanity, tobacco, cheap perfume, and opium, which distinguish the establishment faded from my ken. A sense of loneliness came to me.

Perhaps I should say that it became complete. I had grown conscious of its approach at the very moment that the cadaverous white-haired man had addressed me. There was a quality in his steadfast gaze and in his oddly pitched deep voice which from the first had wrapped me about—as though he were cloaking me in his queer personality and withdrawing me from the common plane.

Having stared for some moments at the object in my palm, I touched it gingerly; whereupon my acquaintance laughed—a short bass laugh.

"It looks fragile," he said. "But have no fear. It is nearly as hard as a diamond."

Thus encouraged, I took the thing up between finger and thumb, and held it before my eyes. For long enough I looked at it, and looking, my wonder grew. I thought that here was the most wonderful example of the lapidary's art which I had ever met with, east or west.

It was a tiny pink rose, no larger than the nail of my little finger. Stalk and leaves were there, and golden pollen lay in its delicate heart. Each fairy-petal blushed with June fire; the frail leaves were exquisitely green. Withal it was as hard and unbendable as a thing of steel.

"Allow me," said the masterful voice.

A powerful lens was passed by my acquaintance. I regarded the rose through the glass, and thereupon I knew, beyond doubt, that there was something phenomenal about the gem—if gem it were. I could plainly trace the veins and texture of every petal.

I suppose I looked somewhat startled. Although, baldly stated, the fact may not seem calculated to affright, in reality there was something so weird about this unnatural bloom that I dropped it on the table. As I did so I uttered an exclamation; for in spite of the stranger's assurances on the point, I had by no means overcome my idea of the thing's fragility.

"Don't be alarmed," he said, meeting my startled gaze. "It would need a steam-hammer to do any serious damage."

He replaced the jewel in his pocket, and when I returned the lens to him he acknowledged it with a grave inclination of the head. As I looked into his sunken eyes, in which I thought lay a sort of sardonic merriment, the fantastic idea flashed through my mind that I had fallen into the clutches of an expert hypnotist who was amusing himself at my expense, that the miniature rose was a mere hallucination produced by the same means as the notorious Indian rope trick.

Then, looking around me at the cosmopolitan groups surrounding the many tables, and catching snatches of conversations dealing with subjects so diverse as the quality of whisky in Singapore, the frail beauty of Chinese maidens, and the ways of "bloody greasers," common sense reasserted itself.

I looked into the gray face of my acquaintance.

"I cannot believe," I said slowly, "that human ingenuity could so closely duplicate the handiwork of nature. Surely the gem is unique?—possibly one of those magical talismans of which we read in Eastern stories?"

My companion smiled.

"It is not a gem," he replied, "and while in a sense it is a product of human ingenuity, it is also the handiwork of nature."

I was badly puzzled, and doubtless revealed the fact, for the stranger laughed in his short fashion, and:

"I am not trying to mystify you," he assured me. "But the truth is so hard to believe sometimes that in the present case I hesitate to divulge it. Did you ever meet Tcheriapin?"

This abrupt change of topic somewhat startled me, but nevertheless:

"I once heard him play," I replied. "Why do you ask the question?"

"For this reason: Tcheriapin possessed the only other example of this art which so far as I am aware ever left the laboratory of the inventor. He occasionally wore it in his buttonhole."

"It is then a manufactured product of some sort?"

"As I have said, in a sense it is; but"—he drew the tiny exquisite ornament from his pocket again and held it up before me—"it is a natural bloom."

"What!"

"It is a natural bloom," replied my acquaintance, fixing his penetrating gaze upon me. "By a perfectly simple process invented by the cleverest chemist of his age it had been reduced to this gem-like state while retaining unimpaired every one of its natural beauties, every shade of its natural colour. You are incredulous?"

"On the contrary," I replied, "having examined it through a magnifying glass I had already assured myself that no human hand had fashioned it. You arouse my curiosity intensely. Such a process, with its endless possibilities, should be worth a fortune to the inventor."

The stranger nodded grimly and again concealed the rose in his pocket.

"You are right," he said; "and the secret died with the man who discovered it—in the great explosion at the Vortex Works in 1917. You recall it? The T.N.T. factory? It shook all London, and fragments were cast into three counties."

"I recall it perfectly well."

"You remember also the death of Dr. Kreener, the chief chemist? He died in an endeavour to save some of the workpeople."

"I remember."

"He was the inventor of the process, but it was never put upon the market. He was a singular man, sir; as was once said of him—'A Don Juan of science.' Dame Nature gave him her heart unwooed. He trifled with science as some men trifle with love, tossing aside with a smile discoveries which would have made another famous. This"—tapping his breast pocket—"was one of them."

"You astound me. Do I understand you to mean that Dr. Kreener had invented a process for reducing any form of plant life to this condition?"

"Almost any form," was the guarded reply. "And some forms of animal life."

"What!"

"If you like"—the stranger leaned forward and grasped my arm—"I will tell you the story of Dr. Kreener's last experiment."

I was now intensely interested. I had not forgotten the heroic death of the man concerning whose work this chance acquaintance of mine seemed to know so much. And in the cadaverous face of the stranger as he sat there regarding me fixedly there was a promise and an allurement. I stood on the verge of strange things; so that, looking into the deep-set eyes, once again I felt the cloak being drawn about me, and I resigned myself willingly to the illusion.

From the moment when he began to speak again until that when I rose and followed him from Malay Jack's, as I shall presently relate, I became oblivious of my surroundings. I lived and moved through those last fevered hours in the lives of Dr. Kreener, Tcheriapin, the violinist, and that other tragic figure around whom the story centred. I append:

THE STRANGER'S STORY

I asked you (said the man in the caped coat) if you had ever seen Tcheriapin, and you replied that you had once heard him play. Having once heard him play you will not have forgotten him. At that time, although war still raged, all musical London was asking where he had come from and to what nation he belonged. Then when he disappeared it was variously reported, you will recall, that he had been shot as a spy and that he had escaped from England and was serving with the Austrian army. As to his parentage I can enlighten you in a measure. He was a Eurasian. His father was an aristocratic Chinaman, and his mother a Polish ballet-dancer—that was his parentage; but I would scarcely hesitate to affirm that he came from Hell; and I shall presently show you that he has certainly returned there.

You remember the strange stories current about him. The cunning ones said that he had a clever press agent. This was true enough. One of the most prominent agents in London discovered him playing in a Paris cabaret. Two months later he was playing at the Queen's Hall, and musical London lay at his feet.

He had something of the personality of Paganini, as you remember, except that he was a smaller man; long, gaunt, yellowish hands and the face of a haggard Mephistopheles. The critics quarrelled about him, as critics only quarrel about real genius, and while one school proclaimed that Tcheriapin had discovered an entirely new technique, a revolutionary system of violin playing, another school was equally positive in declaring that he could not play at all, that he was a mountebank, a trickster, whose proper place was in a variety theatre.

There were stories, too, that were never published—not only about Tcheriapin, but concerning the Strad, upon which he played. If all this atmosphere of mystery which surrounded the man had truly been the work of a press agent, then the agent must have been as great a genius as his client. But I can assure you that the stories concerning Tcheriapin, true and absurd alike, were not inspired for business purposes; they grew up around him like fungi.

I can see him now, a lean, almost emaciated figure with slow, sinuous movements and a trick of glancing sideways with those dark, unfathomable, slightly oblique eyes. He could take up his bow in such a way as to create an atmosphere of electrical suspense.

He was loathsome, yet fascinating. One's mental attitude toward him was one of defence, of being tensely on guard. Then he would play.

You have heard him play, and it is therefore unnecessary for me to attempt to describe the effect of that music. The only composition which ever bore his name—I refer to "The Black Mass"—affected me on every occasion when I heard it, as no other composition has ever done.

Perhaps it was Tcheriapin's playing rather than the music itself which reached down into hitherto un-plumbed depths within me and awakened dark things which, unsuspected, lay there sleeping. I never heard "The Black Mass" played by anyone else; indeed, I am not aware that it was ever published. But had it been we should rarely hear it. Like Locke's music to "Macbeth" it bears an unpleasant reputation; to include it in any concert programme would be to court disaster. An idle superstition, perhaps, but there is much naivete in the artistic temperament.

Men detested Tcheriapin, yet when he chose he could win over his bitterest enemies. Women followed him as children followed the Pied Piper; he courted none, but was courted by all. He would glance aside with those

black, slanting eyes, shrug in his insolent fashion, and turn away. And they would follow. God knows how many of them followed—whether through the dens of Limehouse or the more fashionable salons of vice in the West End—they followed—perhaps down to Hell. So much for Tcheriapin.

At the time when the episode occurred to which I have referred, Dr. Kreener occupied a house in Regent's Park, to which, when his duties at the munition works allowed, he would sometimes retire at week-ends. He was a man of complex personality. I think no one ever knew him thoroughly; indeed, I doubt if he knew himself.

He was hail-fellow-well-met with the painters, sculptors, poets, and social reformers who have made of Soho a new Mecca. No movement in art was so modern that Dr. Kreener was not conversant with it; no development in Bolshevism so violent or so secret that Dr. Kreener could not speak of it complacently and with inside knowledge.

These were his Bohemian friends, these dreamers and schemers. Of this side of his life his scientific colleagues knew little or nothing, but in his hours of leisure at Regent's Park it was with these dreamers that he loved to surround himself rather than with his brethren of the laboratory. I think if Dr. Kreener had not been a great chemist he would have been a great painter, or perhaps a politician, or even a poet. Triumph was his birthright, and the fruits for which lesser men reached out in vain fell ripe into his hands.

The favourite meeting-place for these oddly assorted boon companions was the doctor's laboratory, which was divided from the house by a moderately large garden. Here on a Sunday evening one might meet the very "latest" composer, the sculptor bringing a new "message," or the man destined to supplant with the ballet the time-worn operatic tradition.

But while some of these would come and go, so that one could never count with certainty upon meeting them, there was one who never failed to be present when such an informal reception was held. Of him I must speak at greater length, for a reason which will shortly appear.

Andrews was the name by which he was known to the circles in which he moved. No one, from Sir John Tennier, the fashionable portrait painter, to Kruski, of the Russian ballet, disputed Andrews's right to be counted one of the elect. Yet it was known, nor did he trouble to hide the fact, that Andrews was employed at a large printing works in South London, designing

advertisements. He was a great, red-bearded, unkempt Scotsman, and only once can I remember to have seen him strictly sober; but to hear him talk about painters and painting in his thick Caledonian accent was to look into the soul of an artist.

He was as sour as an unripe grape-fruit, cynical, embittered, a man savagely disappointed with life and the world; and tragedy was written all over him. If anyone knew the secret of his wasted life it was Dr. Kreener, and Dr. Kreener was a reliquary of so many secrets that this one was safe as if the grave had swallowed it.

One Sunday Tcheriapin joined the party. That he would gravitate there sooner or later was inevitable, for the laboratory in the garden was a Kaaba to which all such spirits made at least one pilgrimage. He had just set musical London on fire with his barbaric playing, and already those stories to which I have referred were creeping into circulation.

Although Dr. Kreener never expected anything of his guests beyond an interchange of ideas, it was a fact that the laboratory contained an almost unique collection of pencil and charcoal studies by famous artists, done upon the spot; of statuettes in wax, putty, soap and other extemporized materials, by the newest sculptors. While often enough from the drawing room which opened upon the other end of the garden had issued the strains of masterly piano-playing, and it was no uncommon thing for little groups to gather in the neighbouring road to listen, gratis, to the voice of some great vocalist.

From the first moment of their meeting an intense antagonism sprang up between Tcheriapin and Andrews. Neither troubled very much to veil it. In Tcheriapin it found expression in covert sneers and sidelong glances, while the big, lion-maned Scotsman snorted open contempt of the Eurasian violinist. However, what I was about to say was that Tcheriapin on the occasion of his first visit brought his violin.

It was there, amid these incongruous surroundings, that I first had my spirit tortured by the strains of "The Black Mass."

There were five of us present, including Tcheriapin, and not one of the four listeners was unaffected by the music. But the influence which it exercised upon Andrews was so extraordinary as almost to reach the phenomenal. He literally writhed in his chair, and finally interrupted the performance by staggering rather than walking out of the laboratory.

I remember that he upset a jar of acid in his stumbling exit. It flowed across the floor almost to the feet of Tcheriapin, and the way in which the little black-haired man skipped, squealing, out of the path of the corroding fluid was curiously like that of a startled rabbit. Order was restored in due course, but we could not induce Tcheriapin to play again, nor did Andrews return until the violinist had taken his departure. We found him in the dining room, a nearly empty whisky-bottle beside him.

"I had to gang awa'," he explained thickly; "he was temptin' me to murder him. I should ha' had to do it if I had stayed. Damn his hell-music."

Tcheriapin revisited Dr. Kreener on many occasions afterward, although for a long time he did not bring his violin again. The doctor had prevailed upon Andrews to tolerate the Eurasian's company, and I could not help noticing how Tcheriapin skilfully and deliberately goaded the Scotsman, seeming to take a fiendish delight in disagreeing with his pet theories and in discussing any topic which he had found to be distasteful to Andrews.

Chief among these was that sort of irreverent criticism of women in which male parties so often indulge. Bitter cynic though he was, women were sacred to Andrews. To speak disrespectfully of a woman in his presence was like uttering blasphemy in the study of a cardinal. Tcheriapin very quickly detected the Scotsman's weakness, and one night he launched out into a series of amorous adventures which set Andrews writhing as he had writhed under the torture of "The Black Mass."

On this occasion the party was only a small one, comprising myself, Dr. Kreener, Andrews and Tcheriapin. I could feel the storm brewing, but was powerless to check it. How presently it was to break in tragic violence I could not foresee. Fate had not meant that I should foresee it.

Allowing for the free play of an extravagant artistic mind, Tcheriapin's career on his own showing had been that of a callous blackguard. I began by being disgusted and ended by being fascinated, not by the man's scandalous adventures, but by the scarcely human psychology of the narrator.

From Warsaw to Budapesth, Shanghai to Paris, and Cairo to London he passed, leaving ruin behind him with a smile—airily flicking cigarette ash upon the floor to indicate the termination of each "episode."

Andrews watched him in a lowering way which I did not like at all. He had ceased to snort his scorn; indeed, for ten minutes or so he had uttered

no word or sound; but there was something in the pose of his ungainly body which strangely suggested that of a great dog preparing to spring. Presently the violinist recalled what he termed a "charming idyll of Normandy."

"There is one poor fool in the world," he said, shrugging his slight shoulders, "who never knew how badly he should hate me. Ha! ha! of him I shall tell you. Do you remember, my friends, some few years ago, a picture that was published in Paris and London? Everybody bought it; everybody said: 'He is a made man, this fellow who can paint so fine.'"

"To what picture do you refer?" asked Dr. Kreener.

"It was called 'A Dream at Dawn.'"

As he spoke the words I saw Andrews start forward, and Dr. Kreener exchanged a swift glance with him. But the Scotsman, unseen by the vainglorious half-caste, shook his head fiercely.

The picture to which Tcheriapin referred will, of course, be perfectly familiar to you. It had phenomenal popularity some eight years ago. Nothing was known of the painter—whose name was Colquhoun—and nothing has been seen of his work since. The original painting was never sold, and after a time this promising new artist was, of course, forgotten.

Presently Tcheriapin continued:

"It is the figure of a slender girl—ah! angels of grace!—what a girl!" He kissed his hand rapturously. "She is posed bending gracefully forward, and looking down at her own lovely reflection in the water. It is a seashore, you remember, and the little ripples play about her ankles. The first blush of the dawn robes her white body in a transparent mantle of light. Ah! God's mercy! it was as she stood so, in a little cove of Normandy, that I saw her!"

He paused, rolling his dark eyes; and I could hear Andrews's heavy breathing; then:

"It was the 'new art'—the posing of the model not in a lighted studio, but in the scene to be depicted.

"And the fellow who painted her!—the man with the barbarous name! Bah! he was big—as big as our Mr Andrews—and ugly—pooh! uglier than he! A moon-face, with cropped skull like a prize- fighter and no soul. But, yes, he could paint. 'A Dream at Dawn' was genius—yes, some soul he must have had.

"He could paint, dear friends, but he could not love. Him I counted as—puff!"

He blew imaginary down into space.

"Her I sought out, and presently found. She told me, in those sweet stolen rambles along the shore, when the moonlight made her look like a Madonna, that she was his inspiration—his art—his life. And she wept; she wept, and I kissed her tears away.

"To please her I waited until 'A Dream at Dawn' was finished. With the finish of the picture, finished also his dream of dawn— the moon-faced one's."

Tcheriapin laughed, and lighted a fresh cigarette.

"Can you believe that a man could be so stupid? He never knew of my existence, this big, red booby. He never knew that I existed until—until his 'dream' had fled—with me! In a week we were in Paris, that dream-girl and I—in a month we had quarrelled. I always end these matters with a quarrel; it makes the complete finish. She struck me in the face—and I laughed. She turned and went away. We were tired of one another.

"Ah!" Again he airily kissed his hand. "There were others after I had gone. I heard for a time. But her memory is like a rose, fresh and fair and sweet. I am glad I can remember her so, and not as she afterward became. That is the art of love. She killed herself with absinthe, my friends. She died in Marseilles in the first year of the great war."

Thus far Tcheriapin had proceeded, and was in the act of airily flicking ash upon the floor, when, uttering a sound which I can only describe as a roar, Andrews hurled himself upon the smiling violinist.

His great red hands clutching Tcheriapin's throat, the insane Scotsman, for insane he was at that moment, forced the other back upon the settee from which he had half arisen. In vain I sought to drag him away from the writhing body, but I doubt that any man could have relaxed that deadly grip. Tcheriapin's eyes protruded hideously and his tongue lolled forth from his mouth. One could hear the breath whistling through his nostrils as Andrews silently, deliberately, squeezed the life out of him.

It all occupied only a few minutes, and then Andrews, slowly opening his rigidly crooked fingers, stood panting and looking down at the distorted face of the dead man.

For once in his life the Scotsman was sober, and turning to Dr. Kreener:

"I have waited seven long years for this," he said, "and I'll hang wi' contentment."

I can never forget the ensuing moments, in which, amid a horrible silence broken only by the ticking of a clock and the heavy breathing of Colquhoun (so long known to us as Andrews) we stood watching the contorted body on the settee.

And as we watched, slowly the rigid limbs began to relax, and Tcheriapin slid gently on to the floor, collapsing there with a soft thud, where he squatted like some hideous Buddha, resting back against the cushions, one spectral yellow hand upraised, the fingers still clutching a big gold tassel.

Andrews (for so I always think of him) was seized with a violent fit of trembling, and he dropped into the chair, muttering to himself and looking down wild-eyed at his twitching fingers. Then he began to laugh, high-pitched laughter, in little short peals.

"Here!" cried the doctor sharply. "Drop that!"

Crossing to Andrews, he grasped him by the shoulders and shook him roughly.

The laughter ceased, and:

"Send for the police," said Andrews in a queer, shaky voice. "Dinna fear but I'm ready. I'm only sorry it happened here."

"You ought to be glad," said Dr. Kreener.

There was a covert meaning in the words—a fact which penetrated even to the dulled intelligence of the Scotsman, for he glanced up haggardly at his friend.

"You ought to be glad," repeated Dr. Kreener.

Turning, he walked to the laboratory door and locked it. He next lowered all the blinds.

"I pray that we have not been observed," he said, "but we must chance it."

He mixed a drink for Andrews and himself. His quiet, decisive manner had had its effect, and Andrews was now more composed. Indeed, he seemed to be in a half-dazed condition; but he persistently kept his back turned to the crouching figure propped up against the settee.

"If you think you can follow me," said Dr. Kreener abruptly, "I will show you the result of a recent experiment."

Unlocking a cupboard, he took out a tiny figure some two inches long by one inch high, mounted upon a polished wooden pedestal. It was that of a guinea-pig. The flaky fur gleamed like the finest silk, and one felt that the

coat of the minute creature would be as floss to the touch; whereas in reality it possessed the rigidity of steel. Literally one could have done it little damage with a hammer. Its weight was extraordinary.

"I am learning new things about this process every day," continued Dr. Kreener, placing the little figure upon a table. "For instance, while it seems to operate uniformly upon vegetable matter, there are curious modifications when one applies it to animal and mineral substances. I have now definitely decided that the result of this particular inquiry must never be published. You, Colquhoun, I believe, possess an example of the process, a tiger lily, I think? I must ask you to return it to me. Our late friend, Tcheriapin, wears a pink rose in his coat which I have treated in the same way. I am going to take the liberty of removing it."

He spoke in the hard, incisive manner which I had heard him use in the lecture theatre, and it was evident enough that his design was to prepare Andrews for something which he contemplated. Facing the Scotsman where he sat hunched up in the big armchair, dully watching the speaker:

"There is one experiment," said Dr. Kreener, speaking very deliberately, "which I have never before had a suitable opportunity of attempting. Of its result I am personally confident, but science always demands proof."

His voice rang now with a note of repressed excitement. He paused for a moment, and then:

"If you were to examine this little specimen very closely," he said, and rested his finger upon the tiny figure of the guinea- pig, "you would find that in one particular it is imperfect. Although a diamond drill would have to be employed to demonstrate the fact, the animal's organs, despite their having undergone a chemical change quite new to science, are intact, perfect down to the smallest detail. One part of the creature's structure alone defied my process. In short, dental enamel is impervious to it. This little animal, otherwise as complete as when it lived and breathed, has no teeth. I found it necessary to extract them before submitting the body to the reductionary process."

He paused.

"Shall I go on?" he asked.

Andrews, to whose mind, I think, no conception of the doctor's project had yet penetrated, shuddered, but slowly nodded his head.

Dr. Kreener glanced across the laboratory at the crouching figure of Tcheriapin, then, resting his hands upon Andrews's shoulders, he pushed him back in the chair and stared into his dull eyes.

"Brace yourself, Colquhoun," he said tersely.

Turning, he crossed to a small mahogany cabinet at the farther end of the room. Pulling out a glass tray he judicially selected a pair of dental forceps.

II. "THE BLACK MASS"

Thus far the stranger's appalling story had progressed when that singular cloak in which hypnotically he had enwrapped me seemed to drop, and I found myself clutching the edge of the table and staring into the gray face of the speaker.

I became suddenly aware of the babel of voices about me, of the noisome smell of Malay Jack's, and of the presence of Jack in person, who was inquiring if there were any further orders. I was conscious of nausea.

"Excuse me," I said, rising unsteadily, "but I fear the oppressive atmosphere is affecting me."

"If you prefer to go out," said my acquaintance, in that deep voice which throughout the dreadful story had rendered me oblivious of my surroundings, "I should be much favoured if you would accompany me to a spot not five hundred yards from here."

Seeing me hesitate:

"I have a particular reason for asking," he added.

"Very well," I replied, inclining my head, "if you wish it. But certainly I must seek the fresh air."

Going up the steps and out through the door above which the blue lantern burned, we came to the street, turned to the left, to the left again, and soon were threading that maze of narrow ways which complicates the map of Pennyfields.

I felt somewhat recovered. Here, in the narrow but familiar highways the spell of my singular acquaintance lost much of its potency, and already I found myself doubting the story of Dr. Kreener and Tcheriapin. Indeed, I began to laugh at myself, conceiving that I had fallen into the hands of

some comedian who was making sport of me; although why such a person should visit Malay Jack's was not apparent.

I was about to give expression to these new and saner ideas when my companion paused before a door half hidden in a little alley which divided the back of a Chinese restaurant from the tawdry- looking establishment of a cigar merchant. He apparently held the key, for although I did not actually hear the turning of the lock I saw that he had opened the door.

"May I request you to follow me?" came his deep voice out of the darkness. "I will show you something which will repay your trouble."

Again the cloak touched me, but it was without entirely resigning myself to the compelling influence that I followed my mysterious acquaintance up an uncarpeted and nearly dark stair. On the landing above a gas lamp was burning, and opening a door immediately facing the stair the stranger conducted me into a barely furnished and untidy room.

The atmosphere smelled like that of a pot-house, the odours of stale spirits and of tobacco mingling unpleasantly. As my guide removed his hat and stood there, a square, gaunt figure in his queer, caped overcoat, I secured for the first time a view of his face in profile; and found it to be startlingly unfamiliar. Seen thus, my acquaintance was another man. I realized that there was something unnatural about the long, white hair, the gray face; that the sharp outline of brow, nose, and chin was that of a much younger man than I had supposed him to be.

All this came to me in a momentary flash of perception, for immediately my attention was riveted upon a figure hunched up on a dilapidated sofa on the opposite side of the room. It was that of a big man, bearded and very heavily built, but whose face was scarred as by years of suffering, and whose eyes confirmed the story indicated by the smell of stale spirits with which the air of the room was laden. A nearly empty bottle stood on a table at his elbow, a glass beside it, and a pipe lay in a saucer full of ashes near the glass.

As we entered, the glazed eyes of the man opened widely and he clutched at the table with big red hands, leaning forward and staring horribly.

Save for this derelict figure and some few dirty utensils and scattered garments which indicated that the apartment was used both as sleeping and living room, there was so little of interest in the place that automatically my wandering gaze strayed from the figure on the sofa to a large oil painting,

unframed, which rested upon the mantelpiece above the dirty grate, in which the fire had become extinguished.

I uttered a stifled exclamation. It was "A Dream at Dawn"— evidently the original painting!

On the left of it, from a nail in the wall, hung a violin and bow, and on the right stood a sort of cylindrical glass case or closed jar, upon a wooden base.

From the moment that I perceived the contents of this glass case a sense of fantasy claimed me, and I ceased to know where reality ended and mirage began.

It contained a tiny and perfect figure of a man. He was arrayed in a beautifully fitting dress-suit such as a doll might have worn, and he was posed as if in the act of playing a violin, although no violin was present. At the elfin black hair and Mephistophelian face of this horrible, wonderful image, I stared fascinatedly.

I looked and looked at the dwarfed figure of. . . Tcheriapin!

All these impressions came to me in the space of a few hectic moments, when in upon my mental tumult intruded a husky whisper from the man on the sofa.

"Kreener!" he said. "Kreener!"

At the sound of that name, and because of the way in which it was pronounced, I felt my blood running cold. The speaker was staring straight at my companion.

I clutched at the open door. I felt that there was still some crowning horror to come. I wanted to escape from that reeking room, but my muscles refused to obey me, and there I stood while:

"Kreener!" repeated the husky voice, and I saw that the speaker was rising unsteadily to his feet.

"You have brought him again. Why have you brought him again? He will play. He will play me a step nearer to Hell."

"Brace yourself, Colquhoun," said the voice of my companion. "Brace yourself."

"Take him awa'!" came in a sudden frenzied shriek. "Take him awa'! He's there at your elbow, Kreener, mockin' me, and pointing to that damned violin."

"Here!" said the stranger, a high note of command in his voice. "Drop that! Sit down at once."

Even as the other obeyed him, the cloaked stranger, stepping to the mantelpiece, opened a small box which lay there beside the glass case. He turned to me; and I tried to shrink away from him. For I knew—I knew—yet I loathed to look upon—what was in the box. Muffled as though reaching me through fog, I heard the words:

"A perfect human body . . .in miniature. . . every organ intact by means of. . . process. . . rendered indestructible. Tcheriapin as he was in life may be seen by the curious ten thousand years hence. Incomplete. . . one respect. . . here in this box. . ."

The spell was broken by a horrifying shriek from the man whom my companion had addressed as Colquhoun, and whom I could only suppose to be the painter of the celebrated picture which rested upon the mantelshelf.

"Take him awa', Kreener! He is reaching for the violin!"

Animation returned to me, and I fell rather than ran down the darkened stair. How I opened the street door I know not, but even as I stepped out into the squalid alleys of Pennyfields the cloaked figure was beside me. A hand was laid upon my shoulder.

"Listen!" commanded a deep voice.

Clearly, with an eerie sweetness, an evil, hellish beauty indescribable, the wailing of a Stradivarius violin crept to my ears from the room above. Slowly—slowly the music began, and my soul rose up in revolt.

"Listen!" repeated the voice. "Listen! It is 'The Black Mass'!"

THE DANCE OF THE VEILS

I. THE HOUSE OF THE AGAPOULOS

Hassan came in and began very deliberately to light the four lamps. He muttered to himself and often smiled in the childish manner which

characterizes some Egyptians. Hassan wore a red cap, and a white robe confined at the waist by a red sash. On his brown feet he wore loose slippers, also of red. He had good features and made a very picturesque figure moving slowly about his work.

As he lighted lamp after lamp and soft illumination crept about the big room, because of the heavy shadows created the place seemed to become mysteriously enlarged. That it was an Eastern apartment cunningly devised to appeal to the Western eye, one familiar with Arab households must have seen at once. It was a traditional Oriental interior, a stage setting rather than the nondescript and generally uninteresting environment of the modern Egyptian at home.

Brightly coloured divans there were and many silken cushions of strange pattern and design. The hanging lamps were of perforated brass with little coloured glass panels. In carved wooden cabinets stood beautiful porcelain jars, trays, and vessels of silver and copper ware. Rich carpets were spread about the floor, and the draperies were elegant and costly, while two deep windows projecting over the court represented the best period of Arab architecture. Their intricate carven woodwork had once adorned the palace of a Grand Wazir. Agapoulos had bought them in Cairo and had had them fitted to his house in Chinatown. A smaller brass lamp of very delicate workmanship was suspended in each of the recesses.

As Hassan, having lighted the four larger lanterns, was proceeding leisurely to light the first of the smaller ones, draperies before a door at the east end of the room were parted and Agapoulos came in. Agapoulos was a short but portly Greek whom the careless observer might easily have mistaken for a Jew. He had much of the appearance of a bank manager, having the manners of one used to making himself agreeable, but also possessing the money-eye and that comprehensive glance which belongs to the successful man of commerce.

Standing in the centre of the place he brushed his neat black moustache with a plump forefinger. A diamond ring which he wore glittered brilliantly in the coloured rays of the lanterns. With his right hand, which rested in his trouser pocket, he rattled keys. His glance roved about the room appraisingly. Walking to a beautifully carved Arab cabinet he rearranged three pieces of Persian copperware which stood upon it. He moved several

cushions, and taking up a leopard skin which lay upon the floor he draped it over an ebony chair which was inlaid intricately with ivory.

The drooping eyelids of M. Agapoulos drooped lower, as returning to the centre of the room he critically surveyed the effect of these master touches. At the moment he resembled a window- dresser, or, rather, one of those high-salaried artists who beautify the great establishments of Regent Street, the Rue de la Paix, and Ruination Avenue, New York.

Hassan lighted the sixth lamp, muttering smilingly all the time. He was about to depart when Agapoulos addressed him in Arabic.

"There will be a party down from the Savoy tonight, Hassan. No one else is to come unless I am told. That accursed red policeman, Kerry, has been about here of late. Be very careful."

Hassan saluted him gravely and retired through one of the draped openings. In his hand he held the taper with which he had lighted the lamps. In order that the draperies should not be singed he had to hold them widely apart. For it had not occurred to Hassan to extinguish the taper. The Egyptian mind is complex in its simplicity.

M. Agapoulos from a gold case extracted a cigarette, and lighting it, inhaled the smoke contentedly, looking about him. The window-dresser was lost again in the bank manager who has arranged a profitable overdraft. Somewhere a bell rang. Hassan, treading silently, reappeared, crossed the room, and opening a finely carved door walked along a corridor which it had concealed. He still carried the lighted taper.

Presently there entered a man whose well-cut serge suit revealed the figure of a soldier. He wore a soft gray felt hat and carried light gloves and a cane. His dark face, bronzed by recent exposure to the Egyptian sun, was handsome in a saturnine fashion, and a touch of gray at the temples tended to enhance his good looks. He carried himself in that kind of nonchalant manner which is not only insular but almost insolent.

M. Agapoulos bowed extravagantly. As he laid his plump hand upon his breast the diamond ring sparkled in a way most opulent and impressive.

"I greet you, Major Grantham," he said. "Behold"—he waved his hand glitteringly—"all is prepared."

"Oh, yes," murmured the other, glancing around without interest; "good. You are beginning to get straight in your new quarters."

Agapoulos extended the prosperous cigarette-case, and Major Grantham took and lighted a superior cigarette.

"How many in the party?" inquired the Greek smilingly.

"Three and myself."

A shadow of a frown appeared upon the face of Agapoulos.

"Only three," he muttered.

Major Grantham laughed.

"You should know me by this time, Agapoulos," he said. "The party is small but exclusive, you understand?"

He spoke wearily, as a tired man speaks of distasteful work which he must do. There was contempt in his voice; contempt of Agapoulos, and contempt of himself.

"Ah!" cried the Greek, brightening; "do I know any of them?"

"Probably. General Sir Francis Payne, Mr Eddie, and Sir Horace Tipton."

"An Anglo-American party, eh?"

"Quite. Mr Eddie is the proprietor of the well-known group of American hotels justly celebrated for their great height and poisonous cuisine; while Sir Horace Tipton alike as sportsman, globe-trotter, and soap manufacturer, is characteristically British. Of General Sir Francis Payne I need only say that his home services during the war did incalculable harm to our prestige throughout the Empire."

He spoke with all the bitterness of a man who has made a failure of life. Agapoulos was quite restored to good humour.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, brushing his moustache and rattling his keys; "sportsmen, eh?"

Major Grantham dropped into the carven chair upon which the Greek had draped the leopard skin. Momentarily the window-dresser leapt into life as Agapoulos beheld one of his cunning effects destroyed, but he forced a smile when Grantham, shrugging his shoulders, replied:

"If they are fools enough to play—the usual 5 per cent, on the bank's takings."

He paused, glancing at some ash upon the tip of his cigarette. Agapoulos swiftly produced an ashtray and received the ash on it in the manner of a churchwarden collecting half a crown from a pew-holder.

"I think," continued Grantham indifferently, "that it will be the dances. Two of them are over fifty."

"Ah!" said Agapoulos thoughtfully; "not, of course, the ordinary programme?"

Major Grantham looked up at him with lazy insolence.

"Why ask?" he inquired. "Does Lucullus crave for sausages? Do philosophers play marbles?"

He laughed again, noting the rather blank look of Agapoulos.

"You don't know what I'm talking about, do you?" he added. "I mean to say that these men have been everywhere and done everything. They have drunk wine sweet and sour and have swallowed the dregs. I am bringing them. It is enough."

"More than enough," declared the Greek with enthusiasm. He bowed, although Grantham was not looking at him. "In the little matter of fees I can rely upon your discretion, as always. Is it not said that a good dragoman is a desirable husband?"

Major Grantham resettled himself in his chair.

"M. Agapoulos," he said icily, "we have done shady business together for years, both in Port Said and in London, and have remained the best of friends; two blackguards linked by our common villainy. But if this pleasant commercial acquaintance is to continue let there be no misunderstanding between us, M. Agapoulos. I may know I'm a dragoman; but in future, old friend"—he turned lazy eyes upon the Greek—"for your guidance, don't remind me of the fact or I'll wring your neck."

The drooping eyelids of M. Agapoulos flickered significantly, but it was with a flourish more grand than usual that he bowed.

"Pardon, pardon," he murmured. "You speak harshly of yourself, but ah, you do not mean it. We understand each other, eh?"

"I understand you perfectly," drawled Grantham; "I was merely advising you to endeavour to understand me. My party will arrive at nine o'clock, Agapoulos, and I am going back to the Savoy shortly to dress. Meanwhile, if Hassan would bring me a whisky and soda I should be obliged."

"Of course, of course. He shall do so at once," cried Agapoulos. "I will tell him."

Palpably glad to escape, the fat Greek retired, leaving Major Grantham lolling there upon the leopard skin, his hat, cane and gloves upon the carpet beside him; and a few moments later Hassan the silent glided into the

extravagant apartment bearing refreshments. Placing his tray upon a little coffee-table beside Major Grantham, he departed.

There was a faint smell of perfume in the room, a heavy voluptuous smell in which the odour of sandal-wood mingled with the pungency of myrrh. It was very silent, so that when Grantham mixed a drink the pleasant chink of glass upon glass rang out sharply.

II. ZAHARA

Zahara had overheard the latter part of the conversation from her own apartment. Once she had even crept across to the carven screen in order that she might peep through into the big, softly lighted room. She had interrupted her toilet to do so, and having satisfied herself that Grantham was one of the speakers (although she had really known this already), she had returned and stared at herself critically in the mirror.

Zahara, whose father had been a Frenchman, possessed skin of a subtle cream colour very far removed from the warm brown of her Egyptian mother, but yet not white. At night it appeared dazzling, for she enhanced its smooth, creamy pallor with a wonderful liquid solution which came from Paris. It was hard, Zahara had learned, to avoid a certain streaky appearance, but much practice had made her an adept.

This portion of her toilet she had already completed and studying her own reflection she wondered, as she had always wondered, what Agapoulos could see in Safiyeh. Safiyeh was as brown as a berry; quite pretty for an Egyptian girl, as Zahara admitted scornfully, but brown—brown. It was a great puzzle to Zahara. The mystery of life indeed had puzzled little Zahara very much from the moment when she had first begun to notice things with those big, surprising blue eyes of hers, right up to the present twenty- fourth year of her life. She had an uneasy feeling that Safiyeh, who was only sixteen, knew more of this mystery than she did. Once, shortly after the Egyptian girl had come to the house of Agapoulos, Zahara had playfully placed her round white arm against that of the more dusky beauty, and:

"Look!" she had exclaimed. "I am cream and you are coffee."

"It is true," the other had admitted in her practical, serious way, "but some men do not like cream. All men like coffee."

Zahara rested her elbows upon the table and surveyed the reflection of her perfect shoulders with disapproval. She had been taught at her mother's knee that men did not understand women, and she, who had been born and reared in that quarter of Cairo where there is no day but one long night, had lived to learn the truth of the lesson. Yet she was not surprised that this was so; for Zahara did not understand herself. Her desires were so simple and so seemingly natural, yet it would appear that they were contrary to the established order of things.

She was proud to think that she was French, although someone had told her that the French, though brave, were mercenary. Zahara admired the French for being brave, and thought it very sensible that they should be mercenary. For there was nothing that Zahara wanted of the world that money could not obtain (or so she believed), and she knew no higher philosophy than the quest of happiness. Because others did not seem to share this philosophy she often wondered if she could be unusual. She had come to the conclusion that she was ignorant. If only Harry Grantham would talk to her she felt sure he could teach her so much.

There were so many things that puzzled her. She knew that at twenty-four she was young for a French girl, although as an Egyptian she would have been considered old. She had been taught that gold was the key to happiness and that man was the ogre from whom this key must be wheedled. A ready pupil, Zahara had early acquired the art of attracting, and now at twenty-four she was a past mistress of the Great Craft, and as her mirror told her, more beautiful than she had ever been.

Therefore, what did Agapoulos see in Safiyeh?

It was a problem which made Zahara's head ache. She could not understand why as her power of winning men increased her power to hold them diminished. Safiyeh was a mere inexperienced child— yet Agapoulos had brought her to the house, and Zahara, wise in woman's lore, had recognized the familiar change of manner.

It was a great problem, the age-old problem which doubtless set the first silver thread among Phryne's red-gold locks and which now brought a little perplexed wrinkle between Zahara's delicately pencilled brows.

It had not always been so. In those early days in Cairo there had been an American boy. Zahara had never forgotten. Her beauty had bewildered him. He had wanted to take her to New York; and oh! how she had wanted to go. But her mother, who was then alive, had held other views, and he had gone alone. Heavens! How old she felt. How many had come and gone since that Egyptian winter, but now, although admiration was fatally easy to win how few were so sincere as that fresh-faced boy from beyond the Atlantic.

Zahara, staring into the mirror, observed that there was not a wrinkle upon her face, not a flaw upon her perfect skin. Nor in this was she blinded by vanity. Nature, indeed, had cast her in a rare mould, and from her unusual hair, which was like dull gold, to her slender ankles and tiny feet, she was one of the most perfectly fashioned human beings who ever added to the beauty of the world.

Yet Agapoulos preferred Safiyeh. Zahara could hear him coming to her room even as she sat there, chin in hands, staring at her own bewitching reflection. Presently she would slip out and speak to Harry Grantham. Twice she had read in his eyes that sort of interest which she knew so well how to detect. She liked him very much, but because of a sense of loyalty to Agapoulos (a sentiment purely Egyptian which she longed to crush) Zahara had never so much as glanced at Grantham in the Right Way. She was glad, though, that he had not gone, and she hoped that Agapoulos would not detain her long.

As a matter of fact, the Greek's manner was even more cold than usual. He rested his hand upon her shoulder for a moment, and meeting her glance reflected in the mirror:

"There will be a lot of money here to-night," he said. "Make the best of your opportunities. Chinatown is foggy, yes—but it pays better than Port Said."

He ran fat fingers carelessly through her hair, the big diamond glittering effectively in the wavy gold, then turned and went out. Sitting listening intently, Zahara could hear him talking in a subdued voice to Safiyeh, and could detect the Egyptian's low-spoken replies.

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Grantham looked up with a start. A new and subtle perfume had added itself to that with which the air of the room was already laden. He found Zahara standing beside him.

His glance travelled upward from a pair of absurdly tiny brocaded shoes past slender white ankles to the embroidered edge of a wonderful mandarin robe decorated with the figures of peacocks; upward again to a little bejewelled hand which held the robe confined about the slender figure of Zahara, and upward to where, sideways upon a bare shoulder peeping impudently out from Chinese embroidery, rested the half-mocking and half-serious face of the girl.

"Hallo!" he said, smiling, "I didn't hear you come in."

"I walk very soft," explained Zahara, "because I am not supposed to be here."

She looked at him quizzically. "I don't see you for a long time," she added, and in the tone of her voice there was a caress. "I saw you more often in Port Said than here."

"No," replied Grantham, "I have been giving Agapoulos a rest. Besides, there has been nobody worth while at any of the hotels or clubs during the last fortnight."

"Somebody worth while coming to-night?" asked Zahara with professional interest.

At the very moment that she uttered the words she recognized her error, for she saw Grantham's expression change. Yet to her strange soul there was a challenge in his coldness and the joy of contest in the task of melting the ice of this English reserve.

"Lots of money," he said bitterly; "we shall all do well to- night."

Zahara did not reply for a moment. She wished to close this line of conversation which inadvertently she had opened up. So that, presently:

"You look very lonely and bored," she said softly.

As a matter of fact, it was she who was bored of the life she led in Limehouse—in chilly, misty Limehouse—and who had grown so very lonely since Safiyeh had come. In the dark gray eyes looking up at her she read recognition of her secret. Here was a man possessing that rare masculine attribute, intuition. Zahara knew a fear that was half delightful.

Fear because she might fail in either of two ways and delight because the contest was equal.

"Yes," he replied slowly, "my looks tell the truth. How did you know?"

Zahara observed that his curiosity had not yet become actual interest. She toyed with the silken tassel on her robe, tying and untying it with quick nervous fingers and resting the while against the side of the carved chair.

"Perhaps because I am so lonely myself," she said. "I matter to no one. What I do, where I go, if I live or die. It is all——"

She spread her small hands eloquently and shrugged so that another white shoulder escaped from the Chinese wrapping. Thereupon Zahara demurely drew her robe about her with a naive air of modesty which nine out of ten beholding must have supposed to be affected.

In reality it was a perfectly natural, instinctive movement. To Zahara her own beauty was a commonplace to be displayed or concealed as circumstances might dictate. In a certain sense, which few could appreciate, this half-caste dancing girl and daughter of El Wasr was as innocent as a baby. It was one of the things which men did not understand. She thought that if Harry Grantham asked her to go away with him it would be nice to go. Suddenly she realized how deep was her loathing of this Limehouse and of the people she met there, who were all alike.

He sat looking at her for some time, and then: "Perhaps you are wrong," he said. "There may be some who could understand."

And because he had answered her thoughts rather than her words, the fear within Zahara grew greater than the joy of the contest.

Awhile longer she stayed, seeking for a chink in the armour. But she failed to kindle the light in his eyes which—unless she had deluded herself—she had seen there in the past; and because she failed and could detect no note of tenderness in his impersonal curiosity:

"You are lonely because you are so English, so cold," she exclaimed, drawing her robe about her and glancing sideways toward the door by which Agapoulos might be expected to enter. "You are bored, yes. Of course. You look on at life. It is not exciting, that game—except for the players."

Never once had she looked at him in the Right Way; for to have done so and to have evoked only that amused yet compassionate smile would have

meant hatred, and Zahara had been taught that such hatred was fatal because it was a confession of defeat.

"I shall see you again to-night, shall I not?" he said as she turned away.

"Oh, yes, I shall be—on show. I hope you will approve."

She tossed her head like a petulant child, turned, and with never another glance in his direction, walked from the room. She was very graceful, he thought.

Yet it was not entirely of this strange half-caste, whose beauty was provoking, although he resolutely repelled her tentative advances, that Grantham was thinking. In that last gesture when she had scornfully tossed her head in turning aside, had lain a bitter memory. Grantham stood for a moment watching the swaying draperies. Then, dropping the end of his cigarette into a little brass ash-tray, he took up his hat, gloves, and cane from the floor, and walked toward the doorway through which he had entered.

A bell rang somewhere, and Grantham paused. A close observer might have been puzzled by his expression. Evidently changing his mind, he crossed the room, opened the door and went out, leaving the house of Agapoulos by a side entrance. Crossing the little courtyard below he hurried in the direction of the main street, seeming to doubt the shadows which dusk was painting in the narrow ways.

Many men who know Chinatown distrust its shadows, but the furtive fear of which Grantham had become aware was due not to anticipation but to memory—to a memory conjured up by that gesture of Zahara's.

There were few people in London or elsewhere who knew the history of this scallywag Englishman. That he had held the King's commission at some time was generally assumed to be the fact, but that his real name was not Grantham equally was taken for granted. His continuing, nevertheless, to style himself "Major" was sufficient evidence to those interested that Grantham lived by his wits; and from the fact that he lived well and dressed well one might have deduced that his wits were bright if his morals were turbid.

Now, the gesture of a woman piqued had called up the deathless past. Hurrying through nearly empty squalid streets, he found himself longing to pronounce a name, to hear it spoken that he might linger over its bitter sweetness. To this longing he presently succumbed, and:

"Inez," he whispered, and again more loudly, "Inez."

Such a wave of lonely wretchedness and remorse swept up about his heart that he was almost overwhelmed by it, yet he resigned himself to its ruthless cruelty with a sort of savage joy. The shadowed ways of Limehouse ceased to exist for him, and in spirit he stood once more in a queer, climbing, sunbathed street of Gibraltar looking out across that blue ribbon of the Straits to where the African coast lay hidden in the haze.

"I never knew," he said aloud. And one meeting this man who hurried along and muttered to himself must have supposed him to be mad. "I never knew. Oh, God! if I had only known."

But he was one of those to whom knowledge comes as a bitter aftermath. When his regiment had received orders to move from the Rock, and he had informed Inez of his departure, she had turned aside, just as Zahara had done; scornfully and in silence. Because of his disbelief in her he had guarded his heart against this beautiful Spanish girl who (as he realized too late) had brought him the only real happiness he had ever known. Often she had told him of her brother, Miguel, who would kill her—would kill them both—if he so much as suspected their meetings; of her affianced husband, absent in Tunis, whose jealousy knew no bounds.

He had pretended to believe, had even wanted to believe; but the witchery of the girl's presence removed, he had laughed—at himself and at Inez. She was playing the Great Game, skilfully, exquisitely. When he was gone—there would soon be someone else. Yet he had never told her that he doubted. He had promised many things—and had left her.

She died by her own hand on the night of his departure.

Now, as a wandering taxi came into view: "Inez!" he moaned—"I never knew."

That brother whom he had counted a myth had succeeded in getting on board the transport. Before Grantham's inner vision the whole dreadful scene now was reenacted: the struggle in the stateroom; he even seemed to hear the sound of the shot, to see the Spaniard, drenched with blood from a wound in his forehead, to hear his cry:

"I cannot see! I cannot see! Mother of Mercy! I have lost my sight!"

It had broken Grantham. The scandal was hushed up, but retirement was inevitable. He knew, too, that the light had gone out of the world for him as it had gone for Miguel da Mura.

It is sometimes thus that a scallywag is made.

III. THE STAR OF EGYPT

As Grantham went out by the side door, Hassan, soft of foot, appeared. Crossing to the main door he opened it and walked down the narrow corridor beyond. Presently came the tap, tap, tap of a stick and a sound of muttered conversation in some place below.

Hassan reentered and went in through the curtained doorway to summon Agapoulos. Agapoulos was dressing and would not be disturbed. Hassan went back to those who waited, but ere long returned again chattering volubly to himself. Going behind the carven screen he rapped upon the door of Zahara's room, and she directed him to come in. To Zahara, Hassan was no more than a piece of furniture, and she thought as little of his intruding while she was in the midst of her toilet as another woman would have thought of the entrance of a maid.

"Two men," reported Hassan, "who won't go away until they see somebody."

"Whom do they want to see?" she inquired indifferently, adjusting the line of her eyebrow with an artistically pointed pencil.

"They say whoever belongs here."

Zahara invariably spoke either French or English to natives, and if Hassan had addressed her in Arabic she would not have replied, although she spoke that language better than she spoke any other.

"What are they like? Not—police?"

"Foreign," replied Hassan vaguely.

"English—American?"

"No, not American or English. Very black hair, dark skin."

Zahara, a student of men, became aware of a mild interest. These swarthy visitors should prove an agreeable antidote to the poisonous calm of Harry Grantham. She was trying with all the strength of her strange, stifled soul not to think of Grantham, and she was incapable of recognizing the fact that she could think of nothing else and had thought of little else for a long time

past. Even now it was because of him that she determined to interview the foreign visitors. The mystery of her emotions puzzled her more than ever.

She descended to a small, barely furnished room on the ground floor, close beside the door opening upon the street. It was lighted by one hanging lamp. On the divan which constituted the principal item of furniture a small man, slenderly built, was sitting. He wore a broad-brimmed hat, so broad of brim that it threw the whole of the upper part of his face into shadow. It was impossible to see his eyes. Beside him rested a heavy walking-stick.

As Zahara entered, a wonderful, gaily coloured figure, this man did not move in the slightest, but sat, chin on breast, his small, muscular, brown hands resting on his knees. His companion, however, a person of more massive build, elegantly dressed and handsome in a swarthy fashion, bowed gravely and removed his hat. Zahara liked his eyes, which were dark and very bold looking.

"M. Agapoulos is engaged," she said, speaking in French. "What is it you wish to know?"

The man regarded her fixedly, and:

"Senorita," he replied, "I will be frank with you."

Save for his use of the word "senorita" he also spoke in French. Zahara drew her robe more closely about her and adopted her most stately manner.

"My name," continued the other, "does not matter, but my business is to look into the affairs of other people, you understand?"

Zahara, who understood from this that the man was some kind of inquiry agent, opened her blue eyes very widely and at the same time shook her head.

"No," she protested; "what do you mean?"

"A certain gentleman came here a short time ago, came into this house and must be here now. Don't be afraid. He has done nothing very dreadful," he added reassuringly.

Zahara retreated a step, and a little wrinkle of disapproval appeared between her pencilled brows. She no longer liked the man's eyes, she decided. They were deceitful eyes. His companion had taken up the heavy stick and was restlessly tapping the floor.

"There is no one here," said Zahara calmly, "except the people who live in the house."

"He is here, he is here," muttered the man seated on the divan.

The tapping of his stick had grown more rapid, but as he had spoken in Spanish, Zahara, who was ignorant of that language, had no idea what he had said.

"My friend," continued the Spaniard, bowing slightly in the direction of the slender man who so persistently kept his broad- brimmed hat on his head, "chanced to hear the voice of this gentleman as he spoke to your porter on entering the door. And although the door was closed too soon for us actually to see him, we are convinced that he is the person we seek."

"I think you are mistaken," said Zahara coolly. "But what do you want him for?"

As she uttered the words she realized that even the memory of Grantham was sufficient to cause her to betray herself. She had betrayed her interest to the man himself, and now she had betrayed it to this dark-faced stranger whose manner was so mysterious. The Spaniard recognized the fact, and, unlike Grantham, acted upon it promptly.

"He has taken away the wife of another, Senorita," he said simply, and watched her as he spoke the lie.

She listened in silence, wide-eyed. Her lower lip twitched, and she bit it fiercely.

"He went first to Port Said and then came to London with this woman," continued the Spaniard remorselessly. "We come from her husband to ask her to return. Yes, he will forgive her—or he offers her freedom."

Rapidly but comprehensively the speaker's bold glance travelled over Zahara, from her golden head to her tiny embroidered shoes.

"If you can help us in this matter it will be worth fifty English pounds to you," he concluded.

Zahara was breathing rapidly. The fatal hatred which she had sought to stifle gained a new vitality. Another woman—another woman actually here in London! So there was someone upon whom he did not look in that half-amused and half-compassionate manner. How she hated him! How she hated the woman to whom he had but a moment ago returned!

"Then he will marry this other one?" she said suddenly.

"Oh, no. Already he neglects her. We think she will go back."

Zahara experienced a swift change of sentiment. She seemed to be compounded of two separate persons, one of whom laughed cruelly at the folly of the other.

"What is the name of this man you think your friend has recognized?" she asked.

The big stick was rapping furiously during this colloquy.

"We are both sure, Senorita. His name is Major Spalding."

That Spalding and Grantham were neighbouring towns in Lincolnshire Zahara did not know, but:

"No one of that name comes here," she replied.

"The one you heard and—who has gone—is not called by that name." She spoke with forced calm. It was Grantham they sought! "But what happens if I show you this one who is not called Spalding?"

"No matter! Point him out to me," answered the Spaniard eagerly —and his dark eyes seemed to be on fire—"point him out to me and fifty pounds of English money is yours!"

"Let me see."

He drew out a wallet and held up a number of notes.

"Fifty," he said, in a subdued voice, "when you point him out."

For a long moment Zahara hesitated, then:

"Sixty," she corrected him—"now! Then I will do it to-night—if you tell what happens."

Exhibiting a sort of eager impatience the man displayed a bunch of official-looking documents.

"I give him these," he explained, "and my work is done."

"H'm," said Zahara. "He must not know that it is I who have shown him to you. To-night he will be here at nine o'clock, and I shall dance. You understand?"

"Then," said the Spaniard eagerly, "this is what you will do."

And speaking close to her ear he rapidly outlined a plan; but presently she interrupted him.

"Pooh! It is Spanish, the rose. I dance the dances of Egypt."

"But to-night," he persisted, "it will not matter."

Awhile longer they talked, the rapping of the stick upon the tiled floor growing ever faster and faster. But finally:

"I will tell Hassan that you are to be admitted," said Zahara, and she held out her hand for the notes.

When, presently, the visitors departed, she learned that the smaller man was blind; for his companion led him out of the room and out of the house.

She stood awhile listening to the tap, tap, tap of the heavy stick receding along the street. What she did not hear, and could not have understood had she heard, since it was uttered in Spanish, was the cry of exultant hatred which came from the lips of the taller man:

"At last, Miguel! at last! Though blind, you have found him! You have not failed. I shall not fail!"

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Zahara peeped through the carved screen at the assembled company. They were smoking and drinking and seemed to be in high good humour. Safiyeh had danced and they had applauded the performance, but had complained to M. Agapoulos that they had seen scores of such dances and dancers. Safiyeh, who had very little English, had not understood this, and because presently she was to play upon the a'ood while Zahara danced the Dance of the Veils, Zahara had avoided informing her of the verdict of the company.

Now as she peeped through the lattice in the screen she could see the Greek haggling with Grantham and a tall gray-haired man whom she supposed to be Sir Horace Tipton. They were debating the additional fees to be paid if Zahara, the Star of Egypt, was to present the secret and wonderful dance of which all men had heard but which only a true daughter of the ancient tribe of the Ghawazi could perform.

Sometimes Zahara was proud of her descent from a dancing-girl of Kenneh. This was always at night, when a sort of barbaric excitement possessed her which came from the blood of her mother. Then, a new light entered her eyes and they seemed to grow long and languid and dark, so that no one would have suspected that in daylight they were blue.

A wild pagan abandon claimed her, and she seemed to hear the wailing of reed instruments and the throb of the ancient drums which were played of old before the kings of Egypt. Safiyeh was not a true dancing girl, and because she knew none of those fine frenzies, she danced without inspiration, like a brown puppet moved by strings. But she could play upon an a'ood much better than Zahara, and therefore must not be upset until she had played for the Dance of the Veils.

Seeing that the bargain was all but concluded, Zahara stole back to her room. Her lightly clad body gleamed like that of some statue become animate.

Her cheeks flushed as she took up the veils, of which she alone knew the symbolic meaning; the white veil, the purple veil: each had its story to tell her; and the veil of burning scarlet. In a corner of the big room on a divan near the door she had seen the Spaniard, a handsome, swarthy figure in his well-fitting dress clothes, and now, opening a drawer, she glanced at the little pile of notes which represented her share of the bargain. There were fifty. She had told Agapoulos that a distinguished foreigner with an introduction from someone she knew had paid ten pounds to be present. And because she had given Agapoulos the ten pounds, Agapoulos had agreed to admit the visitor.

She could hear the Greek approaching now, but she was thinking of Grantham whom she had last seen in laughing conversation with the tall, gray-haired man. His laughter had appeared forced. Doubtless he grew weary of the woman he had brought to London.

"Dance to-night with all the devil that is in you, my beautiful," said Agapoulos, hurrying into the room.

Zahara turned aside, toying with the veils.

"They are rich, eh?" she said indifferently.

She was thinking of the fifty pounds which she had earned so easily; and after all (how strangely her mind wandered) perhaps he was really tired of the woman. The Spaniard had said so.

"Very rich," murmured Agapoulos complacently.

He brushed his moustache and rattled keys in his pocket. In his dress clothes he looked like the manager of a prosperous picture palace. "Safryeh!" he called.

When presently the music commenced, the players concealed behind the tall screen, an expectant hush fell upon the wine-flushed company. Hassan, who played the darabukkeh, could modulate its throbbing so wonderfully.

Zahara entered the room, enveloped from shoulders to ankles in a flame-coloured cloak. Between her lips she held a red rose.

"By God, what a beauty!" said a husky voice.

Zahara did not know which of the party had spoken, but she was conscious of the fact that by virtue of the strange witchcraft which became

hers on such nights she held them all spell-bound. They were her slaves.

Slowly she walked across the apartment while the throbbing of the Arab drum grew softer and softer, producing a weird effect of space and distance. All eyes were fixed upon her, and meeting Grantham's gaze she saw at last the Light there which she knew. This sudden knowledge of triumph almost unnerved her, and the rose which she had taken from between her lips trembled in her white fingers. Two of the petals fell upon the carpet, which was cream-coloured from the looms of Ispahan. Like blood spots the petals lay upon the cream surface.

Zahara swung sharply about. Agapoulos, seated alone in the chair over which he had draped the leopard skin, was busily brushing his moustache and glancing sideways toward the screen which concealed Safryeh. Zahara tilted her head on to her shoulder and cast a languorous glance into the shadows masking the watchful Spaniard.

She could see his eyes gleaming like those of a wild beast. An icy finger seemed to touch her heart. He had lied to her! She knew it, suddenly, intuitively. Well, she would see. She also had guile.

With a little scornful laugh Zahara tossed the rose on to the knees—of Agapoulos.

The sound of three revolver shots fired in quick succession rang out above the throbbing music. Agapoulos clutched at his shirt front with both hands, uttered a stifled scream and tried to stand up. He coughed, and glaring straight in front of him fell forward across a little coffee table laden with champagne bottles and glasses.

Coincident with the crash made by his falling body came the loud bang of a door. The Spaniard had gone.

"By God, sir! It's murder, it's murder!" cried the same husky voice which had commented upon the beauty of Zahara.

There was a mingling, purposeless movement. Someone ran to the door —to find that it was locked from the outside. Mr Eddie, now recognizable by his accent, came toward the prone man, dazed, horrified, and grown very white. Zahara, a beautiful, tragic figure, in her flaming cloak, stood looking down at the dead man. Safiyeh was peeping round from behind the screen, her face a brown mask of terror. Hassan, holding his drum, appeared behind her, staring stupidly. To the smell of cigar smoke and perfume a new and acrid odour was added.

Vaguely the truth was stealing in upon the mind of the dancing- girl that she had been made party to a plot to murder Grantham. She had saved his life. He belonged to her now. She could hear him speaking, although for some reason she could not see him. A haze had come, blotting out everything but the still, ungainly figure which lay so near her upon the carpet, one clutching, fat hand, upon which a diamond glittered, outstretched so that it nearly touched her bare white feet.

"We must get out this way! The side door to the courtyard! None of us can afford to be mixed up in an affair of this sort."

There was more confused movement and a buzz of excited voices—meaningless, chaotic. Zahara could feel the draught from the newly opened door. A thin stream of blood was stealing across the carpet. It had almost reached the fallen rose petals, which it strangely resembled in colour under the light of the lanterns.

As though dispersed by the draught, the haze lifted, and Zahara saw Grantham standing by the open doorway through which he had ushered out the other visitors.

Wide-eyed and piteous she met his glance. She had seen that night the Look in his eyes. She had saved his life, and there was much, so much, that she wanted to tell him. A thousand yearnings, inexplicable, hitherto unknown, deep mysteries of her soul, looked out of those great eyes.

"Don't think," he said tensely, "that I was deceived. I saw the trick with the rose! You are as guilty as your villainous lover! Murderess!"

He went out and closed the door. The flame-coloured cloak slowly slipped from Zahara's shoulders, and the veils, like falling petals, began to drop gently one by one upon the blood-stained carpet.

THE HAND OF THE MANDARIN QUONG

I. THE SHADOW ON THE CURTAIN

"Singapore is by no means herself again," declared Jennings, looking about the lounge of the Hotel de l'Europe. "Don't you agree, Knox?"

Burton fixed his lazy stare upon the speaker.

"Don't blame poor old Singapore," he said. "There is no spot in this battered world that I have succeeded in discovering which is not changed for the worse."

Dr. Matheson flicked ash from his cigar and smiled in that peculiarly happy manner which characterizes a certain American type and which lent a boyish charm to his personality.

"You are a pair of pessimists," he pronounced. "For some reason best known to themselves Jennings and Knox have decided upon a Busman's Holiday. Very well. Why grumble?"

"You are quite right, Doctor," Jennings admitted. "When I was on service here in the Straits Settlements I declared heaven knows how often that the country would never see me again once I was demobbed. Yet here you see I am; Burton belongs here; but here's Knox, and we are all as fed up as we can be!"

"Yes," said Burton slowly. "I may be a bit tired of Singapore. It's a queer thing, though, that you fellows have drifted back here again. The call of the East is no fable. It's a call that one hears for ever."

The conversation drifted into another channel, and all sorts of topics were discussed, from racing to the latest feminine fashions, from ballroom dances to the merits and demerits of coalition government. Then suddenly:

"What became of Adderley?" asked Jennings.

There were several men in the party who had been cronies of ours during the time that we were stationed in Singapore, and at Jennings's words a sort of hush seemed to fall on those who had known Adderley. I cannot say if Jennings noticed this, but it was perfectly evident to me that Dr. Matheson had perceived it, for he glanced swiftly across in my direction in an oddly significant way.

"I don't know," replied Burton, who was an engineer. "He was rather an unsavoury sort of character in some ways, but I heard that he came to a sticky end."

"What do you mean?" I asked with curiosity, for I myself had often wondered what had become of Adderley.

"Well, he was reported to his C. O., or something, wasn't he, just before the time for his demobilization? I don't know the particulars; I thought perhaps you did, as he was in your regiment."

"I have heard nothing whatever about it," I replied.

"You mean Sidney Adderley, the man who was so indecently rich?" someone interjected. "Had a place at Katong, and was always talking about his father's millions?"

"That's the fellow."

"Yes," said Jennings, "there was some scandal, I know, but it was after my time here."

"Something about an old mandarin out Johore Bahru way, was it not?" asked Burton. "The last thing I heard about Adderley was that he had disappeared."

"Nobody would have cared much if he had," declared Jennings. "I know of several who would have been jolly glad. There was a lot of the brute about Adderley, apart from the fact that he had more money than was good for him. His culture was a veneer. It was his check-book that spoke all the time."

"Everybody would have forgiven Adderley his vulgarity," said Dr. Matheson, quietly, "if the man's heart had been in the right place."

"Surely an instance of trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear," someone murmured.

Burton gazed rather hard at the last speaker.

"So far as I am aware," he said, "the poor devil is dead, so go easy."

"Are you sure he is dead?" asked Dr. Matheson, glancing at Burton in that quizzical, amused way of his.

"No, I am not sure; I am merely speaking from hearsay. And now I come to think of it, the information was rather vague. But I gathered that he had vanished, at any rate, and remembering certain earlier episodes in his career, I was led to suppose that this vanishing meant———"

He shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"You mean the old mandarin?" suggested Dr. Matheson.

"Yes."

"Was there really anything in that story, or was it suggested by the unpleasant reputation of Adderley?" Jennings asked.

"I can settle any doubts upon that point," said I; whereupon I immediately became a focus of general attention.

"What! were you ever at that place of Adderley's at Katong?" asked Jennings with intense curiosity.

I nodded, lighting a fresh cigarette in a manner that may have been unduly leisurely.

"Did you see her?"

Again I nodded.

"Really!"

"I must have been peculiarly favoured, but certainly I had that pleasure."

"You speak of seeing her," said one of the party, now entering the conversation for the first time. "To whom do you refer?"

"Well," replied Burton, "it's really a sort of fairy tale—unless Knox"—glacing across in my direction—"can confirm it. But there was a story current during the latter part of Adderley's stay in Singapore to the effect that he had made the acquaintance of the wife, or some member of the household, of an old gentleman out Johore Bahru way—sort of mandarin or big pot among the Chinks."

"It was rumoured that he had bolted with her," added another speaker.

"I think it was more than a rumour."

"Why do you say so?"

"Well, representations were made to the authorities, I know for an absolute certainty, and I have an idea that Adderley was kicked out of the Service as a consequence of the scandal which resulted."

"How is it one never heard of this?"

"Money speaks, my dear fellow," cried Burton, "even when it is possessed by such a peculiar outsider as Adderley. The thing was hushed up. It was a very nasty business. But Knox was telling us that he had actually seen the lady. Please carry on, Knox, for I must admit that I am intensely curious."

"I can only say that I saw her on one occasion."

"With Adderley?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Where?"

"At his place at Katong."

"I even thought his place at that resort was something of a myth," declared Jennings. "He never asked me to go there, but, then, I took that as a compliment. Pardon the apparent innuendo, Knox," he added, laughing. "But you say you actually visited the establishment?"

"Yes," I replied slowly, "I met him here in this very hotel one evening in the winter of '15, after the natives' attempt to mutiny. He had been drinking rather heavily, a fact which he was quite unable to disguise. He was never by any means a real friend of mine; in fact, I doubt that he had a true friend in the world. Anyhow, I could see that he was lonely, and as I chanced to be at a loose end I accepted an invitation to go over to what he termed his 'little place at Katong.'

"His little place proved to be a veritable palace. The man privately, or rather, secretly, to be exact, kept up a sort of pagan state. He had any number of servants. Of course he became practically a millionaire after the death of his father, as you will remember; and given more congenial company, I must confess that I might have spent a most enjoyable evening there.

"Adderley insisted upon priming me with champagne, and after a while I may as well admit that I lost something of my former reserve, and began in a fashion to feel that I was having a fairly good time. By the way, my host was not quite frankly drunk. He got into that objectionable and dangerous mood which some of you will recall, and I could see by the light in his eyes that there was mischief brewing, although at the time I did not know its nature.

"I should explain that we were amusing ourselves in a room which was nearly as large as the lounge of this hotel, and furnished in a somewhat similar manner. There were carved pillars and stained glass domes, a little fountain, and all those other peculiarities of an Eastern household.

"Presently, Adderley gave an order to one of his servants, and glanced at me with that sort of mocking, dare-devil look in his eyes which I loathed, which everybody loathed who ever met the man. Of course I had no idea what all this portended, but I was very shortly to learn.

"While he was still looking at me, but stealing side-glances at a doorway before which was draped a most wonderful curtain of a sort of flamingo colour, this curtain was suddenly pulled aside, and a girl came in.

"Of course, you must remember that at the time of which I am speaking the scandal respecting the mandarin had not yet come to light. Consequently I had no idea who the girl could be. I saw she was a Eurasian. But of her striking beauty there could be no doubt whatever. She was dressed in magnificent robes, and she literally glittered with jewels. She even wore jewels upon the toes of her little bare feet. But the first thing that struck me at the moment of her appearance was that her presence there was contrary to her wishes and inclinations. I have never seen a similar expression in any woman's eyes. She looked at Adderley as though she would gladly have slain him!

"Seeing this look, his mocking smile in which there was something of triumph—of the joy of possession—turned to a scowl of positive brutality. He clenched his fists in a way that set me bristling. He advanced toward the girl—and although the width of the room divided them, she recoiled—and the significance of expression and gesture was unmistakable. Adderley paused.

"'So you have made up your mind to dance after all?' he shouted.

"The look in the girl's dark eyes was pitiful, and she turned to me with a glance of dumb entreaty.

"'No, no!' she cried. 'No, no! Why do you bring me here?'

"'Dance!' roared Adderley. 'Dance! That's what I want you to do.'

"Rebellion leapt again to the wonderful eyes, and she started back with a perfectly splendid gesture of defiance. At that my brutal and drunken host leapt in her direction. I was on my feet now, but before I could act the girl said a thing which checked him, sobered him, which pulled him up short, as though he had encountered a stone wall.

"'Ah, God!' she said. (She was speaking, of course, in her native tongue.) 'His hand! His hand! Look! His hand!'

"To me her words were meaningless, naturally, but following the direction of her positively agonized glance I saw that she was watching what seemed to me to be the shadow of someone moving behind the flame-like curtain which produced an effect not unlike that of a huge, outstretched hand, the fingers crooked, claw- fashion.

"'Knox, Knox!' whispered Adderley, grasping me by the shoulder.

"He pointed with a quivering finger toward this indistinct shadow upon the curtain, and:

"'Do you see it—do you see it?' he said huskily. 'It is his hand—it is his hand!'

"Of the pair, I think, the man was the more frightened. But the girl, uttering a frightful shriek, ran out of the room as though pursued by a demon. As she did so whoever had been moving behind the curtain evidently went away. The shadow disappeared, and Adderley, still staring as if hypnotized at the spot where it had been, continued to hold my shoulder as in a vise. Then, sinking down upon a heap of cushions beside me, he loudly and shakily ordered more champagne.

"Utterly mystified by the incident, I finally left him in a state of stupor, and returned to my quarters, wondering whether I had dreamed half of the episode or the whole of it, whether he did really possess that wonderful palace, or whether he had borrowed it to impress me."

I ceased speaking, and my story was received in absolute silence, until:

"And that is all you know?" said Burton.

"Absolutely all. I had to leave about that time, you remember, and afterward went to France."

"Yes, I remember. It was while you were away that the scandal arose respecting the mandarin. Extraordinary story, Knox. I should like to know what it all meant, and what the end of it was."

Dr. Matheson broke his long silence.

"Although I am afraid I cannot enlighten you respecting the end of the story," he said quietly, "perhaps I can carry it a step further."

"Really, Doctor? What do you know about the matter?"

"I accidentally became implicated as follows," replied the American: "I was, as you know, doing voluntary surgical work near Singapore at the time, and one evening, presumably about the same period of which Knox is speaking, I was returning from the hospital at Katong, at which I acted sometimes as anaesthetist, to my quarters in Singapore; just drifting along, leisurely by the edge of the gardens admiring the beauty of the mangroves and the deceitful peace of the Eastern night.

"The hour was fairly late and not a soul was about. Nothing disturbed the silence except those vague sibilant sounds which are so characteristic of the country. Presently, as I rambled on with my thoughts wandering back to the dim ages, I literally fell over a man who lay in the road.

"I was naturally startled, but I carried an electric pocket torch, and by its light I discovered that the person over whom I had fallen was a dignified-looking Chinaman, somewhat past middle age. His clothes, which were of good quality, were covered with dirt and blood, and he bore all the appearance of having recently been engaged in a very tough struggle. His face was notable only for its possession of an unusually long jet-black moustache. He had swooned from loss of blood."

"Why, was he wounded?" exclaimed Jennings.

"His hand had been nearly severed from his wrist!"

"Merciful heavens!"

"I realized the impossibility of carrying him so far as the hospital, and accordingly I extemporized a rough tourniquet and left him under a palm tree by the road until I obtained assistance. Later, at the hospital, following a consultation, we found it necessary to amputate."

"I should say he objected fiercely?"

"He was past objecting to anything, otherwise I have no doubt he would have objected furiously. The index finger of the injured hand had one of those preternaturally long nails, protected by an engraved golden case. However, at least I gave him a chance of life. He was under my care for some time, but I doubt if ever he was properly grateful. He had an iron constitution, though, and I finally allowed him to depart. One queer stipulation he had made—that the severed hand, with its golden nail-case, should be given to him when he left hospital. And this bargain I faithfully carried out."

"Most extraordinary," I said. "Did you ever learn the identity of the old gentleman?"

"He was very reticent, but I made a number of inquiries, and finally learned with absolute certainty, I think, that he was the Mandarin Quong Mi Su from Johore Bahru, a person of great repute among the Chinese there, and rather a big man in China. He was known locally as the Mandarin Quong."

"Did you learn anything respecting how he had come by his injury, Doctor?"

Matheson smiled in his quiet fashion, and selected a fresh cigar with great deliberation. Then:

"I suppose it is scarcely a case of betraying a professional secret," he said, "but during the time that my patient was recovering from the effects of the anaesthetic he unconsciously gave me several clues to the nature of the episode. Putting two and two together I gathered that someone, although the name of this person never once passed the lips of the mandarin, had abducted his favourite wife."

"Good heavens! truly amazing," I exclaimed.

"Is it not? How small a place the world is. My old mandarin had traced the abductor and presumably the girl to some house which I gathered to be in the neighbourhood of Katong. In an attempt to force an entrance—doubtless with the amiable purpose of slaying them both—he had been detected by the prime object of his hatred. In hurriedly descending from a window he had been attacked by some weapon, possibly a sword, and had only made good his escape in the condition in which I found him. How far he had proceeded I cannot say, but I should imagine that the house to which he had been was no great distance from the spot where I found him."

"Comment is really superfluous," remarked Burton. "He was looking for Adderley."

"I agree," said Jennings.

"And," I added, "it was evidently after this episode that I had the privilege of visiting that interesting establishment."

There was a short interval of silence; then:

"You probably retain no very clear impression of the shadow which you saw," said Dr. Matheson, with great deliberation. "At the time perhaps you had less occasion particularly to study it. But are you satisfied that it was really caused by someone moving behind the curtain?"

I considered his question for a few moments.

"I am not," I confessed. "Your story, Doctor, makes me wonder whether it may not have been due to something else."

"What else can it have been due to?" exclaimed Jennings contemptuously —"unless to the champagne?"

"I won't quote Shakespeare," said Dr. Matheson, smiling in his odd way. "The famous lines, though appropriate, are somewhat overworked. But I will quote Kipling: 'East is East, and West is West.'"

II. THE LADY OF KATONG

Fully six months had elapsed, and on returning from Singapore I had forgotten all about Adderley and the unsavoury stories connected with his reputation. Then, one evening as I was strolling aimlessly along St. James's Street, wondering how I was going to kill time—for almost everyone I knew was out of town, including Paul Harley, and London can be infinitely more lonely under such conditions than any desert—I saw a thick-set figure approaching along the other side of the street.

The swing of the shoulders, the aggressive turn of the head, were vaguely familiar, and while I was searching my memory and endeavouring to obtain a view of the man's face, he stared across in my direction.

It was Adderley.

He looked even more debauched than I remembered him, for whereas in Singapore he had had a tanned skin, now he looked unhealthily pallid and blotchy. He raised his hand, and:

"Knox!" he cried, and ran across to greet me.

His boisterous manner and a sort of coarse geniality which he possessed had made him popular with a certain set in former days, but I, who knew that this geniality was forced, and assumed to conceal a sort of appalling animalism, had never been deceived by it. Most people found Adderley out sooner or later, but I had detected the man's true nature from the very beginning. His eyes alone were danger signals for any amateur psychologist. However, I greeted him civilly enough:

"Bless my soul, you are looking as fit as a fiddle!" he cried. "Where have you been, and what have you been doing since I saw you last?"

"Nothing much," I replied, "beyond trying to settle down in a reformed world."

"Reformed world!" echoed Adderley. "More like a ruined world it has seemed to me."

He laughed loudly. That he had already explored several bottles was palpable.

We were silent for a while, mentally weighing one another up, as it were. Then:

"Are you living in town?" asked Adderley.

"I am staying at the Carlton at the moment," I replied. "My chambers are in the hands of the decorators. It's awkward. Interferes with my work."

"Work!" cried Adderley. "Work! It's a nasty word, Knox. Are you doing anything now?"

"Nothing, until eight o'clock, when I have an appointment."

"Come along to my place," he suggested, "and have a cup of tea, or a whisky and soda if you prefer it."

Probably I should have refused, but even as he spoke I was mentally translated to the lounge of the Hotel de l'Europe, and prompted by a very human curiosity I determined to accept his invitation. I wondered if Fate had thrown an opportunity in my way of learning the end of the peculiar story which had been related on that occasion.

I accompanied Adderley to his chambers, which were within a stone's throw of the spot where I had met him. That this gift for making himself unpopular with all and sundry, high and low, had not deserted him, was illustrated by the attitude of the liftman as we entered the hall of the chambers. He was barely civil to Adderley and even regarded myself with marked disfavour.

We were admitted by Adderley's man, whom I had not seen before, but who was some kind of foreigner, I think a Portuguese. It was characteristic of Adderley. No Englishman would ever serve him for long, and there had been more than one man in his old Company who had openly avowed his intention of dealing with Adderley on the first available occasion.

His chambers were ornately furnished; indeed, the room in which we sat more closely resembled a scene from an Oscar Asche production than a normal man's study. There was something unreal about it all. I have since thought that this unreality extended to the person of the man himself. Grossly material, he yet possessed an aura of mystery, mystery of an unsavoury sort. There was something furtive, secretive, about Adderley's entire mode of life.

I had never felt at ease in his company, and now as I sat staring wonderingly at the strange and costly ornaments with which the room was overladen I bethought me of the object of my visit. How I should have brought the conversation back to our Singapore days I know not, but a suitable opening was presently offered by Adderley himself.

"Do you ever see any of the old gang?" he inquired.

"I was in Singapore about six months ago," I replied, "and I met some of them again."

"What! Had they drifted back to the East after all?"

"Two or three of them were taking what Dr. Matheson described as a Busman's Holiday."

At mention of Dr. Matheson's name Adderley visibly started.

"So you know Matheson," he murmured. "I didn't know you had ever met him."

Plainly to hide his confusion he stood up, and crossing the room drew my attention to a rather fine silver bowl of early Persian ware. He was displaying its peculiar virtues and showing a certain acquaintance with his subject when he was interrupted. A door opened suddenly and a girl came in. Adderley put down the bowl and turned rapidly as I rose from my seat.

It was the lady of Katong!

I recognized her at once, although she wore a very up-to-date gown. While it did not suit her dark good looks so well as the native dress which she had worn at Singapore, yet it could not conceal the fact that in a barbaric way she was a very beautiful woman. On finding a visitor in the room she became covered with confusion.

"Oh," she said, speaking in Hindustani. "Why did you not tell me there was someone here?"

Adderley's reply was characteristically brutal.

"Get out," he said. "You fool."

I turned to go, for I was conscious of an intense desire to attack my host. But:

"Don't go, Knox, don't go!" he cried. "I am sorry, I am damned sorry, I _____"

He paused, and looked at me in a queer sort of appealing way. The girl, her big eyes widely open, retreated again to the door, with curious lithe steps, characteristically Oriental. The door regained, she paused for a moment and extended one small hand in Adderley's direction.

"I hate you," she said slowly, "hate you! Hate you!"

She went out, quietly closing the door behind her. Adderley turned to me with an embarrassed laugh.

"I know you think I am a brute and an outsider," he said, "and perhaps I am. Everybody says I am, so I suppose there must be something in it. But if

ever a man paid for his mistakes I have paid for mine, Knox. Good God, I haven't a friend in the world."

"You probably don't deserve one," I retorted.

"I know I don't, and that's the tragedy of it," he replied. "You may not believe it, Knox; I don't expect anybody to believe me; but for more than a year I have been walking on the edge of Hell. Do you know where I have been since I saw you last?"

I shook my head in answer.

"I have been half round the world, Knox, trying to find peace."

"You don't know where to look for it," I said.

"If only you knew," he whispered. "If only you knew," and sank down upon the settee, ruffling his hair with his hands and looking the picture of haggard misery. Seeing that I was still set upon departure:

"Hold on a bit, Knox," he implored. "Don't go yet. There is something I want to ask you, something very important."

He crossed to a sideboard and mixed himself a stiff whisky-and- soda. He asked me to join him, but I refused.

"Won't you sit down again?"

I shook my head.

"You came to my place at Katong once," he began abruptly. "I was damned drunk, I admit it. But something happened, do you remember?"

I nodded.

"This is what I want to ask you: Did you, or did you not, see that shadow?"

I stared him hard in the face.

"I remember the episode to which you refer," I replied. "I certainly saw a shadow."

"But what sort of shadow?"

"To me it seemed an indefinite, shapeless thing, as though caused by someone moving behind the curtain."

"It didn't look to you like—the shadow of a hand?"

"It might have been, but I could not be positive."

Adderley groaned.

"Knox," he said, "money is a curse. It has been a curse to me. If I have had my fun, God knows I have paid for it."

"Your idea of fun is probably a peculiar one," I said dryly.

Let me confess that I was only suffering the man's society because of an intense curiosity which now possessed me on learning that the lady of Katong was still in Adderley's company.

Whether my repugnance for his society would have enabled me to remain any longer I cannot say. But as if Fate had deliberately planned that I should become a witness of the concluding phases of this secret drama, we were now interrupted a second time, and again in a dramatic fashion.

Adderley's nondescript valet came in with letters and a rather large brown paper parcel sealed and fastened with great care.

As the man went out:

"Surely that is from Singapore," muttered Adderley, taking up the parcel.

He seemed to become temporarily oblivious of my presence, and his face grew even more haggard as he studied the writing upon the wrapper. With unsteady fingers he untied it, and I lingered, watching curiously. Presently out from the wrappings he took a very beautiful casket of ebony and ivory, cunningly carved and standing upon four claw-like ivory legs.

"What the devil's this?" he muttered.

He opened the box, which was lined with sandal-wood, and thereupon started back with a great cry, recoiling from the casket as though it had contained an adder. My former sentiments forgotten, I stepped forward and peered into the interior. Then I, in turn, recoiled.

In the box lay a shrivelled yellow hand—with long tapering and well-manicured nails—neatly severed at the wrist!

The nail of the index finger was enclosed in a tiny, delicately fashioned case of gold, upon which were engraved a number of Chinese characters.

Adderley sank down again upon the settee.

"My God!" he whispered, "his hand! His hand! He has sent me his hand!"

He began laughing. Whereupon, since I could see that the man was practically hysterical because of his mysterious fears:

"Stop that," I said sharply. "Pull yourself together, Adderley. What the deuce is the matter with you?"

"Take it away!" he moaned, "take it away. Take the accursed thing away!"

"I admit it is an unpleasant gift to send to anybody," I said, "but probably you know more about it than I do."

"Take it away," he repeated. "Take it away, for God's sake, take it away, Knox!"

He was quite beyond reason, and therefore:

"Very well," I said, and wrapped the casket in the brown paper in which it had come. "What do you want me to do with it?"

"Throw it in the river," he answered. "Burn it. Do anything you like with it, but take it out of my sight!"

III. THE GOLD-CASED NAIL

As I descended to the street the liftman regarded me in a curious and rather significant way. Finally, just as I was about to step out into the hall:

"Excuse me, sir," he said, having evidently decided that I was a fit person to converse with, "but are you a friend of Mr Adderley's?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, sir, I hope you will excuse me, but at times I have thought the gentleman was just a little bit queer, like."

"You mean insane?" I asked sharply.

"Well, sir, I don't know, but he is always asking me if I can see shadows and things in the lift, and sometimes when he comes in late of a night he absolutely gives me the cold shivers, he does."

I lingered, the box under my arm, reluctant to obtain confidences from a servant, but at the same time keenly interested. Thus encouraged:

"Then there's that lady friend of his who is always coming here," the man continued. "She's haunted by shadows, too." He paused, watching me narrowly.

"There's nothing better in this world than a clean conscience, sir," he concluded.

*****

Having returned to my room at the hotel, I set down the mysterious parcel, surveying it with much disfavour. That it contained the hand of the Mandarin Quong I could not doubt, the hand which had been amputated by

Dr. Matheson. Its appearance in that dramatic fashion confirmed Matheson's idea that the mandarin's injury had been received at the hands of Adderley. What did all this portend, unless that the Mandarin Quong was dead? And if he were dead why was Adderley more afraid of him dead than he had been of him living?

I thought of the haunting shadow, I thought of the night at Katong, and I thought of Dr. Matheson's words when he had told us of his discovery of the Chinaman lying in the road that night outside Singapore.

I felt strangely disinclined to touch the relic, and it was only after some moments' hesitation that I undid the wrappings and raised the lid of the casket. Dusk was very near and I had not yet lighted the lamps; therefore at first I doubted the evidence of my senses. But having lighted up and peered long and anxiously into the sandal-wood lining of the casket I could doubt no longer.

The casket was empty!

It was like a conjuring trick. That the hand had been in the box when I had taken it up from Adderley's table I could have sworn before any jury. When and by whom it had been removed was a puzzle beyond my powers of unravelling. I stepped toward the telephone—and then remembered that Paul Harley was out of London. Vaguely wondering if Adderley had played me a particularly gruesome practical joke, I put the box on a sideboard and again contemplated the telephone doubtfully far a moment. It was in my mind to ring him up. Finally, taking all things into consideration, I determined that I would have nothing further to do with the man's unsavoury and mysterious affairs.

It was in vain, however, that I endeavoured to dismiss the matter from my mind; and throughout the evening, which I spent at a theatre with some American friends, I found myself constantly thinking of Adderley and the ivory casket, of the mandarin of Johore Bahru, and of the mystery of the shrivelled yellow hand.

I had been back in my room about half an hour, I suppose, and it was long past midnight, when I was startled by a ringing of my telephone bell. I took up the receiver, and:

"Knox! Knox!" came a choking cry.

"Yes, who is speaking?"

"It is I, Adderley. For God's sake come round to my place at once!"

His words were scarcely intelligible. Undoubtedly he was in the grip of intense emotion.

"What do you mean? What is the matter?"

"It is here, Knox, it is here! It is knocking on the door! Knocking! Knocking!"

"You have been drinking," I said sternly. "Where is your man?"

"The cur has bolted. He bolted the moment he heard that damned knocking. I am all alone; I have no one else to appeal to." There came a choking sound, then: "My God, Knox, it is getting in! I can see. . . the shadow on the blind. . ."

Convinced that Adderley's secret fears had driven him mad, I nevertheless felt called upon to attend to his urgent call, and without a moment's delay I hurried around to St. James's Street. The liftman was not on duty, the lower hall was in darkness, but I raced up the stairs and found to my astonishment that Adderley's door was wide open.

"Adderley!" I cried. "Adderley!"

There was no reply, and without further ceremony I entered and searched the chambers. They were empty. Deeply mystified, I was about to go out again when there came a ring at the door-bell. I walked to the door and a policeman was standing upon the landing.

"Good evening, sir," he said, and then paused, staring at me curiously.

"Good evening, constable," I replied.

"You are not the gentleman who ran out awhile ago," he said, a note of suspicion coming into his voice.

I handed him my card and explained what had occurred, then:

"It must have been Mr Adderley I saw," muttered the constable.

"You saw—when?"

"Just before you arrived, sir. He came racing out into St. James's Street and dashed off like a madman."

"In which direction was he going?"

"Toward Pall Mall."

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The neighbourhood was practically deserted at that hour. But from the guard on duty before the palace we obtained our first evidence of

Adderley's movements. He had raced by some five minutes before, frantically looking back over his shoulder and behaving like a man flying for his life. No one else had seen him. No one else ever did see him alive. At two o'clock there was no news, but I had informed Scotland Yard and official inquiries had been set afoot.

Nothing further came to light that night, but as all readers of the daily press will remember, Adderley's body was taken out of the pond in St. James's Park on the following day. Death was due to drowning, but his throat was greatly discoloured as though it had been clutched in a fierce grip.

It was I who identified the body, and as many people will know, in spite of the closest inquiries, the mystery of Adderley's death has not been properly cleared up to this day. The identity of the lady who visited him at his chambers was never discovered. She completely disappeared.

The ebony and ivory casket lies on my table at this present moment, visible evidence of an invisible menace from which Adderley had fled around the world.

Doubtless the truth will never be known now. A significant discovery, however, was made some days after the recovery of Adderley's body.

From the bottom of the pond in St. James's Park a patient Scotland Yard official brought up the gold nail-case with its mysterious engravings—and it contained, torn at the root, the incredibly long finger-nail of the Mandarin Quong!

THE KEY OF THE TEMPLE OF HEAVEN

I. THE KEEPER OF THE KEY

The note of a silver bell quivered musically through the scented air of the ante-room. Madame de Medici stirred slightly upon the divan with its many silken cushions, turning her head toward the closed door with the

languorous, almost insolent, indifference which one perceives in the movements of a tigress. Below, in the lobby, where the pillars of Mokattam alabaster upheld the painted roof, the little yellow man from Pekin shivered slightly, although the air was warm for Limehouse, and always turned his mysterious eyes toward a corner of the great staircase which was visible from where he sat, coiled up, a lonely figure in the mushrabiyeh chair. Madame blew a wreath of smoke from her lips, and, through half-closed eyes, watched it ascend, unbroken, toward the canopy of cloth-of-gold which masked the ceiling. A Madonna by Leonardo da Vinci faced her across the apartment, the painted figure seeming to watch the living one upon the divan. Madame smiled into the eyes of the Madonna. Surely even the great Leonardo must have failed to reproduce that smile—the great Leonardo whose supreme art has captured the smile of Mona Lisa. Madame had the smile of Cleopatra, which, it is said, made Caesar mad, though in repose the beauty of Egypt's queen left him cold. A robe of Kashmiri silk, fine with a phantom fineness, draped her exquisite shape as the art of Cellini draped the classic figures which he wrought in gold and silver; it seemed incorporate with her beauty.

A second wreath of smoke curled upward to the canopy, and Madame watched this one also through the veil of her curved black lashes, as the Eastern woman watches the world through her veil. Those eyes were notable even in so lovely a setting, for they were of a hue rarely seen in human eyes, being like the eyes of a tigress; yet they could seem voluptuously soft, twin pools of liquid amber, in whose depths a man might lose his soul.

Again the silver bell sounded in the ante-room, and, below, the little yellow man shivered sympathetically. Again Madame stirred with that high disdain that so became her, who had the eyes of a tigress. Her carmine lips possessed the antique curve which we are told distinguished the lips of the Comtesse de Cagliostro; her cheeks had the freshness of flowers, and her hair the blackness of ebony, enhancing the miracle of her skin, which had the whiteness of ivory—not of African ivory, but of that fossil ivory which has lain for untold ages beneath the snows of Siberia.

She dropped the cigarette from her tapered fingers into a little silver bowl upon a table at her side, then lightly touched the bell which stood there also. Its soft note answered to the bell in the ante-room; a white-robed Chinese

servant silently descended the great staircase, his soft red slippers sinking into the rich pile of the carpet; and the little yellow man from the great temple in Pekin followed him back up the stairway and was ushered into the presence of Madame de Medici.

The servant closed the door silently and the little yellow man, fixing his eyes upon the beautiful woman before him, fell upon his knees and bowed his forehead to the carpet.

Madame's lovely lips curved again in the disdainful smile, and she extended one bare ivory arm toward the visitor who knelt as a suppliant at her feet.

"Rise, my friend!" she said, in purest Chinese, which fell from her lips with the music of a crystal spring. "How may I serve you?"

The yellow man rose and advanced a step nearer to the divan, but the strange beauty of Madame had spoken straight to his Eastern heart, had awakened his soul to a new life. His glance travelled over the vision before him, from the little Persian slipper that peeped below the drapery of Kashmir silk to the small classic head with its crown of ebon locks; yet he dared not meet the glance of the amber eyes.

"Sit here beside me," directed Madame, and she slightly changed her position with that languorous and lithe grace suggestive of a creature of the jungle.

Breathing rapidly betwixt the importance of his mission and a new, intoxicating emotion which had come upon him at the moment of entering the perfumed room, the yellow man obeyed, but always with glance averted from the taunting face of Madame. A golden incense-burner stood upon the floor, over between the high, draped windows, and a faint pencil from its dying fires stole grayly upward. Upon the scented smoke the Buddhist priest fixed his eyes, and began, with a rapidity that grew as he proceeded, to pour out his tale. Seated beside him, one round arm resting upon the cushions so as almost to touch him, Madame listened, watching the averted yellow face, and always smiling—smiling.

The tale was done at last; the incense-burner was cold, and breathlessly the Buddhist clutched his knees with lean, clawish fingers and swayed to and fro, striving to conquer the emotions that whirled and fought within him. Selecting another cigarette from the box beside her, and lighting it deliberately, Madame de Medici spoke.

"My friend of old," she said, and of the language of China she made strange music, "you come to me from your home in the secret city, because you know that I can serve you. It is enough."

She touched the bell upon the table, and the white-robed servant reentered, and, bowing low, held open the door. The little yellow man, first kneeling upon the carpet before the divan as before an altar, hurried from the apartment. As the door was reclosed, and Madame found herself alone again, she laughed lightly, as Calypso laughed when Ulysses' ship appeared off the shores of her isle.

God fashions few such women. It is well.

II. THE TIGER LADY

"By heavens, Annesley!" whispered Rene Deacon, "what eyes that woman has!" His companion, following the direction of Deacon's glance, nodded rather grimly.

"The eyes of a Circe, or at times the eyes of a tigress."

"She is magnificent!" murmured Deacon rapturously. "I have never seen so beautiful a woman."

His glance followed the tall figure as it passed into a smaller salon on the left; nor was he alone in his regard. Fashionable society was well represented in the gallery—where a collection of pictures by a celebrated artist was being shown; and prior to the entrance of the lady in the strangely fashioned tiger-skin cloak, the somewhat extraordinary works of art had engaged the interest even of the most fickle, but, from the moment the tiger-lady made her appearance, even the most daring canvases were forgotten.

"She wears tiger-skin shoes!" whispered one.

"She is like a design for a poster!" laughed another.

"I have never seen anything so flashy in my life," was the acrid comment of a third.

"What a dazzlingly beautiful woman!" remarked another—this one a man. While:

"Who is she?" arose upon all sides.

Judging from the isolation of the barbaric figure, it would seem that society did not know the tiger-lady, but Deacon, seizing his companion by the arm and almost dragging him into the small salon which the lady had entered, turned in the doorway and looked into Annesley's eyes. Annesley palpably sought to evade the glance.

"You know everybody," whispered Deacon. "You must be acquainted with her."

A great number of people were now thronging into the room, not so much because of the pictures it contained, but rather out of curiosity respecting the beautiful unknown. Annesley tried to withdraw; his uneasiness grew momentarily greater.

"I scarcely know her well enough," he protested, "to present you. Moreover———"

"But she's smiling at you!" interrupted Deacon eagerly.

His handsome but rather weak face was flushed; he was, as an old clubman had recently said of him, "so very young." He lacked the restraint usual in cultured Englishmen, and had the frankly passionate manner which one associates with the South. His uncle, Colonel Deacon, a mordant wit, would say apologetically:

"Reggie" (Deacon's father) "married a Gascon woman. She was delightfully pretty. Poor Reggie!"

Certainly Rene was impetuous to an embarrassing degree, nor lightly to be thwarted. Boldly meeting the glance of the woman of the amber eyes, he pushed Annesley forward, not troubling to disguise his anxiety to be presented to the tiger-lady. She turned her head languidly, with that wild-animal grace of hers, and unsmiling now, regarded Annesley.

"So you forget me so soon, Mr Annesley," she murmured, "or is it that you play the good shepherd?"

"My dear Madame," said Annesley, recovering with an effort his wonted sang-froid, "I was merely endeavouring to calm the rhapsodies of my friend, who seemed disposed to throw himself at your feet in knight-errant fashion."

"He is a very handsome boy," murmured Madame; and as the great eyes were turned upon Deacon the carmine lips curved again in the Cleopatrian smile.

She was indeed wonderful, for while she spoke as the woman of the world to the boy, there was nothing maternal in her patronage, and her eyes were twin flambeaux, luring—luring, and her sweet voice was a siren's song.

"May I beg leave to present my friend, Mr Rene Deacon, Madame de Medici?" said Annesley; and as the two exchanged glances—the boy's a glance of undisguised passionate admiration, the woman's a glance unfathomable—he slightly shrugged his shoulders and stood aside.

There were others in the salon, who, perceiving that the unknown beauty was acquainted with Annesley, began to move from canvas to canvas toward that end of the room where the trio stood. But Madame did not appear anxious to make new acquaintances.

"I have seen quite enough of this very entertaining exhibition," she said languidly, toying with a great unset emerald which swung by a thin gold chain about her neck. "Might I entreat you to take pity upon a very lonely woman and return with me to tea?"

Annesley seemed on the point of refusing, when:

"I have acquired a reputed Leonardo," continued Madame, "and I wish you to see it."

There was something so like a command in the words that Deacon stared at his companion in frank surprise. The latter avoided his glance, and:

"Come!" said Madame de Medici.

As of old the great Catherine of her name might have withdrawn with her suite, so now the lady of the tiger skins withdrew from the gallery, the two men following obediently, and one of them at least a happy courtier.

III. TWIN POOLS OF AMBER

The white-robed Chinese servant entered and placed fresh perfume upon the burning charcoal of the silver incense-burner. As the scented smoke began to rise he withdrew, and a second servant entered, who facially, in dress, in figure and bearing, was a duplicate of the first. This one carried a large tray upon which was set an exquisite porcelain tea-service. He placed the tray upon a low table beside the divan, and in turn withdrew.

Deacon, seated in a great ebony chair, smoked rapidly and nervously—looking about the strangely appointed room with its huge picture of the Madonna, its jade Buddha surmounting a gilded Burmese cabinet, its Persian canopy and Egyptian divan, at the thousand and one costly curiosities which it displayed, at this mingling of East and West, of Christianity and paganism, with a growing wonder.

To one of his blood there was delight, intoxication, in that room; but something of apprehension, too, now grew up within him.

Madame de Medici entered. The garish motor-coat was discarded now, and her supple figure was seen to best advantage in one of those dark silken gowns which she affected, and which had a seeming of the ultra-fashionable because they defied fashion. She held in her hand an orchid, its structure that of an odontoglossum, but of a delicate green colour heavily splashed with scarlet—a weird and unnatural-looking bloom.

Just within the doorway she paused, as Deacon leaped up, and looked at him through the veil of the curved lashes.

"For you," she said, twirling the blossom between her fingers and gliding toward him with her tigerish step.

He spoke no word, but, face flushed, sought to look into her eyes as she pinned the orchid in the button-hole of his coat. Her hands were flawless in shape and colouring, being beautiful as the sculptured hands preserved in the works of Phidias.

The slight draught occasioned by the opening of the door caused the smoke from the incense-burner to be wafted toward the centre of the room. Like a blue-gray phantom it coiled about the two standing there upon a red and gold Bedouin rug, and the heavy perfume, or the close proximity of this singularly lovely woman, wrought upon the high-strung sensibilities of Deacon to such an extent that he was conscious of a growing faintness.

"Ah! You are not well!" exclaimed Madame with deep concern. "It is the perfume which that foolish Ah Li has lighted. He forgets that we are in England."

"Not at all," protested Deacon faintly, and conscious that he was making a fool of himself. "I think I have perhaps been overdoing it rather of late. Forgive me if I sit down."

He sank on the cushioned divan, his heart beating furiously, while Madame touched the little bell, whereupon one of the servants entered.

She spoke in Chinese, pointing to the incense-burner.

Ah Li bowed and removed the censer. As the door softly reclosed:

"You are better?" she whispered, sweetly solicitous, and, seating herself beside Deacon, she laid her hand lightly upon his arm.

"Quite," he replied hoarsely; "please do not worry about me. I am wondering what has become of Annesley."

"Ah, the poor man!" exclaimed Madame, with a silver laugh, and began to busy herself with the teacups. "He remembered, as he was looking at my new Leonardo, an appointment which he had quite forgotten."

"I can understand his forgetting anything under the circumstances."

Madame de Medici raised a tiny cup and bent slightly toward him. He felt that he was losing control of himself, and, averting his eyes, he stooped and smelled the orchid in his buttonhole. Then, accepting the cup, he was about to utter some light commonplace when the faintness returned overwhelmingly, and, hurriedly replacing the cup upon the tray, he fell back among the cushions. The stifling perfume of the place seemed to be choking him.

"Ah, poor boy! You are really not at all well. How sorry I am!"

The sweet tones reached him as from a great distance; but as one dying in the desert turns his face toward the distant oasis, Deacon turned weakly to the speaker. She placed one fair arm behind his head, pillowing him, and with a peacock fan which had lain amid the cushions fanned his face. The strange scene became wholly unreal to him; he thought himself some dying barbaric chief.

"Rest there," murmured the sweet voice.

The great eyes, unveiled now by the black lashes, were two twin lakes of fairest amber. They seemed to merge together, so that he stood upon the brink of an unfathomable amber pool—which swallowed him up—which swallowed him up.

He awoke to an instantaneous consciousness of the fact that he had been guilty of inexcusably bad form. He could not account for his faintness, and reclining there amid the silken cushions, with Madame de Medici watching him anxiously, he felt a hot flush stealing over his face.

"What is the matter with me!" he exclaimed, and sprang to his feet. "I feel quite well now."

She watched him, smiling, but did not speak. He was a "very young man" again, and badly embarrassed. He glanced at his wrist-watch.

"Gracious heavens!" he cried, and noted that the tea-tray had been removed, "there must be something radically wrong with my health. It is nearly seven o'clock!"

The note of the silver bell sounded in the ante-room.

"Can you forgive me?" he said.

But Madame, rising to her feet, leaned lightly upon his shoulder, toying with the petals of the orchid in his buttonhole.

"I think it was the perfume which that foolish Ah Li lighted," she whispered, looking intently into his eyes, "and it is you who have to forgive me. But you will, I know!" The silver bell rang again. "When you have come to see me again—many, many times, you will grow to love it—because I love it."

She touched the bell upon the table, and Ah Li entered silently. When Madame de Medici held out her hand to him Deacon raised the white fingers to his lips and kissed them rapturously; then he turned, the Gascon within him uppermost again, and ran from the room.

A purple curtain was drawn across the lobby, screening the caller newly arrived from the one so hurriedly departing.

IV. THE LIVING BUDDHA

It was past midnight when Colonel Deacon returned to the house. Rene was waiting for him, pacing up and down the big library. Their relationship was curious, as subsisting between ward and guardian, for these two, despite the disparity of their ages, had few secrets from one another. Rene burned to pour out his story of the wonderful Madame de Medici, of the secret house in Chinatown with its deceptively mean exterior and its gorgeous interior, to the shrewd and worldly elder man. That was his way. But Fate had an oddly bitter moment in store for him.

"Hallo, boy!" cried the Colonel, looking into the library; "glad you're home. I might not see you in the morning, and I want to tell you about—er—a lady who will be coming here in the afternoon."

The words died upon Rene's lips unspoken, and he stared blankly at the Colonel.

"I thought I knew all there was to know about pictures, antiques, and all that sort of lumber," continued Colonel Deacon in his rapid and off-hand manner. "Thought there weren't many men in London could teach me anything; certainly never suspected a woman could. But I've met one, boy! Gad! What a splendid creature! You know there isn't much in the world I haven't seen—north, south, east and west. I know all the advertised beauties of Europe and Asia—stage, opera, and ballet, and all the rest of them. But this one—Gad!"

He dropped into an arm-chair, clapping both his hands upon his knees. Rene stood at the farther end of the library, in the shadow, watching him.

"She's coming here to-morrow, boy—coming here. Gad! you dog! You'll fall in love with her the moment you see her—sure to, sure to! I did, and I'm three times your age!"

"Who is this lady, sir?" asked Rene, very quietly.

"God knows, boy! Everybody's mad to meet her, but nobody knows who she is. But wait till you see her. Lady Dascot seems to be acquainted with her, but you will see when they come to-morrow— see for yourself. Gad, boy! . . . what did you say?"

"I did not speak."

"Thought you did. Have a whisky-and-soda?"

"No, thank you, sir—good night."

"Good night, boy!" cried the Colonel. "Good night. Don't forget to be in to-morrow afternoon or you'll miss meeting the loveliest woman in London, and the most brilliant."

"What is her name?"

"Eh? She calls herself Madame de Medici. She's a mystery, but what a splendid creature!"

Rene Deacon walked slowly upstairs, entered his bedroom, and for fully an hour sat in the darkness, thinking—thinking.

"Am I going mad?" he murmured. "Or is this witch driving all London mad?"

He strove to recover something of the glamour which had mastered him when in the presence of Madame de Medici, but failed. Yet he knew that, once near her again, it would all return. His reflections were bitter, and

when at last wearily he undressed and went to bed it was to toss restlessly far into the small hours ere sleep came to soothe his troubled mind.

But his sleep was disturbed: a series of dreadfully realistic dreams danced through his brain. First he seemed to be standing upon a high mountain peak with eternal snows stretched all about him. He looked down, past the snow line, past the fir woods, into the depths of a lovely lake, far down in the valley below. It was a lake of liquid amber, and as he looked it seemed to become two lakes, and they were like two great eyes looking up at him and summoning him to leap. He thought that he leaped, a prodigious leap, far out into space; then fell—fell—fell. When he splashed into the amber deeps they became churned up in a milky foam, and this closed about him with a strangle grip. But it was no longer foam, but the clinging arms of Madame de Medici! . . .

Then he stood upon a fragile bridge of bamboo spanning a raging torrent. Right and left of the torrent below were jungles in which moved tigerish shapes. Upon the farther side of the bridge Madame de Medici, clad in a single garment of flame-coloured silk, beckoned to him. He sought to cross the bridge, but it collapsed, and he fell near the edge of the torrent. Below were the raging waters, and ever nearing him the tigerish shapes, which now Madame was calling to as to a pack of hounds. They were about to devour him, when———

He was crouching upon a ledge, high above a street which seemed to be vaguely familiar. He could not see very well, because of a silk mask tied upon his face, and the eyeholes of which were badly cut. From the ledge he stepped to another, perilously. He gained it, and crouching there, where there was scarce foothold for a cat, he managed fully to raise a window which already was raised some six inches. Then softly and silently—for he was bare-footed—he entered the room.

Someone slept in a bed facing the window by which he had entered, and upon a table at the side of the sleeper lay a purse, a bunch of keys, an electric torch, and a Service revolver. Gliding to the table Rene took the keys and the electric torch, unlocked the door of the room, and crept down a thickly carpeted stair to a room below. The door of this also he opened with one of the keys in the bunch, and by the light of the torch found his way through a quantity of antique furniture and piled up curiosities to a safe set in the farther wall.

He seemed, in his dream, to be familiar with the lock combination, and, selecting the correct key from the bunch, he soon had the safe open. The shelves within were laden principally with antique jewellery, statuettes, medals, scarabs; and a number of little leather-covered boxes were there also. One of these he abstracted, relocked the safe, and stepped out of the room, locking the door behind him. Up the stairs he mounted to the bedroom wherein he had left the sleeper. Having entered, he locked the door from within, placed the keys and the torch upon the table, and crept out again upon the dizzy ledge.

Poised there, high above the thoroughfare below, a great nausea attacked him. Glancing to the right, in the direction of the window through which he had come, he perceived Madame de Medici leaning out and beckoning to him. Her arm gleamed whitely in the faint light. A new courage came to him. He succeeded, crouched there upon the narrow ledge, in relowering the window, and leaving it in the state in which he had found it, he stood up and essayed that sickly stride to the adjoining ledge. He accomplished it, knelt, and crept back into the room from which he had started. . . .

The head of an ivory image of Buddha loomed up out of the utter darkness, growing and growing until it seemed like a great mountain. He could not believe that there was so much ivory in the world, and he felt it with his fingers, wonderingly. As he did so it began to shrink, and shrink, and shrink, and shrink, until it was no larger than a seated human figure. Then beneath his trembling hands it became animate; it moved, extended ivory arms, and wrapped them about his neck. Its lips became carmine—perfumed; they bent to him. . . and he was looking into the bewitching face of Madame de Medici!

He awoke, gasping for air and bathed in cold perspiration. The dawn was just breaking over London and stealing grayly from object to object in his bedroom.

V. THE IVORY GOD

The great car, with its fittings of gold and ivory, drew up at the door of Colonel Deacon's house. The interior was ablaze with tiger lilies, and out

from their midst stepped the fairest of them all—Madame de Medici, and swept queenly up the steps upon the arm of the cavalierly soldier.

All connoisseurs esteemed it a privilege to view the Deacon collection, and this afternoon there was a goodly gathering. Chairs and little white tables were dotted about the lawn in shady spots, and the majority of the company were already assembled; but when, in a wonderful golden robe, Madame de Medici glided across the lawn, the babel ceased abruptly as if by magic. She pulled off one glove and began twirling a great emerald between her slim fingers. It was suspended from a thin gold chain. Presently, descrying Annesley seated at a table with Lady Dascot, she raised the jewel languidly and peered through it at the two.

"Why!" exclaimed Rene Deacon, who stood close beside her, "that was a trick of Nero's!"

Madame laughed musically.

"One might take a worse model," she said softly; "at least he enjoyed life."

Colonel Deacon, who listened to her every word as to the utterance of a Cumaean oracle, laughed with extraordinary approbation.

There was scarce a woman present who regarded Madame with a friendly eye, nor a man who did not aspire to become her devoted slave. She brought an atmosphere of unreality with her, dominating old and young alike by virtue of her splendid pagan beauty. The lawn, with its very modern appointments, became as some garden of the Golden House, a pleasure ground of an emperor.

But later, when the company entered the house, and Colonel Deacon sought to monopolize the society of Madame, an unhealthy spirit of jealousy arose between Rene and his guardian. It was strange, grotesque, horrible almost. Annesley watched from afar, and there was something very like anger in his glance.

"And this," said the Colonel presently, taking up an exquisitely carved ivory Buddha, "has a strange history. In some way a legend has grown up around it—it is of very great age—to the effect that it must always cause its owner to lose his most cherished possession."

"I wonder," said the silvern voice, "that you, who possess so many beautiful things, should consent to have so ill-omened a curiosity in your house."

"I do not fear the evil charm of this little ivory image," said Colonel Deacon, "although its history goes far to bear out the truth of the legend. Its last possessor lost his most cherished possession a month after the Buddha came into his hands. He fell down his own stairs—and lost his life!"

Madame de Medici languidly surveyed the figure through the upraised emerald.

"Really!" she murmured. "And the one from whom he procured it?"

"A Hindu usurer of Simla," replied the Colonel. "His daughter stole it from her father together with many other things, and took them to her lover, with whom she fled!"

Madame de Medici seemed to be slightly interested.

"I should love to possess so weird a thing," she said softly.

"It is yours!" exclaimed the Colonel, and placed it in her hands.

"Oh, but really," she protested.

"But really I insist—in order that you may not forget your first visit to my house!"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"How very kind you are, Colonel Deacon," she said, "to a rival collector!"

"Now that the menace is removed," said Colonel Deacon with laboured humour, "I will show you my most treasured possession."

"So! I am greatly interested."

"Not even this rascal Rene," said the Colonel, stopping before a safe set in the wall, "has seen what I am about to show you!"

Rene started slightly and watched with intense interest the unlocking of the safe.

"If I am not superstitious about the ivory Buddha," continued the Colonel, "I must plead guilty in the case of the Key of the Temple of Heaven!"

"The Key of the Temple of Heaven!" murmured a lady standing immediately behind Madame de Medici. "And what is the Key of the Temple of Heaven?"

The Colonel, having unlocked the safe, straightened himself, and while everyone was waiting to see what he had to show, began to speak again pompously:

"The Temple of Heaven stands in the outer or Chinese City of Pekin, and is fabulously wealthy. No European, I can swear, had ever entered its secret chambers until last year. One of its most famous treasures was this Key. It was used only to open the special entrance reserved for the Emperor when he came to worship after his succession to the throne—that was, of course, before China became a Republic. The Key is studded almost all over with precious stones. Last year a certain naval man—I'll not mention his name—discovered the secret of its hiding-place. How he came by that knowledge does not matter at present. One very dark night he crept up to the temple. He found the Keeper of the Key— a Buddhist priest—to be sleeping, and he succeeded, therefore, in gaining access and becoming possessed of the Key."

A chorus of excited exclamations greeted this dramatic point of the story.

"The object of this outrage," continued the Colonel, "for an outrage I cannot deny it to have been, was not a romantic one. The poor chap wanted money, and he thought he could sell the Key to one of the native jewellers. But he was mistaken. He got back safely, and secretly offered it in various directions. No one would touch the thing; moreover, although of great value, the stones were very far from flawless, and not really worth the risks which he had run to secure them. Don't misunderstand me; the Key would fetch a big sum, but not a fortune."

"Yes?" said Madame de Medici, smiling, for the Colonel paused.

"He packed it up and addressed it to me, together with a letter. The price that he asked was quite a moderate one, and when the Key arrived in England I dispatched a check immediately. It never reached him."

"Why?" cried many whom this strange story had profoundly interested.

"He was found dead at the back of the native cantonments, with a knife in his heart!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Lady Dascot. "How positively ghastly! I don't think I want to see the dreadful thing!"

"Really!" murmured Madame de Medici, turning languidly to the speaker. "I do."

The Colonel stooped and reached into the safe. Then he began to take out object after object, box after box. Finally, he straightened himself again, and all saw that his face was oddly blanched.

"It's gone!" he whispered hoarsely. "The Key of the Temple of Heaven has been stolen!"

VI. MADAME SMILES

Rene entered his bedroom, locked the door, and seated himself on the bed; then he lowered his head into his hands and clutched at his hair distractedly. Since, on his uncle's own showing, no one knew that the Key of the Temple of Heaven had been in the safe, since, excepting himself (Rene) and the Colonel, no one else knew the lock combination, how the Key had been stolen was a mystery which defied conjecture. No one but the Colonel had approached within several yards of the safe at the time it was opened; so that clearly the theft had been committed prior to that time.

Now Rene sought to recall the details of a strange dream which he had dreamed immediately before awakening on the previous night; but he sought in vain. His memory could supply only blurred images. There had been a safe in his dream, and he—was it he or another?—had unlocked it. Also there had been an enormous ivory Buddha. . . . Yet, stay! it had not been enormous; it had been. . .

He groaned at his own impotency to recall the circumstances of that mysterious, perhaps prophetic dream; then in despair he gave it up, and stooping to a little secretaire, unlocked it with the idea of sending a note round to Annesley's chambers. As he did so he uttered a loud cry.

Lying in one of the pigeon-holes was a long piece of black silk, apparently torn from the lining of an opera hat. In it two holes were cut as if it were intended to be used as a mask. Beside it lay a little leather-covered box. He snatched it out and opened it. It was empty!

"Am I going mad?" he groaned. "Or———"

"You are wanted on the 'phone, sir."

It was the butler who had interrupted him. Rene descended to the telephone, dazedly, but, recognizing the voice of Annesley, roused himself.

"I'm leaving town to-night, Deacon," said Annesley, "for—well, many reasons. But before I go I must give you a warning, though I rely on you never to mention my name in the matter. Avoid the woman who calls herself

Madame de Medici; she'll break you. She's an adventuress, and has a dangerous acquaintance with Eastern cults, and. . . I can't explain properly. . . ."

"Annesley! the Key!"

"It's the theft of the Key that has prompted me to speak, Deacon. Madame has some sort of power—hypnotic power. She employed it on me once, to my cost! Paul Harley, of Chancery Lane, can tell you more about her. The house she's living in temporarily used to belong to a notorious Eurasian, Zani Chada. To make a clean breast of it I daren't thwart her openly; but I felt it up to me to tell you that she possesses the secret of post-hypnotic suggestion. I may be wrong, but I think you stole that Key!"

"I!"

"She hypnotized you at some time, and, by means of this uncanny power of hers, ordered you to steal the Key of the Temple of Heaven in such and such a fashion at a certain hour in the night. . ."

"I had a strange seizure while I was at her house. . . ."

"Exactly! During that time you were receiving your hypnotic orders. You would remember nothing of them until the time to execute them—which would probably be during sleep. In a state of artificial somnambulism, and under the direction of Madame's will, you became a burglar!"

As Madame de Medici's car drove off from the house of Colonel Deacon, and Madame seated herself in the cushioned corner, up from amid the furs upon the floor, where, dog-like, he had lain concealed, rose the little yellow man from the Temple of Heaven. He extended eager hands toward her, kneeling there, and spoke:

"Quick! quick!" he breathed. "You have it? The Key of the Temple."

Madame held in her hand an ivory Buddha. Inverting it she unscrewed the pedestal, and out from the hollow inside the image dropped a gleaming Key.

"Ah!" breathed the yellow man, and would have clutched it; but Madame disdainfully raised her right hand which held the treasure, and with her left hand thrust down the clutching yellow fingers.

She dropped the Key between her white skin and the bodice of her gown, tossing the ivory figure contemptuously amid the fur.

"Ah!" repeated the yellow man in a different tone, and his eyes gleamed with the flame of fanaticism. He slowly uprose, a sinister figure, and with

distended fingers prepared to seize Madame by the throat. His eyes were bloodshot, his nostrils were dilated, and his teeth were exposed like the fangs of a wolf.

But she pulled off her glove and stretched out her bare white hand to him as a queen to a subject; she raised the long curved lashes, and the great amber eyes looked into the angry bloodshot eyes.

The little yellow man began to breathe more and more rapidly; soon he was panting like one in a fight to the death who is all but conquered. At last he dropped on his knees amid the fur. . . and the curling lashes were lowered again over the blazing amber eyes that had conquered.

Madame de Medici lowered her beautiful white hand, and the little yellow man seized it in both his own and showered rapturous kisses upon it.

Madame smiled slightly.

"Poor little yellow man!" she murmured in sibilant Chinese, "you shall never return to the Temple of Heaven!"

THE END