

FICTION

Sax Rohmer

The Haunting of Low Fennel

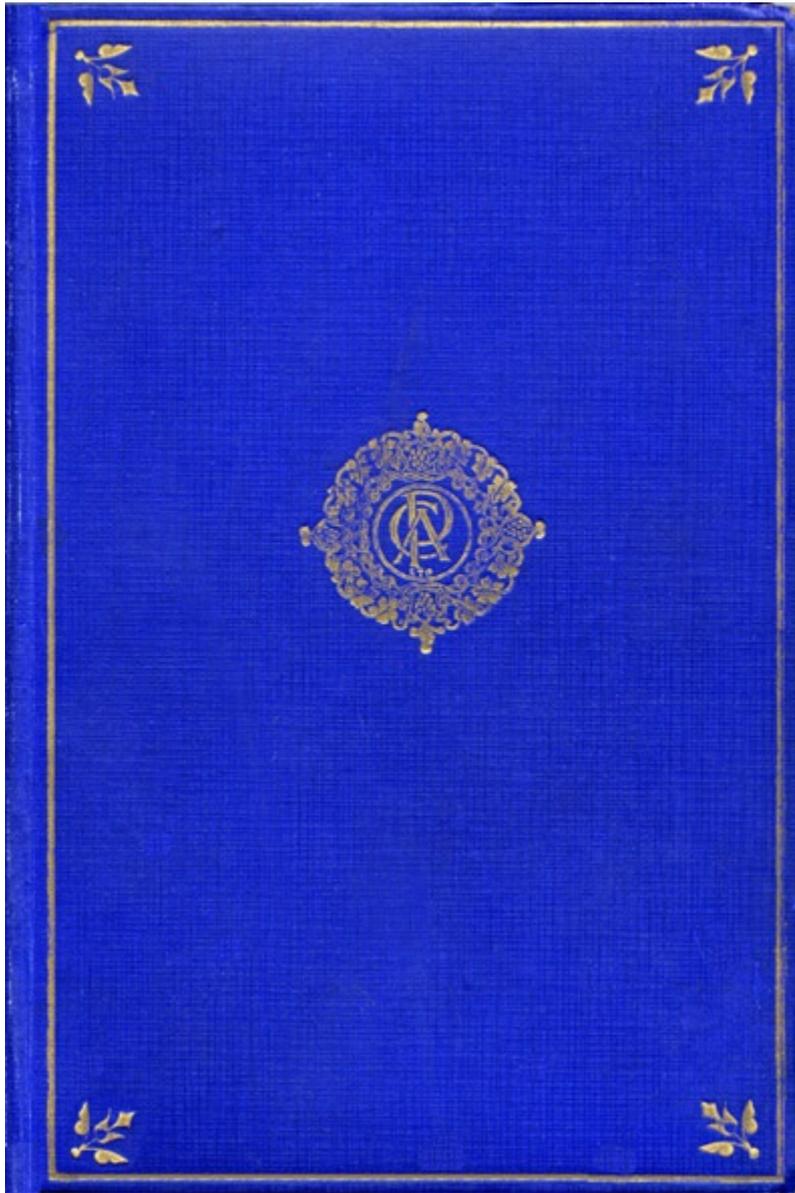
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FICTION



THE HAUNTING OF
LOW FENNEL

UNIFORM WITH THIS VOLUME.

ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN KETTLE.
BY C. J. CUTCLIFFE HYNE.

THE LOVERS OF YVONNE.
BY RAFAEL SABATINI.

THE MARRIAGE OF MARGARET.
BY E. M. ALBANESI.

THE SECRET WAY.
BY J. S. FLETCHER.

CAPTAIN KETTLE, K.C.B.
BY C. J. CUTCLIFFE HYNE.

THE HAUNTING OF LOW FENNEL

BY

SAX ROHMER

Author of "Brood of the Witch Queen,"
"The Quest of the Sacred Slipper," etc., etc.

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The Haunting of Low Fennel

I

"THERE'S Low Fennel," said Major Dale.

We pulled up short on the brow of the hill. Before me lay a little valley carpeted with heather, purple slopes hemming it in. A group of four tall firs guarded the house, which was couched in the hollow of the dip--a low, rambling building, in parts showing evidence of great age and in other parts of the modern improver.

"That's the new wing," continued the Major, raising his stick; "projecting out this way. It's the only addition I've made to the house, which, as it stood, had insufficient accommodation for the servants."

"It is a quaint old place."

"It is, and I'm loath to part with it, especially as it means a big loss."

"Ah! Have you formed any theories since wiring me?"

"None whatever. I've always been a sceptic, Addison, but if Low Fennel is not haunted, I'm a Dutchman, by the Lord Harry!"

I laughed reassuringly, and the two of us descended the slope to the white gate giving access to a trim gravel path flanked by standard roses. Mrs. Dale greeted us at the door. She was, as I had heard, much younger than the Major, and a distinctly pretty woman. In so far Dame Rumour was confirmed; other things I had heard of her, but I was not yet in a position to pass judgment.

She greeted me cordially enough, although women are usually natural actresses. I thought that she did not suspect the real object of my visit. Tea was served in a delightful little drawing-room which bore evidence of having but recently left the hands of London decorators, but when presently I found myself alone with my host in the Major's peculiar sanctum, the real business afoot monopolised our conversation.

The room which Major Dale had appropriated as a study was on the ground floor of the new wing--the wing which he himself had had built on to Low Fennel. In regard to its outlook it was a charming apartment enough, with roses growing right up to the open window, so that their perfume filled the place, and beyond, a prospect of purple heather slopes and fir-clad hills.

Sporting prints decorated the walls, and the library was entirely, or almost entirely, made up of works on riding, hunting, shooting, racing, and golf, with a sprinkling of Whyte-Melville and Nat Gould novels and a Murray handbook or two. It was a most cosy room, probably because it was so untidy, or, as Mrs. Dale phrased it, "so manny."

On a side table was ranked enough liquid refreshment to have inebriated a regiment, and, in one corner, cigar-boxes and tobacco-tins were stacked from the floor some two feet up against the wall. We were soon comfortably ensconced, then, the Major on a hard leather couch, and I in a deep saddle-bag chair.

"It's an awkward sort of thing to explain," began Dale, puffing away at a cigar and staring through the open window;

"because, if you're to do anything, you will want full particulars."

I nodded.

"Well," the Major continued, "you've heard how that blackguard Ellis let me down over those shares? The result?--I had to sell the Hall--Fennel Hall, where a Dale has been since the time of Elizabeth! But still, never mind! that's not the story. This place, Low Fennel, is really part of the estate, and I have leased it from Meyers, who has bought the Hall. It was formerly the home farm, but since my father's time it has not been used for that purpose. The New Farm is over the brow of the hill there, on the other side of the high road; my father built it."

"Why?"

"Well,"--Dale shifted uneasily and a look of perplexity crossed his jolly, red face--"there were stories--uncomfortable stories. To cut a long story short, Seager--a man named Seager, who occupied it at the time I was at Sandhurst--was found dead here, or something; I never was clear as to the particulars, but there was an inquiry and a lot of fuss, and, in short, no one would occupy the property. Therefore the governor built the New Farm."

"Low Fennel has been empty for many years then?"

"No, sir; only for one. Ord, the head gardener at the Hall, lived here up till last September. The old story about Seager was dying out, you see; but Ord must have got to hear about it--or I've always supposed so. At any rate, in September--a dam' hot September, too, almost if not quite as hot as this--Ord declined to live here any longer."

"On what grounds?"

"He told me a cock-and-bull story about his wife having seen a horrible-looking man with a contorted face peering in at her bedroom window! I questioned the woman, of course, and she swore to it."

He mopped his heated brow excitedly, and burnt several matches before he succeeded in relighting his cigar.

"She tried to make me believe that she woke up and saw this apparition, but I bullied the truth out of her, and, as I expected, the man Ord had come home the worse for drink. I made up my mind that the contorted face was the face of her drunken husband--whom she had declined to admit, and who therefore had climbed the ivy to get in at the open window."

"She denied this?"

"Of course she denied it; they both did; but, from evidence obtained at the *Three Keys* in the village, I proved that Ord had returned home drunk that night. Still"--he shrugged his shoulders ponderously--"the people declined to remain in the place, so what could I do? Ord was a good gardener, and his drunken habits in no way interfered with his efficiency. He gained nothing out of the matter except that, instead of keeping Low Fennel, a fine house, I sent him to live in one of the Valley Cottages. He lives there now, for he's still head gardener at the Hall."

I made an entry in my notebook.

"I must see Ord," I said.

"I should," agreed the Major in his loud voice; "you'll get nothing out of him. He's the most pig-headed liar in the county! But to continue. The place proved unlettable. All the old stories were revived, and I'm told that people cheerfully went two miles out of their way in order to avoid passing Low Fennel at night! When I sold the Hall and decided to lease the place from the new proprietor, believe me it was almost hidden in a wilderness of weeds and bushes which had grown up around it. By the Lord Harry, I don't think a living soul had approached within a hundred yards of the house since the day that the Ords quitted it! But it suited my purpose, being inexpensive to keep up; and by adding this new wing I was enabled to accommodate such servants as we required. The horses and the car had to go, of course, and with them a lot of my old people, but we brought the housekeeper and three servants, and when a London firm had rebuilt, renovated, decorated, and so forth, it began to look habitable."

"It's a charming place," I said with sincerity.

"Is it!" snapped the Major, tossing his half-smoked cigar on to a side table and selecting a fresh one from a large box at his elbow. "Help yourself, the bottle's near you. Is it!... Hullo! what have we here?"

He broke off, cigar in hand, as the sound of footsteps upon the gravel path immediately outside the window became audible. Through the cluster of roses peered a handsome face, that of a dark man, whose soft-grey hat and loose tie lent him a sort of artistic appearance.

"Oh, it's you, Wales!" cried the Major, but without cordiality. "See you in half an hour or so; little bit of business in hand at the moment, Marjorie's somewhere about."

"All right!" called the new arrival, and, waving his hand, passed on.

"It's young Aubrey Wales," explained Dale, almost savagely biting the end from his cigar, "son of Sir Frederick Wales, and one of my neighbours. He often drops in."

Mentally considering the Major's attitude, certain rumours which had reached me, and the youth and beauty of Mrs. Dale, I concluded that the visits of Aubrey Wales were not too welcome to my old friend. But he resumed in a louder voice than ever:--

"It was last night that the fun began. I can make neither head nor tail of it. If the blessed place is haunted, why have we seen nothing of the ghost during the two months or so we have lived at Low Fennel? The fact remains that nothing unusual happened until last night. It came about owing to the infernal heat.

"Mrs. Alson, the housekeeper, came down about two o'clock, intending, so I understand, to get a glass of cider from the barrel in the cellar. She could not sleep owing to the heat, and felt extremely thirsty. There's a queer sort of bend in the stair--I'll show you in a minute; and as she came down and reached this bend she met a man, or a thing, who was going up! The moonlight was streaming in through the window right upon that corner of the stair, and the apparition stood fully revealed.

"I gather that it was that of an almost naked man. Mrs. Alson naturally is rather reticent on the point, but I gather that the apparition was inadequately clothed. Regarding the face of the thing she supplies more details. Addison"--the Major leant forward across the table--"it was the face of a demon, a contorted devilish face, the eyes crossed, and glaring like the eyes of a mad dog!

"Of course the poor woman fainted dead away on the spot. She might have died there if it hadn't been for the amazing heat of the night. This certainly was the cause of her trouble, but it also saved her. About three o'clock I woke up in a perfect bath of perspiration. I never remember such a night, not even in India, and, as Mrs. Alson had done an hour earlier, I also started to find a drink. Addison! I nearly fell over her as she lay swooning on the stair!"

He helped himself to a liberal tot of whisky, then squirted soda into the glass.

"For once in a way I did the right thing, Addison. Not wishing to alarm Marjorie, I knocked up one of the maids, and when Mrs. Alson had somewhat recovered, gave her into the girl's charge. I sat downstairs here in this room until she could see me, and then got the particulars which I've given you. I wired you as soon as the office was open; for I said to myself, 'Dale, the devilry has begun again. If Marjorie gets to hear of it there'll be hell to pay. She won't live in the place.'"

He stood up abruptly, as a ripple of laughter reached us from the garden.

"Suppose we explore the scene of the trouble?" he suggested, moving toward the door.

I thought in the circumstance our inspection might be a hurried one; therefore:

"Should you mind very much if I sought it out for myself?" I said. "It is my custom in cases of the kind to be alone if possible."

"My dear fellow, certainly!"

"My ramble concluded, I will rejoin Mrs. Dale and yourself--say on the lawn?"

"Good, good!" cried the Major, throwing open the door. "An opening has been made on the floor above corresponding with this, and communicating with the old stair. Go where you like; find out what you can; but remember--not a word to Marjorie."

II

Filled with the liveliest curiosity, I set out to explore Low Fennel. First I directed my attention to the exterior, commencing my investigations from the front. That part of the building on either side of the door was evidently of Tudor date, with a Jacobean wing to the west containing apartments overlooking the lawn--the latter a Georgian addition; whilst the new east wing, built by Major Dale, carried the building out almost level with the clump of fir-trees, and into the very heart of the ferns and bushes which here grew densely.

There was no way around on this side, and not desiring to cross the lawn at present, I passed in through the house to the garden at the back. This led me through the northern part of the building and the servants' quarters, which appeared to be of even greater age than the front of the house. The fine old kitchen in particular was suggestive of the days when roasting was done upon a grand scale.

Beyond the flower garden lay the kitchen garden, and beyond that the orchard. The latter showed evidences of neglect, bearing out the Major's story that the place had been unoccupied for twelve months; but it was evident, nevertheless, that the soil had been cultivated for many generations. Thus far I had discovered nothing calculated to assist me in my peculiar investigation, and entering the house I began a room-to-room quest, which, beyond confirming most of my earlier impressions, afforded little data.

The tortuous stairway, which had been the scene of the event described by my host, occupied me for some time, and I carefully examined the time-blackened panels, and tested each separate stair, for in houses like Low Fennel secret passages and "priest-holes" were to be looked for. However, I discovered nothing, but descending again to the hall I made a small discovery.

There were rooms in Low Fennel which one entered by descending or ascending two or three steps, but this was entirely characteristic of the architectural methods of the period represented. I was surprised, however, to find that one mounted three steps in order to obtain access to the passage leading to the new wing. I had overlooked this peculiarity hitherto, but now it struck me as worthy of attention. Why should a modern architect introduce such a device? It could only mean that the ground was higher on the east side of the building, and that, for some reason, it had proved more convenient to adopt the existing foundations than to level the site.

I returned to the hall-way and stood there deep in thought, when the contact of a rough tongue with my hand drew my attention to a young Airedale terrier who was anxious to make my acquaintance. I patted his head encouragingly, and, having reviewed the notes made during my tour of inspection, determined to repeat the tour in order to check them.

The Airedale accompanied me, behaving himself with admirable propriety as we passed around the house and then out through the kitchens into the garden. It was not until my journey led me back to the three steps, communicating with the new wing, that my companion seemed disposed to desert me.

At first I ascribed his attitude to mere canine caprice. But when he persistently refused to be encouraged, I began to ascribe it to something else.

Suddenly grasping him by the collar, I dragged him up the steps, along the corridor, and into the Major's study. The result was extraordinary. I think I have never seen a dog in quite the same condition; he whimpered and whined most piteously. At the door he struggled furiously, and even tried to snap at my hand. Then, as I still kept a firm grip upon him, he set out upon a series of howls which must have been audible for miles around. Finally I released him, having first closed the study door, and lowered the window. What followed was really amazing.

The Airedale hurled himself upon the closed door, scratching at it furiously, with intermittent howling; then, crouching down, he turned his eyes upon me with a look in them, not savage, but truly piteous. Seeing that I did not move, the dog began to whimper again; when, suddenly making up his mind, as it seemed, he bounded across the room and went crashing through the glass of the closed window into the rose bushes, leaving me standing looking after him in blank wonderment.

III

Aubrey Wales stayed to dinner, and since he had no opportunity of dressing, his presence afforded a welcome excuse for the other members of the party. The night was appallingly hot; the temperature being such as to preclude the slightest exertion. The Major was an excellent host, but I could see that the presence of the younger man irritated him, and at times the conversation grew strained; there was an uncomfortable tension. So that altogether I was not sorry when Mrs. Dale left the table and the quartet was broken up. On closer acquaintance I perceived that Wales was even younger than I had supposed, and therefore I was the more inclined to condone his infatuation for the society of Mrs. Dale, although I felt less sympathetically disposed toward her for offering him the encouragement which rather openly she did.

Ere long, Wales left Major Dale and myself for the more congenial society of the hostess; so that shortly afterwards, when the Major, who took at least as much wine as was good for him, began to doze in his chair, I found myself left to my own devices. I quitted the room quietly, without disturbing my host, and strolled around on to the lawn smoking a cigarette, and turning over in my mind the matters responsible for my presence at Low Fennel.

With no definite object in view, I had wandered towards the orchard, when I became aware of a whispered conversation taking place somewhere near me, punctuated with little peals of laughter. I detected the words "Aubrey" and "Marjorie" (Mrs. Dale's name), and, impatiently tossing my cigarette away, I returned to the house, intent upon arousing the Major and terminating this tete-a-tete. That it was more, on Mrs. Dale's part, than a harmless flirtation, I did not believe; but young Wales was not a safe type of man for that sort of amusement.

The Major, sunk deep in his favourite chair in the study, was snoring loudly, and as I stood contemplating him in the dusk, I changed my mind, and retracing my steps, joined the two in the orchard, proclaiming my arrival by humming a popular melody.

"Has he fallen asleep?" asked Mrs. Dale, turning laughing eyes upon me.

I studied the piquant face ere replying. Her tone and her expression had reassured me, if further assurance were necessary, that my old friend's heart was in safe keeping; but she was young and gay; it was a case for diplomatic handling.

"India leaves its mark on all men," I replied lightly; "but I have no doubt that the Major is wide-awake enough now."

My words were an invitation; to which, I was glad to note, she responded readily enough.

"Let's come and dig him out of that cavern of his!" she said, and linking her right arm in that of Wales, and her left with mine, she turned us about toward the house.

Dusk was now fallen, and lights shone out from several windows of Low Fennel. Suddenly, an upper window became illuminated, and Mrs. Dale pointed to this.

"That is my room," she said to me; "isn't it delightfully situated? The view from the window is glorious."

"I consider Low Fennel charming in every way," I replied.

Clearly she knew nothing of the place's sinister reputation, which seemed to indicate that she employed herself little with the domestic side of the household; otherwise she must undoubtedly have learnt of the episode of the man with the contorted face, if not from the housekeeper, from the maid. It was a tribute to the reticence of the servants that the story had spread no further; but the broken study window and the sadly damaged Airedale already afforded matter for whispered debate among them, as I had noted with displeasure.

The "digging out" of the Major did not prove to be an entire success. He was in one of his peculiar moods, which I knew of old, and rather surly, being pointedly rude on more than one occasion to Wales. He had some accounts to look into, or professed to have, and the three of us presently left him alone. It was now about ten o'clock, and Aubrey Wales made his departure, shaking me warmly by the hand and expressing the hope that we should see more of one another. He could not foresee that the wish was to be realised in a curious fashion.

Mrs. Dale informed me that the Major in all probability would remain immured in his study until a late hour, which I took to be an intimation that she wished to retire. I therefore pleaded weariness as a result of my journey, and went up to my room, although I had no intention of turning-in. I opened the two windows widely, and the heavy perfume of some kind of tobacco plant growing in the beds below grew almost oppressive. The heat of the night was truly phenomenal; I might have been, not in an English home county, but in the Soudan. An absolute stillness reigned throughout Low Fennel, and, my hearing being peculiarly acute, I could detect the chirping of the bats which flitted restlessly past my windows.

It was difficult to decide how to act. My experience of so-called supernatural appearances had strengthened my faith in the theory set forth in the paper "Chemistry of Psychic Phenomena"--which had attracted unexpected attention a year before. Therein I classified hauntings under several heads, basing my conclusions upon the fact that such apparitions are invariably localised; often being confined, not merely to a particular room, for instance, but to a certain wall, door, or window. I had been privileged to visit most of the famous haunted homes of Great Britain, and this paper was the result; but in the case of Low Fennel I found myself nonplussed, largely owing to lack of data. I hoped on the morrow to make certain inquiries along lines suggested by oddities in the structure of the house itself and by the nature of the little valley in which it stood.

When meditating I never sit still, and whilst marshalling my ideas I paced the room from end to end, smoking the whole time. Both windows and also the door, were widely opened. The amazing heat-wave which we were then experiencing promised to afford me a valuable clue, for I had proved to my own satisfaction that the apparitions variously known as "controls" and "elementals," not infrequently coincided with abrupt climatic changes, thunderstorms, or heat waves, or with natural phenomena, such as landslides and the like.

This pacing led me from end to end of the room, then, between the open door and the large dressing-table facing it. It was as I returned from the door towards the dressing-table that I became aware of the presence of the *contorted face*.

My peculiar studies had brought me into contact with many horrible apparitions, and if familiarity had failed to breed contempt, at least it had served to train my nerves for the reception of such sudden and ghastly appearances. I should be avoiding the truth, however, if I claimed to have been unmoved by the vision which now met me in the mirror. I drew up short, with one sibilant breath, and then stood transfixed.

Before me was a reflection of the open door, and of part of the landing and stairs beyond it. The landing lights were extinguished, and therefore the place beyond the door lay in comparative darkness. But, crawling in, serpent-fashion, inch by inch, silently, intently, so that the head, throat, and hands were actually across the threshold, came a creature which seemed to be entirely naked! It had the form of a man, but the face, the dreadful face which was being pushed forward slowly across the carpet with head held sideways so that one ear all but touched the floor, was the face, not of a man, but of a ghoul!

I clenched my teeth hard, staring into the mirror and trying to force myself to turn and confront, not the reflection, but the reality. Yet for many seconds I was unable to accomplish this. The baleful, protruding eyes glared straight into mine from the glass. The chin and lower lip of this awful face seemed to be drawn up so as almost to meet the nose, entirely covering the upper lip, and the nostrils were distended to an incredible degree, whilst the skin had a sort of purple tinge unlike anything I had seen before. The effect was grotesque in the true sense of the word; for the thing was clearly grimacing at me, yet God knows there was nothing humorous in that grimace!

Nearer it came and nearer. I could hear the heavy body being drawn across the floor; I could hear the beating of my own heart ... and I could hear a whispered conversation which seemed to be taking place somewhere immediately outside my room.

At the moment that I detected the latter sound, it seemed that the apparition detected it also. The protruding eyes twisted in the head, rolling around ridiculously but horribly. Despite the dread which held me, I identified the whisperers and located their situation. Mrs. Dale was at her open window and Aubrey Wales was in the garden below.

The thought crossed my mind and was gone--but gone no quicker than the contorted face. By a sort of backward, serpentine movement, the thing which had been crawling into my room suddenly retired and was swallowed up in the shadows of the landing.

I turned and sprang toward the open door, the fever of research hot upon me, and my nerves in hand again. At the door I paused and listened intently. No sound came to guide me from the darkened stair, and when, stepping quietly forward and leaning over the rail, I peered down into the hall below, nothing stirred, no shadow of the many there moved to tell of the passage of any living thing. I paused irresolute, unable to doubt that I was in the presence of an authentic apparition. But how to classify it?

Slowly I returned to my room, and stood there, thinking hard, and all the while listening for the slightest sound from within or without the house.

The whispered conversation continued, and I stole quietly to one of the windows and leant out, looking to the left, in the direction of the new wing. A light burnt in the Major's study, whereby I concluded that he was still engaged with his accounts, if he had not fallen asleep. Between my window and the new wing, and on a level with my eyes, was the window of Mrs. Dale's room; and in the bright moonlight I could see her leaning out, her elbows on the ledge. Her bare arms gleamed like marble in the cold light, and she looked statuesquely beautiful. Wales I could not see, for a thick, square-clipped hedge obstructed my view ... but I saw something else.

Lizard fashion, a hideous unclad shape crawled past beneath me amongst the tangle of ivy and low plants about the foot of the fir trees. The moonlight touched it for a moment, and then it was gone into denser shadows....

A consciousness of impending disaster came to me, but, because of its very vagueness, found me unprepared. Then suddenly I saw young Wales. He sprang into view above the hedge, against which, I presume, he had been crouching; he leapt high in the air as though from some menace on the ground beneath him. I have never heard a more horrifying scream than that which he uttered.

"My God!" he cried, "Marjorie! Marjorie!" and yet again: "Marjorie! *save me!*"

Then he was down, still screaming horribly, and calling on the woman for aid--as though she could have aided him. The crawling thing made no sound, but the dreadful screams of Wales sank slowly into a sort of sobbing, and then into a significant panting which told of his dire extremity.

I raced out of the room, and down the dark stair into the hall. Everywhere I was met by locked doors which baffled me. I had hoped to reach the garden by way of the kitchens, but now I changed my plan and turned my attention to the front-door. It was bolted, but I drew the bolts one after the other, and got the door open.

Outside, the landscape was bathed in glorious moonlight, and a sort of grey mist hovered over the valley like smoke. I ran around the angle of the house on to the lawn, and went plunging through flower-beds heedlessly to the scene of the incredible conflict.

I almost fell over Wales as he lay inert upon the gravel path. The shadows veiled him so that I could not see his face; but when, groping with my hands, I sought to learn if his heart still pulsed, I failed to discover any evidence that it did. With my hand thrust against his breast and my ear lowered anxiously, I listened, but he gave no sign of life, lying as still as all else around me.

Now this stillness was broken. Excited voices became audible, and doors were being unlocked here and there. First of all the household, Mrs. Dale appeared, enveloped in a lace dressing-gown.

"Aubrey!" she cried tremulously, "what is it? where are you?"

"He is here, Mrs. Dale," I answered, standing up, "and in a bad way, I fear."

"For Heaven's sake, what has happened to him? Did you hear his awful cries?"

"I did," I said shortly.

Standing with the moonlight fully upon her, Mrs. Dale sought him in the shadows of the hedge--and I knew that by the manner of his frightened outcry the man lying unconscious at my feet had forfeited whatever of her regard he had enjoyed. She was dreadfully alarmed, not so much on his behalf, as by the mystery of the attack upon him. But now she composed herself, though not without visible effort.

"Where is he, Mr. Addison?" she said firmly, "and what has happened to him?"

A man, who proved to be a gardener, now appeared upon the scene.

"Help me to carry him in," I said to this new arrival; "perhaps he has only fainted."

We gathered up the recumbent body and carried it through the kitchens into the breakfast-room, where there was a deep couch. All the servants were gathered at the foot of the stairs, frightened and useless, but the outcry did not seem to have aroused Major Dale.

Mrs. Dale and I bent over Wales. His face was frightfully congested, whilst his tongue protruded hideously; and it was evident, from the great discoloured weals which now were coming up upon his throat, that he had been strangled, or nearly so. I glanced at the white face of my hostess and then bent over the victim, examining him more carefully. I stood upright again.

"Do you know first aid, Mrs. Dale?" I asked abruptly.

She nodded, her eyes fixed intently upon me.

"Then help to employ artificial respiration," I said, "and let one of the girls get ammonia, if you have any, and a bowl of hot water. We can patch him up, I think, without medical aid--which might be undesirable."

Mrs. Dale seemed fully to appreciate the point, and in business-like fashion set to work to assist me. Wales had just opened his eyes and begun to clutch at his agonized throat, when I heard a heavy step descending from the new wing--and Major Dale, in his dressing-gown, joined us. His red face was more red than usual, and his eyes were round with wonder.

"What the devil's the matter?" he cried; "what's everybody up for?"

"There has been an accident, Major," I said, glancing around at the servants, who stood in a group by the door of the breakfast-room; "I can explain more fully later."

Major Dale stepped forward and looked down at Wales.

"Good God!" he said hoarsely, "it's young Wales, by the Lord Harry!--what's he doing here?"

Mrs. Dale, standing just behind me, laid her hand upon my arm; and, unseen by the Major, I turned and pressed it reassuringly.

The following day I lunched alone with the Major, Mrs. Dale being absent on a visit. It had been impossible to keep the truth from her (or what we knew of it) and at present I could not quite foresee the issue of last night's affair. Young Wales, who had been driven home in a car sent from his place at a late hour, had not since put in an appearance; and it was sufficiently evident that Mrs. Dale would not welcome him should he do so, the hysterical panic which he had exhibited on the previous night having disgusted her. She had not said so in as many words, but I did not doubt it.

"Well, Addison?" said the Major as I entered, "have you got the facts you were looking for?"

"Some of them," I replied, and opening my notebook I turned to the pages containing notes made that morning.

The Major watched me with intense curiosity, and almost impatiently awaited my next words. The servant having left the room:

"In the first place," I began, glancing at the notes, "I have been consulting certain local records in the town, and I find that in the year 1646 a certain Dame Pryce occupied a cabin which, according to one record, 'stood close beside unto ye Lowe Fennel.'"

"That is, close beside this house?" interjected the Major excitedly.

"Exactly," I said. "She attracted the attention of one of the many infamous wretches who disfigure the history of that period: Matthew Hopkins, the self-styled Witch-Finder General. This was a witch-ridden age, and the man Hopkins was one of those who fattened on the credulity of his fellows, receiving a fee of twenty shillings for every unhappy woman discovered and convicted of witchcraft. Poor Pryce was 'swum' in a local pond (a test whereby the villain Hopkins professed to discover if the woman were one of Satan's band, or otherwise) and burnt alive in Reigate market-place on September 23, 1646."

"By God!" said the Major, who had not attempted to commence his lunch, "that's a horrible story!"

"It is one of the many to the credit of Matthew Hopkins," I replied; "but, without boring you with the details of this woman's examination and so forth, I may say that what interests me most in the case is the date--September 23."

"Why? I don't follow you."

"Well," I said, "there's a hiatus in the history of the place after that, except that even in those early days it evidently suffered from the reputation of being haunted; but without troubling about the interval, consider the case of Seager, which you yourself related to me. Was it not in the month of August that he was done to death here?"

"By Gad!" cried the Major, his face growing redder than ever, "you're right!--and hang it all, Addison! it was in September--last September--that the Ords cleared out!"

"I remember your mentioning," I continued, smiling at his excitement, "that it was a very hot month?"

"It was."

"From a mere word dropped by one of the witnesses at the trial of poor Pryce I have gathered that the month in which she was convicted of practising witchcraft in her cabin adjoining Low Fennel (as it stood in those days) was a tropically hot month also."

Major Dale stared at me uncomprehendingly.

"I'm out of my depth, Addison--wading hopelessly. What the devil has the heat to do with the haunting?"

"To my mind everything. I may be wrong, but I think that if the glass were to fall to-night, there would be no repetition of the trouble."

"You mean that it's only in very hot weather--"

"In phenomenally hot weather, Major--the sort that we only get in England perhaps once in every ten years. For the glass to reach the altitude at which it stands at present, in two successive summers, is quite phenomenal, as you know."

"It's phenomenal for it to reach that point at all," said the Major, mopping his perspiring forehead; "it's simply Indian, simply Indian, sir, by the Lord Harry!"

"Another inquiry," I continued, turning over a leaf of my book, "I have been unable to complete, since, in order to

interview the people who built your new wing, I should have to run up to London."

"What the blazes have they to do with it?"

"Nothing at all, but I should have liked to learn their reasons for raising the wing three feet above the level of the hall-way."

Between the heat and his growing excitement, Major Dale found himself at a temporary loss for words. Then:

"They told me," he shouted at the top of his voice, "they told me at the time that it was something about--that it was due to the plan--that it was----"

"I can imagine that they had some ready explanation," I said, "but it may not have been the true one."

"Then what the--what the--is the true one?"

"The true one is that the new wing covers a former mound."

"Quite right; it does."

"If my theory is correct, it was upon this mound that the cabin of Dame Pryce formerly stood."

"It's quite possible; they used to allow dirty hovels to be erected alongside one's very walls in those days--quite possible."

"Moreover, from what I've learnt from Ord--whom I interviewed at the Hall--and from such accounts as are obtainable of the death of Seager, this mound, and not the interior of Low Fennel as it then stood, was the scene of the apparitions."

"You've got me out of my depth again, Addison. What d'you mean?"

"Seager was strangled outside the house, not inside."

"I believe that's true," agreed the Major, still shouting at the top of his voice, but gradually growing hoarser; "I remember they found him lying on the step, or something."

"Then again, the apparition with the contorted face which peered in at Mrs. Ord----"

"Lies, all lies!"

"I don't agree with you, Major. She was trying to shield her husband, but I think she saw the contorted face right enough. At any rate it's interesting to note that the visitant came from outside the house again."

"But," cried the Major, banging his fist upon the table, "it wanders about inside the house, and--and--damn it all!--it goes outside as well!"

"Where it goes," I interrupted quietly, "is not the point. The point is, where it comes from."

"Then where do you believe it comes from?"

"I believe the trouble arises, in the strictest sense of the word, from the same spot whence it arose in the days of Matthew Hopkins, and from which it had probably arisen ages before Low Fennel was built."

"What the--"

"I believe it to arise from the ancient barrow, or tumulus, above which you have had your new wing erected."

Major Dale fell back in his chair, temporarily speechless, but breathing noisily; then:

"Tumulus!" he said hoarsely; "d'you mean to tell me the house is built on a dam' burial ground?"

"Not the whole house," I corrected him; "only the new wing."

"Then is the place haunted by the spirit of some uneasy Ancient Briton or something of that sort, Addison? Hang it all! you can't tell me a fairy tale like that! A ghost going back to pre-Roman days is a bit too ancient for me, my boy--too hoary, by the Lord Harry!"

"I have said nothing about an Ancient British ghost--you're flying off at a tangent!"

"Hang it all, Addison! I don't know what you're talking about at all, but nevertheless your hints are sufficiently

unpleasant. A tumulus! No man likes to know he's sleeping in a graveyard, not even if it is two or three thousand years old. D'you think the chap who surveyed the ground for me knew of it?"

"By the fact that he planned the new wing so as to avoid excavation, I think probably he did. He was wise enough to surmise that the order might be cancelled altogether and the job lost if you learnt the history of the mound adjoining your walls."

"A barrow under the study floor!" groaned the Major--"damn it all! I'll have the place pulled down--I won't live in it. Gad! if Marjorie knew, she would never close her eyes under the roof of Low Fennel again--I'm sure she wouldn't, I know she wouldn't. But what's more, Addison, the thing, whatever it is, is dangerous--infernally dangerous. It nearly killed young Wales!" he added, with a complacency which was significant.

"It was the fright that nearly killed him," I said shortly.

Major Dale stared across the table at me.

"For God's sake, Addison," he said, "what does it mean? What unholy thing haunts Low Fennel? You've studied these beastly subjects, and I rely upon you to make the place clean and good to live in again."

"Major," I replied, "I doubt if Low Fennel will ever be fit to live in. At any time an abnormal rise of temperature might produce the most dreadful results."

"You don't mean to tell me----"

"If you care to have the new wing pulled down and the wall bricked up again, if you care to keep all your doors and windows fastened securely whenever the thermometer begins to exhibit signs of rising, if you avoid going out on hot nights after dusk, as you would avoid the plague--yes, it may be possible to live in Low Fennel."

Again the Major became speechless, but finally:

"What d'you mean, Addison?" he whispered; "for God's sake, tell me. What is it?--what is it?"

"It is what some students have labelled an 'elemental' and some a 'control,'" I replied; "it is something older than the house, older, perhaps, than the very hills, something which may never be classified, something as old as the root of all evil, and it dwells in the Ancient British tumulus."

V

As I had hoped, for my plans were dependent upon it, the mercury towered steadily throughout that day, and showed no signs of falling at night; the phenomenal heat-wave continued uninterruptedly. The household was late retiring, for the grey lord--Fear--had imposed his will upon all within it. Every shadow in the rambling old building became a cavern of horrors, every sound that disturbed the ancient timbers a portent and a warning.

That the servants proposed to leave *en masse* at the earliest possible moment was perfectly evident to me; in a word, all the dark old stories which had grown up around Low Fennel were revived and garnished, and new ones added to them. The horror of the night before had left its mark upon every one, and the coming of dusk brought with it such a dread as could almost be felt in the very atmosphere of the place. Ghostly figures seemed to stir the hangings, ghostly sighs to sound from every nook of the old hall and stairway; baleful eyes looked in at the open windows, and the shrubberies were peopled with hosts of nameless things who whispered together in evil counsel.

Mrs. Dale was as loath to retire as were the servants, more especially since the Major and I were unable to disguise from her our intention of watching for the strange visitant that night. But finally we prevailed upon her to depart, and she ran upstairs as though the legions of the lost pursued her, slamming and locking her door so that the sound echoed all over the house.

We had told her nothing, of course, of my discoveries and theories, but nevertheless the cat was out of the bag; the affair of the night before had spoilt our scheme of secrecy.

In the Major's study we made our preparations. The windows were widely opened, and the door was ajar. Not a breath of wind disturbed the stillness of the night, and although Major Dale had agreed to act exactly as I might direct, he stared in almost comic surprise when he learnt the nature of these directions.

Placing two large silk handkerchiefs upon the table, I saturated them with the contents of a bottle which I had brought in my pocket, and handed one of the handkerchiefs to him.

"Tie that over your mouth and nostrils," I said, "and whatever happens don't remove it unless I tell you."

"But, Addison...."

"You know the compact, Major? If you aren't prepared to assist I must ask you to retire. To-night might be the last chance, perhaps, for years."

Growling beneath his breath, Major Dale obeyed, and, a humorous figure enough, stretched himself upon the couch, staring at me round-eyed. I also fastened a handkerchief about my head.

"It would perhaps be better," I said, my voice dimmed by the wet silk, "if we avoided conversation as much as possible."

Standing up, I rolled back a corner of the carpet, exposing the floor-planks, and with a brace-and-bit, which I had in my pocket, I bored a round hole in one of these. Into it I screwed the tube, attached to a little watch-like contrivance, twisting the face of the dial so that I could study it from where I proposed to sit. Then I took up my post, smothering a laugh as I noted the expression upon that part of the Major's red face which was visible to me.

Thus began the business of that strange night. Half an hour passed in almost complete silence, save for the audible breathing of the Major--by no means an ideal companion for such an investigation. But, having agreed to assist me, in justice to my old friend I must say that he did his best to stick to the bargain, and to play his part in what obviously he regarded as an insane comedy.

At about the expiration of this thirty minutes, I thought I heard a door open somewhere in the house. Listening intently, and glancing at my companion, I received no confirmation of the idea. Evidently the Major had heard nothing. Again I thought I heard a sound--as of the rustling of silk upon the stair, or in an upper corridor; finally I was almost certain that the floor of the room above (viz. the Major's bedroom) creaked very slightly.

At that I saw my companion glance upward, then across at me, with a question in his eyes. But not desiring to disturb the silence, I merely shook my head.

An hour passed. There had been no repetition of the slight sounds to which I have referred, and the stillness of Low Fennel was really extraordinary. A thermometer, which I had placed upon the table near to my elbow, recorded the fact that the temperature of the room had not abated a fraction of a point since sunset, and, sitting still though I was, I found myself bathed in perspiration. Despite the open door and windows, not a breath of air stirred in the place, but the room was laden with the oppressive perfume of those night-scented flowers which I have mentioned elsewhere, for it was faintly perceptible to me, despite the wet silk.

Once, a bat flew half in at one of the windows, striking its wings upon the glass, but almost immediately it flew out again. A big moth fluttered around the room, persistently banging its wings against the lamp-shade. But nothing else within or without the house stirred, if I except the occasional restless movements of the Major.

Then all at once--and not gradually as I had anticipated--the meter at my feet began to register. Instantly, I looked to the thermometer. It had begun to fall.

I glanced across at Major Dale. He was staring at something which seemed to have attracted his attention in a distant corner of the room. Glancing away from the meter, the indicator of which was still moving upward, I looked in the same direction. There was much shadow there, but nevertheless I could not doubt that a very faint vapour was forming in that corner ... rising--rising--rising--slowly higher and higher.

It proceeded from some part of the floor concealed by the big saddle-bag chair--the Major's favourite dozing-place (probably from a faulty floor-board), and it was rising visibly, inch upon inch, as I watched, until it touched the ceiling above. Then, like a column of smoke, it spread out, mushroom fashion; it crept in ghostly coils along the cornices, spreading, a dim grey haze, until it obscured a great part of the ceiling.

Again I looked across at the Major. He was staring at the phenomenon with eyes which were glassy with amazement. I could see that momentarily he expected the vapour to take shape, to form into some ghoulish thing with a contorted face and clutching, outstretched fingers.

But this did not happen. The vapour, which was growing more fine and imperceptible, began to disperse. I glanced from corner to corner of the room, then down to the meter on the floor. The indicator was falling again.

Still I made no move, although I could hear Major Dale fidgeting nervously, but I looked across at him ... and a dreadful change had come over his face.

He was sitting upright upon the couch, the edge of which he clutched with one hand, whilst with the other he combed the air in a gesture evidently meant to attract my attention. He was trying to speak, but only a guttural sound issued from his throat. His staring eyes were set in a glare of stark horror upon the door of the study.

Swiftly I turned--to see the door slowly opening; to see, low down upon the bare floor--for I had removed the carpet from that corner of the room--a ghastly, contorted face, held sideways with one ear almost touching the ground, and with the lower lip and the chin drawn up as though they were of rubber, almost to the tip of the nose!

The eyes glared up balefully into mine, the hair hung a dishevelled mass about the face, and I had a glimpse of one bare shoulder pressed upon the floor.

Wider and wider opened the door; and further into the room crept the horrible apparition....

The light gleamed equally upon the hideous, contorted face and upon the rounded shoulders and slim, white arms, on one of which a heavy gold Oriental bangle was clasped.

It was a woman!

In a flash of inspiration--at sight of the bangle--my doubts were resolved; *I understood*. Leaning across the table, I extinguished the lamp ... in the same instant that Major Dale, uttering an inarticulate, choking cry, sprang to his feet and toppled forward, senseless, upon the floor!

The study became plunged in darkness, but into the long corridor, beyond the open door, poured the cold illumination of the moon. Framed in the portal, uprose a slim figure, seeming like a black silhouette upon a silvern background, or a wondrous statue in ebony. Elfin, dishevelled locks crowned the head; the pose of the form was as that of a startled dryad or a young Bacchante poised for a joyous leap....

Thus, for an instant, like some exquisite dream of Phidias visualised, the figure stood ... then had fled away down the corridor and was gone!

VI

Close upon a month had elapsed. Major Dale and I sat in my study in London.

"Young Aubrey Wales has gone abroad," I said. "He's ashamed to show up again, I suppose."

"H'm!" growled the Major--"I've got nothing to crow about, myself, by the Lord Harry! There's courage and courage, sir! I've led more than one bayonet attack, but I'd never qualify for the D.S.O. as a ghost-hunter!--never, by Gad!--never!"

He reached out for the decanter; then withdrew his hand. "Doctor's orders," he muttered. "Discipline must be maintained!"

"It was the sudden excitement which precipitated the seizure," I said, glancing at the altered face of my old friend. "I was wrong to expose you to it; but of course I did not know that the doctor had warned you."

"And now," said the Major, sighing loudly as he filled his tumbler with plain soda-water--"what have you to tell me?"

"In the first place--have you definitely decided to leave Low Fennel, for good?"

"Certainly--not a doubt on the point! We're leasing a flat in town here whilst we look around."

"Good! Because I very much doubt if the place could ever be rendered tenable...."

"Then it's really haunted?"

"Undoubtedly."

"By what, Addison? Tell me that!--by what?"

"By a grey vapour."

Major Dale's eyes began to protrude, and:--

"Addison," he said hoarsely--"don't joke about it!--don't joke. It was not a grey vapour that strangled Seager...."

"Certainly it was not. Seager was strangled by some wholly inoffensive person--we shall probably never know his identity--who had fallen asleep amongst the bushes on the mound, close beside the house...."

"But man alive! I've *seen* the beastly thing, with my own eyes! You've seen it! Wales saw it! Mrs. Ord saw it!..."

"Mrs. Ord saw her husband."

"Ah! you're coming round to my belief about the Ords!"

"Decidedly I am."

"But what did Wales see--eh? And what did *I* see!"

"You saw the vapour in operation."

The Major fell back in his chair with an expression upon his face which I cannot hope to describe. Words failed him altogether.

"I had come prepared for something of the sort," I continued rapidly; "for I have investigated several cases of haunting--notably in the Peak district--which have proved to be due to an emanation from the soil--a vapour. But the effect of such vapour, in the other cases, was to induce delusions of sight, in nearly every instance (although, in two, the delusions were of hearing).

"In other words, the person affected by this vapour was drugged, and, during the drugged state, perceived certain visions. I made the mistake, at first, of supposing that Low Fennel came within the same category. The classical analogy, of course, is that of the Sibyls, who delivered the oracular responses from the tripod, under the afflatus of a vapour said to arise from the sacred subterranean stream called Kassotis. The theory is, therefore, by no means a new one!"

Major Dale stared dully, but made no attempt to interrupt me.

"There are probably many spots, in England alone," I continued, "thus affected; but, fortunately, few of them have been chosen as building-sites. Barrows and tumuli of the stone and bronze age, and also Roman shrines, seem frequently to be productive of such emanations. The barrow beside Low Fennel (and now under the new wing) is a case in point.

"Sudden atmospheric changes seem to be favourable to the formation of the vapour. The barrow in Peel Castle, Isle of Man, is peculiarly susceptible to thunder-storms, for instance, whilst that at Low Fennel emits a vapour only after a spell of intense heat, and at the exact moment when the temperature begins to fall again. In the case of a sustained heat-wave, this would take place at some time during each night.

"And now for the particular in which the vapour at Low Fennel differs from other, similar emanations. It is not productive of delusions of sight; it induces a definite and unvarying form of transient insanity!"

Major Dale moved slightly, but still did not speak.

"Dame Pryce was the first recorded victim of the vapour. She was accused of witchcraft by a neighbour who testified to having seen her transform herself into a hideous and unrecognizable hag--whereas, in her proper person, she seems to have been a comely old lady. Lack of evidence compels us to dismiss the case of Seager, but consider that of the Ords. The man Ord, on his own confession, had fallen asleep outside the house. He became a victim of the vapour--and his own wife failed to recognize him.

"To what extent the mania so produced is homicidal remains to be proved; the gas is rare and difficult to procure, so that hitherto analysis has not been attempted. My own theory is that the subject remains harmless provided that, whilst under the mysterious influence, he does not encounter any person distasteful to him. Thus, Seager may have met his death at the hands of some tramp who had been turned away from the house.

"As to the symptoms: they seem to be quite unvarying. The subject strips, contorts his face out of all semblance to humanity (and always in a particular fashion) and crawls, lizard-like upon the ground, with the head held low, in an attitude of listening. That it is possible so to contort the face as to render it unrecognizable is seen in some cases of angina pectoris, of course.

"The subject apparently returns to the spot from whence he started and sinks into profound sleep, as is seen in some cases of somnambulism; and--like the somnambulist, again--he acquires incredible agility. How you yourself came, twice, under the influence of the vapour, is easily explained. The first time--when the housekeeper saw you--you had actually been in bed; and the second time, as you have told me, you had gone upstairs, undressed, and then slipped on your dressing-gown in order to complete some work in the study. Instead of completing the work, you dozed in your chair--and we know what followed! In the case of--Mrs. Dale...."

"God! Addison," said the Major huskily, and stood up, clutching the chair-arms--"Addison! You are trying to tell me that--what I saw was ... *Marjorie!*..."

I nodded gravely.

"Without letting her suspect my reason for making the inquiries, I learnt that on that last night at Low Fennel, feeling dreadfully lonely and frightened, she determined to run along to the new wing--which seemed a safer place--and to wait in your room until you came up. She fell asleep, and...."

"Addison ... can a mere 'vapour' produce such...."

"You mean, is the vapour directed or animated, by some discarnate, evil intelligence? My dear Major, you are taking us back to the theory of Elemental spirits, and I blankly refuse to follow you!"

The Valley of the Just

A Story of the Shan Hills

I

THE merciless sun beat down upon the little caravan, winding its way upward and ever upward to the hill-land. Beneath stretched a panorama limned in feverish greens and unhealthy yellows; scarlike rocks striated the jungle, clothing the foothills, and through the dancing air, viewed from the arid heights, they had the appearance of running water. Swamps to the south-east showed like unhealing wounds upon the face of the landscape; beyond them spread the muddy river waters, the bank of the stream proper being discernible only by reason of a greater greenness in the palm-tops: venomous green slopes beyond them again, a fringe of dwarfed forest, and the brazen skyline.

On the right of the path rose volcanic rock, gnarled, twisted, and contorted as with the agonies of some mighty plague, which in a forgotten past had seized upon the very bowels of the world, and had contorted whole mountains, and laid waste vast forests and endless plains. Above, the cruel sun; ahead, more plague-twisted rocks, with sandy scars dancing like running water; and, all around, the breathless stillness, the swooning stillness of tropical midday. North, south, east, and west, that haze of heat, that silence unbroken, lay like an accursed mantle upon Burma.

Moreen Fayne could scarcely support herself upright in the saddle; her head throbbed incessantly, and the veil which she wore could not protect her eyes from the maddening glare of the sun. But although at any moment during the past hour she could have slipped insensible from her saddle, she sat stiffly upright, her dauntless eyes looking straight ahead, her small mouth set with masculine sternness, and her hands clenched--the physical reflection of the mental effort whereby, alone, she was enabled to pursue the journey.

Just in front of her paced Ramsa Lal. His stride had not varied from the lowlands, through the foothills, nor on the rocky mountain paths. He had looked neither right nor left, but had walked, walked, walked. At times Moreen had been hard put to it to choke down the hysterical screams which had risen in her throat; madness had threatened her, as she watched, in dumb misery, that silent striding man. Yet she knew that it was only the presence of this tireless, immobile guide which had enabled her to go on; although he never directed one glance towards her, she knew that his steady march was meant for encouragement.

Behind, like the tail of a scorpion, trailed the native retinue, and on the end of the tail, where the sting would be, rode her husband. This simile had occurred to her at once, and she allowed her mind to dwell upon the idea as an invalid will consider imaginary designs upon the wall-paper of the sick-room.

Sometimes there was a sliding of hoofs and a sound of stumbling; sometimes her own pony lost his footing. On such occasion, there would be mechanical cries of encouragement from the natives, and perhaps a growling curse from the man who brought up the rear of the little company. The road wound through a frowning chasm, where lizards and other creeping things darted into holes to right and left of their progress. Grateful shadow ruled a while, and a stifled sigh escaped from Moreen's lips. Ramsa Lal paced straightly onward, the others came stumbling behind; fifty yards ahead the ravine opened out, and once more the deathly heat poured unchecked upon their heads.

Again Moreen all but lost control of herself; her fortitude threatened to slip from her; so that she bit her lips until the pain filled her eyes with burning tears. The effort to control herself proved successful, but left her white and quivering. She felt impelled to speak to Ramsa Lal, and constrained herself only with a second effort of which her will was barely capable. Then she saw that speech, which would be dangerous, was unnecessary; the man's wonderful intuition had enabled him to hear that crying of the soul, and he was answering her.

His brown fingers were clutching and unclutching convulsively, and as he swung his arm, he would clench his right fist and beat the air. For a moment he acted thus, and then, as if he knew that she had seen, and understood, his fingers hung limply again, and his arm swung loosely as before.

A sort of plateau was reached, and in a natural clearing, where giant bamboos ranged back to the tangled, creeper-laden boughs of the forest trees, the voice of Major Fayne cried a halt. Ramsa Lal was beside Moreen's pony in a trice, and he so screened her exhausted descent from the saddle, setting her down upon an hospitable bank hard by, that she was enabled to maintain her inflexible attitude, when presently her husband came striding along to stand looking down on her, where she sat. His blackly pencilled brows were drawn together, and the pale blue eyes shone out, saturnine, from cavernous sockets. His handsome face was heavily lined, and in the appearance, in the whole attitude of the man, was something aggressive, a violence markedly repellent. Moreen locked her hands behind her, the fingers twining and intertwining, but she raised a pale face to his, from which by a last supreme effort of will she had driven all traces of emotion.

So they remained for a moment, whilst the servants busied themselves with the baggage; he, with feet wide apart, staring down at her, and slashing at the air with a fly-whisk, and she meeting his gaze with a stony calm pitiful to behold, had there been any soul capable of pity to see her. Ramsa Lal was directing operations.

"Here," said Major Fayne, "we camp."

His voice would have told a skilled observer that which the facial lines and a certain odd puffiness of skin more than suggested, that Major Fayne was not a temperate man.

Moreen made no sign, but simply sat watching the speaker.

"It's a delightful situation," continued he, "and your ambition, frequently expressed in Mandalay, to see something of Burma other than bridge parties and polo-matches, at last is realised."

He spoke with a seeming sincerity that had carried conviction to any, save the most sceptical. But Moreen made no sign.

"Here," continued Major Fayne, "you may feast your eyes upon the glories of a Burma forest. Those flowering creepers yonder, festooned from bough to bough, are peculiar to this district, and if you care to explore further, you will be rewarded by the discovery of some fine orchids. Note, also, the perfume of the flowers."

He twirled his slight moustache, and turned away to supervise the work of camping.

Ramsa Lal already had one of the tents nearly erected, and Moreen watched his deft fingers at work, with an anxiety none the less because it was masked. She knew that collapse was imminent. The cruel march under the pitiless sun had had due effect, but it had not broken her spirit. She knew that she had reached the end of her strength, but she showed no sign of weakness before her husband.

It was done at last, and Ramsa Lal held the tent-cloth aside, and bowed.

Moreen stood up, clenched her teeth together grimly, and staggered forward. As the tent-flap was dropped, she sank down beside the camp bedstead, and her head fell upon the covering.

II

Dusk fell, a quick curtain, and the lamps of night shone out with glorious brilliancy, illuminating the little plateau. The tents gleamed whitely in the cold radiance; there was a dancing redness to show where the fire had been built, with figures grouped dimly around it. On a jagged rock, which started up from the very heart of a thicket, black against the newly risen moon, was silhouetted the figure of Major Fayne. Night things swept the air about him, and rustled in the cane brake below him; the fire crackled in the neighbouring camp; sometimes a murmur came from the group of natives.

But, heedless of these matters, Moreen's husband stood on the rocky eminence looking back upon the way they had come, looking down to the distant river valley.

For many minutes he remained so, but presently, clambering down, heavily forced his way through the undergrowth

to the little camp. Passing the tents, he walked back to the dip of the pathway, and paused again, watching and listening; then turned and strode to the fire, grasped Ramsa Lal by the shoulder, and drew him away from the others.

"Come here!" he directed tersely.

At the head of the pathway he bade him halt.

"Listen!" he directed.

Ramsa Lal stood in an attitude of keen attention, and the Major watched him with feverish anxiety, which he was wholly unable to conceal.

"Do you hear it?" he demanded--"hoofs on the path!"

Ramsa Lal shook his head.

"I hear nothing, Sahib."

"Put your ear to the ground, and listen. I tell you that I saw figures moving away below there, and I heard--hoofs, stumbling hoofs."

The man knelt down upon the ground, and, bending forward, lowered his head. Major Fayne watched him, and with growing anxiety, so that, what with this and the pallid moonlight, his face appeared ghastly.

But again Ramsa Lal stood up, shaking his head.

"Nothing, Sahib," he repeated.

Major Fayne suddenly grasped him by the shoulders, spinning him about, and dragging him forward, so that the dusky face was but inches removed from his own. He glared into the man's eyes.

"Are you lying to me?" he demanded, "are you lying?"

"I swear it is the truth: why should I lie to you, Sahib?"

"You want them----"

Major Fayne broke off abruptly and thrust the man away from him. A different expression had crept into his face, an expression in which there was something furtive. He spun around upon his heel and stepped to the tent where Moreen was. Raising the flap slightly:

"Good-night," he called, and turned away.

Ramsa Lal had gone back to the fireside; and Fayne, following a moment of hesitancy, strode with his swaggering military gait to the tent erected in the furthest corner of the clearing. He had stooped to enter, when he hesitated, remaining there bent forward--and listening.

From the opposite side of the distant fire, Ramsa Lal, though few would have suspected the fact, was watching. Evidently enough, the leader of the little company was obsessed with his delusion that some one or something clambered up the steep path beneath. Suddenly shrugging his shoulders, he stooped yet lower, and dived into the tent.

One of the natives threw fresh fuel upon the fire, and a stream of sparks sped up through the clear air in a widening trail ever growing fainter.

There was a crackling, a murmur of voices, and then a new silence. This in turn was broken by the distant howling of dogs, and in the near stillness one might have heard the faint shrieking of the bats, who now were embarked upon their nocturnal voyagings.

A shrill, wild scream burst suddenly from the heart of the trees in the east, rose eerily upon the night, and died away. But the group about the fire moved not at all, for this dreadful screaming but marked an animal tragedy of the Burma forests. So furred things howled and screamed and moaned in the woodlands, feathered things piped and hooted around and above, and the bats, uncanny creatures of the darkness, who seem to have kinship neither with fur nor feather, chirped faintly overhead.

Once there was a distant, hollow booming like the sound of artillery, which echoed down the mountain gorges, and seemed to roll away over the lowland swamps, and die, inaudible, by the remote river-bank.

Yet no one stirred; for this mysterious gunnery is a phenomenon met with in that district, inexplicable, weird, but no

novelty to one who has camped in the Shan Hills.

A second time later in the night the phantom guns boomed; and again their booming died away in the far valleys. The fire was getting low, now.

III

Moreen lay, sleepless, wide-eyed, staring up at the roof of the tent. She had eaten, could eat, nothing, but she was consumed by a parching thirst. The sounds of the night had no terrors for her; indeed, she scarcely noticed them, for she had other and more dreadful things to think of.

Ramsa Lal had been her father's servant; him she could trust. But the others--the others were Major Fayne's. They were no more than spies upon her; guards.

What did it mean, this sudden dash from the bungalow into the hills? It amused her husband to pretend that it was a pleasure-trip, but the equipment was not of the sort one takes upon such occasions, and one is not usually dragged from bed at midnight to embark upon such a journey. It was additionally improbable in view of the fact that up to the moment of departure Major Fayne had not spoken to her, except in public, for six months. The dreadful, forced marches were breaking her down, and she knew that her husband was drinking heavily. What, in God's name, would be the end of it?

Weakly, she raised herself into a sitting position, groping for and lighting a candle. From the bosom of her dress she took out a letter, the last she had received from home before this mad flight. There was something in it which had frightened her at the time, but which, viewed in the light of recent events, was unspeakably horrifying.

During the long estrangement between her husband and herself she had learnt, and had paid for her knowledge with bitter tears, that there was a side to the character of Major Fayne which he had carefully concealed from her before marriage; the dark, saturnine part of her husband's character had dawned upon her suddenly. That had been the beginning of her disillusionment, the disillusionment which has come to more than one English girl during the first twelve months of married life in an Indian bungalow.

Then, perforce, the gap had widened, and six months later had become a chasm quite impassable except in the interests of social propriety. Anglo-Indian society is notable for divorces, and poor Moreen very early in her married life fully understood the reason.

She held the letter to the dim light and read it again attentively. Allowing a certain discount for her mother's changeless animosity towards Major Fayne, it yet remained a startling letter. Much of it consisted in feckless condolences, characteristic but foolish; the passage, however, which she read and re-read by the dim, flickering light was as follows:

"Mr. Harringay in his last letter begged of me to come out by the next boat to Rangoon," her mother wrote. "He has quite opened my eyes to the truth, Moreen, not in such a way as to shock me all at once, but gradually. I always distrusted Ralph Fayne and never disguised the fact from you. I knew that his previous life had been far from irreproachable, but his treatment of you surpasses even *my* expectations. I know *all*, my poor darling! and I know something which you do not know. His father did not die in Colombo at all; he died in a madhouse! and there are two other known dipsomaniacs in Ralph Fayne's family----"

A hand reached over Moreen's shoulder and tore the letter from her.

She turned with a cry--and looked up into her husband's quivering face! For a moment he stood over her, his left fist clenching and unclenching and his pale blue eyes glassy with anger. Then chokingly he spoke:

"So you carry one of his letters about with you?"

The veins were throbbing visibly upon his temples. Moreen clutched at the blanket but did not speak, dared not move, for if ever she had looked into the face of a madman it was at this moment when she looked into the face of Ralph Fayne.

He suddenly grabbed the candle and, holding it close to the letter, began to read. His hands were perfectly steady, showing the tremendous nerve tension under which he laboured. Then his expression changed, but nothing of the maniac glare left his eyes.

"From your mother," he said hoarsely, "and full of two things--your wrongs, *your* wrongs! and Jack Harringay--Jack Harringay--always Jack Harringay! Damn him!"

He put down the candle and began to tear the letter into tiny fragments, pouring forth the while a stream of coarse, blasphemous language. Moreen, who felt that consciousness was slipping from her, crouched there with a face deathly pale.

Fayne began to laugh softly as he threw the torn-up letter from him piece by piece.

"Damn him!" he said again. He turned the blazing eyes towards his wife. "You lying, baby-faced hypocrite! Why don't you admit that he is----"

He stopped; the sinister laughter died upon his lips and he stood there shaking all over and with a sort of stark horror in his eyes dreadful to see.

"Why don't you?" he muttered--and looked at her almost pathetically,--"why of course you can't--no one can----"

He reeled and clutched at the tent-flap, then stumblingly made his way out.

"No one can," came back in a shaky whisper--"no one can----"

Moreen heard him staggering away, until the sound of his uncertain footsteps grew inaudible. A distant howling rose upon the night, and, nearer to the clearing, sounded a sort of tapping, not unlike that of a woodpecker. Some winged creature was fluttering over the tent.

IV

Dawn saw the dreadful march resumed. Major Fayne now exhibited unmistakable traces of his course of heavy drinking. He brought up the rear as hitherto, and often tarried far behind where some peculiar formation of the path enabled him to study the country already traversed. He had altered the route of the march, and now they were leaving the Shan Hills upon the north-east and dipping down to a chasm-like valley through which ran a tributary of the Selween River. Since the dry season was commenced the entire country beneath them showed through a haze of heat and dust.

They had partaken of a crude and hasty breakfast as strangers having nothing in common who by chance share a table. Moreen no longer doubted that her husband was mad, for he muttered to himself and was ever glancing over his shoulder. This and his constant watching of the path behind spoke of some secret terror from which he fled.

Towards noon, they skirted a village whose inhabitants poured forth *en bloc* to watch the passing of this unfamiliar company. A faint hope that some European might be there died in Moreen's breast. Her position was a dreadful one. Led by a madman--of this she was persuaded--and surrounded by natives who, if not actively hostile, were certainly unfriendly, with but one man to whom she could look for the slightest aid, she was proceeding further and further from civilisation into unknown wildernesses.

What her husband's purpose might be she could not conceive. She was unable to think calmly, unable to formulate any plan. In the dull misery of a sick dream she rode forward speculating upon the awakening.

The midday heat in the valley was so great that a halt became imperative. They camped at the edge of a dense jungle where banks of rotten vegetation, sun-dried upon the top, lay heaped about the bamboo stems. None but a madman would have chosen to tarry in such a spot; and Major Fayne's servants went about their work with many a furtive glance at their master. Ramsa Lal's velvety eyes showed a great compassion, but Moreen offered no protest. She was in an unreal frame of mind and her will was merely capable of a mute indifference: any attempt to assert herself would have meant a sudden breakdown. Something in her brain was strained to utmost tension; any further effort must have snapped it.

In the hour of the greatest heat Major Fayne went out alone, offering no explanation of his intentions and leaving no word as to the time of his return. Moreen only learnt of his departure from Ramsa Lal. She received the news with indifference and asked no questions. Inert she lay in the little tent looking out at the wall of jungle, where it uprose but twenty yards away. So the day wore on. Mechanically she partook of food when Ramsa Lal placed it before her, but, although the man's attitude palpably was one of uneasiness, she did not question him, and he departed in silence. It was an incredible situation.

Throughout the afternoon nothing occurred to break this dread monotony save that once there arose a buzz of conversation, and she became dimly aware that some one from the native village which they had passed in the morning had come into the camp. After a time the sounds had died away again, and Ramsa Lal had stepped into view, looking towards her interrogatively; but although she recognized his wish to speak to her, the inertia which now claimed her mind and body prevailed, and she offered him no encouragement to intrude upon her misery.

Thus the weary hours passed, until even to the dulled perceptions of Moreen the sounds of unrest and uneasiness pervading the camp began to penetrate. Yet Major Fayne did not return. The insect and reptile life of a Burmese jungle moved around her, but she was curiously indifferent to everything. Without alarm she brushed a venomous spider, fully one inch in girth, from the camp-bedstead, and dully watched it darting away into the jungle undergrowth.

Darkness swept down and tropical night things raised their mingled voices; then came Ramsa Lal.

"Forgive me, Mem Sahib," he said, "but I must speak to you."

She half reclined, looking at him as he stood, a dimly seen figure, before her.

"The men from the village," continued he, "come to say that we may not camp. It is holy ground from this place away"--he waved his arm vaguely--"to the end of the jungle where the river is."

"I can do nothing, Ramsa Lal."

"I fear--for him."

"Major Fayne?"

"He goes into the jungle to look for something. What does he go to look for? Why does he not return?"

Moreen made no reply.

"All of them there"--he indicated the direction of the native servants--"know this place. They are already afraid, and, with those from the village coming to warn us, they get more afraid still. This is a haunted place, Mem Sahib."

Moreen sat up, shaking off something of the lassitude which possessed her.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"In that jungle," replied Ramsa Lal, "there is buried a temple, a very old temple, and in the temple there is buried one who was a holy man. His spirit watches over this place, and none may rest here because of him---"

"But the men of the village came here," said Moreen.

"Before sunset, Mem Sahib. No man would come here after dark. Look! you will see--they are frightened."

Languidly, but with some awakening to the necessities of the situation, Moreen stepped out of the tent and looked across to where, about a great fire, the retinue huddled in a circle. Ramsa Lal stood beside her with something contemptuous in the bearing of his tall figure.

"A spell lies upon all this valley, Mem Sahib," he said. "Therefore it is called the Valley of the Just."

"Why?"

"Because only the just can stay within its bounds through the night."

Moreen stared affrightedly.

"Do you mean that they die in the night, Ramsa Lal?"

"In the night, Mem Sahib, before the dawn."

"By what means?"

Ramsa Lal spread his palms eloquently.

"Who knows?" he replied. "It is a haunted place."

"And are you afraid?"

"I am not afraid, for I have passed a night in the Valley of the Just many years ago, and I live."

"You were alone?"

"With two others, Mem Sahib."

"And the others?"

"One was bitten by a snake an hour before dawn, and the other, who was an upright man, lives to-day."

Moreen shuddered.

"Do you know"--she still hesitated to broach this subject with the man--"do you know where--Major Fayne has gone?"

"It is said, Mem Sahib, that a stream runs through the jungle close beside the old temple, a stream which bubbles up from a cavern and which is supposed to come underground from the Ruby Mine plateau. He goes early in the morning to look for rubies--so I think."

Moreen tapped the ground with her foot.

"Do you think"--again she hesitated--"that Major Fayne is afraid of something? Of something--where we have come from?"

Ramsa Lal bowed low.

"I cannot tell," he replied, "but we shall know ere sunrise."

For a moment Moreen scarcely grasped the significance of his words; then their inner meaning became apparent to her.

"Make me some coffee, Ramsa Lal," she said; "I am cold--very cold."

She re-entered the tent, lighting the lamp.

The Valley of the Just! What irony, that her husband should have selected that spot to camp in! She sat deep in thought, when presently Ramsa Lal entered with coffee. He had just set down the tray when the sound of a distant cry brought him rigidly upright. He stood listening intently. The sound was repeated--nearer it seemed--a sort of hoarse scream, terrible to hear--impossible to describe.

Moreen rose to her feet and followed the man out of the tent. Some one--some one who kept crying out--was plunging heavily through the jungle towards the camp.

The men about the fire were on their feet now. Obviously they would have fled, but the prospect of flight into the haunted darkness was one more terrible than that of remaining where they were.

It ceased, that strange cry; but whoever was approaching could be heard alternately groaning and laughing madly.

Then out from the thicket on the west, into the red light of the fire, burst a fearful figure. It was that of Major Fayne, wild eyed, and with face which seemed to be of a dull grey. He staggered and almost fell, but kept on for a few more paces and then collapsed in a heap almost at Moreen's feet, amid the clatter of the strange loot wherewith he was laden.

This consisted in a number of golden vessels heavily encrusted with gems, a huge golden salver, and a dozen or more ropes of gigantic rubies!

Amid these treasures, the ransom of a Sultan, the price of a throne, he lay writhing convulsively.

Ramsa Lal was the first to recover himself. He leapt forward, seized the prostrate man by the shoulders and dragged him into the tent, past Moreen. Having effected this he raised his eyes in a mute question. She nodded, and whilst Ramsa Lal seized the Major's shoulders, Moreen grasped his ankles, and together they lifted him up on to the bed.

He lay there, rolling from side to side. His eyes were wide open, glassy and unseeing; a slight froth was upon his lips, his fists rose and fell in regular, mechanical beats, corresponding with the convulsive movements of his knees.

Moreen dropped down beside him.

"Ramsa Lal! Ramsa Lal! What shall I do? What has happened to him?"

Ramsa Lal ripped the collar from Major Fayne's neck in order to aid his respiration. Then, quietly signing to Moreen to hold the lamp, he began to search the entire exposed surface of the Major's skin. Evidently he failed to find that for which he was looking. He glanced down at the ankles, but the Major wore thick putties and Ramsa Lal shook his head in a puzzled way.

"It is like the bite of a hamadryad," he said softly, "but there is no mark."

"What shall I do!" moaned Moreen--"what shall I do!"

There was a frightened murmur from the entrance, where the native servants stood in a group, peering in. Moreen

stood up.

"Hot water, Ramsa Lal!" she said. "We must give him brandy."

"But it is useless, Mem Sahib; he has not been bitten--there is no mark; it may be a fever from the jungle."

Moreen beat her hands together helplessly.

"We must do *something!*" she said; "we must do *something.*"

A sudden change took place in Major Fayne. The convulsive movements ceased and he lay quiet, and breathing quite regularly. The glassy look began to fade from his eyes, and with every appearance of being in full possession of his senses, he stared at Moreen and spoke:

"You shall repent of your words, Harringay," he said in a quiet voice. "You have deliberately accused me of faking the cards. I care nothing for any of you. Why should I attempt such a thing? I could buy and sell you all!..."

Moreen dropped slowly back upon her knees again, white to the lips, watching her husband. With the same appearance of perfect sanity, but now addressing the empty air, he continued:

"In my tent--my wife will tell you it is true--my wife, Harringay, do you hear?--I have jewelled cups and strings of rubies, enough to buy up Mandalay! I blundered on to them in that old ruined temple back in the jungle, not five hundred yards from your bungalow. Harringay--think of it--a treasure-room like that within sight of your verandah! There are snakes there, snakes, you understand, in hundreds; but it is worth risking for a big fortune like mine."

"He mixes time and place," murmured Ramsa Lal. "He talks to the Commissioner Sahib in Mandalay of what is here in the Valley of the Just."

Moreen nodded, catching her breath hysterically.

"You see," continued the delirious man, "I am as rich as Midas. Why should I want to cheat you! Don't talk to me of what you would do for my wife's sake! Keep your favours, curse you!"

With a contemptuous smile, Major Fayne threw his head back upon the pallet. Then came another change; the look of stark horror which Moreen had seen once before crept into the grey face; and her husband raised himself in bed, glaring wildly into the shadows beyond the lamp.

"You are a spirit!" The words came in a thrilling, eerie whisper. "Oh God! I understand. Yes! I came away from Harringay's bungalow. My wife was asleep and I sat drinking until I had emptied the whisky decanter."

He bent forward as if listening.

"Yes, I went back. I went back to reason with him. No! as God is my witness I did not plan it! I went back to reason with him."

Again the uncanny attitude was resumed. Then:

"I stepped in through the verandah, and there he sat with Moreen's photograph in his hand. Listen to me--*Listen!*" There was an agony of entreaty in his voice; it rose to a thin scream--"My wife's photograph! Do you hear me? Do you understand? *Moreen's* photograph--and as I stood behind him, he raised it to his lips--he----"

Major Fayne stopped abruptly, as if checked by a spoken word; and with wildly beating heart Moreen found herself listening for the phantom voice. She could hear the breathing of the natives clustered behind her; but no other sound save a distant howling in the jungle was audible, until her husband began again:

"I struck him down--from behind, yes, from behind. His blood poured over the picture. You understand I was mad. If you are just--and is not this called the Valley of the Just?--you cannot condemn me. Why did I fly? I was not in my right mind; I had--been drinking, as I told you; I was mad. If I was not mad I should never have fled, never have drawn suspicion--on myself."

He fell back as if exhausted, then once more struggled upright and began to peer about him. When he spoke again, his voice, though weak, was more like his own.

"Moreen!" he said--"where the devil are you? why can't you give me a drink?"

Suddenly, he seemed to perceive her, and he drew his brows together in the old, ugly frown.

"Curse you!" he said. "I have found you out! I am a rich man now, and when I have gone to England, see what Jack

Harringay will do for you. I will paint London red! I have looted the old temple, and they are after me, they----"

The words merged into a frightful scream. Major Fayne threw up his hands and fell back insensible upon the bed.

"Mem Sahib! Mem Sahib, you must be brave!" It was Ramsa Lal who spoke; he supported Moreen with his arm. "There is a spell upon this place. No medicine, nothing, can save him. There is only one thing----"

Moreen controlled herself by one of those giant efforts of which she was capable.

"Tell me," she whispered--"what must we do?"

Ramsa Lal removed his arm, saw that she could stand unsupported, and bent forward over the unconscious man. Following a rapid examination, he signed to her to leave the tent. They came out into the white blaze of the moonlight--and there at their feet lay the glittering loot of the haunted temple, a dazzlement of rainbow sparks.

"Only for such a thing as this," said Ramsa Lal, "dare I go, but not one of us will see another dawn if we do not go." He pointed to the heap of treasure. "Mem Sahib must come also."

"But--my husband----"

"He must remain," he said. "It is of his own choosing."

V

The temple stood in a kind of clearing. Grotesquely horrible figures guarded the time-worn entrance. Moreen drew a deep breath of relief on emerging from the jungle path by which, amid the rustle of retreating snakes, they had come, but shrank back affrighted from the blackness of the ruined doorway. Ramsa Lal stood the lantern upon the stump of a broken pillar, where its faint yellow light was paled by the moon-rays.

"It is *you* who must restore," he said.

One by one he handed her the jewel-encrusted vessels and hung the ropes of rubies upon her arm.

She nodded, and as Ramsa Lal took up the lantern and began to descend the steps within followed him.

"No foot save his," came back to her, "has trod these sacred steps for ages, for the secret of the jungle path is known only to the few..."

"How do you--know the way?"

Ramsa Lal did not reply.

They traversed a short tunnel; a heavy door was thrust open; and Moreen found herself standing in a small pillared hall. Through a window high in one wall, overgrown with tangled vegetation, crept a broken moonbeam. Directly before her was the carved figure of a grotesque deity. A long, heavily clamped chest stood before it like an altar step.

She staggered forward, deposited her priceless burden upon the floor, and mechanically began to raise the lid of the chest.

"Not that one, Mem Sahib!" The voice of Ramsa Lal rose shrilly--"not that one!..."

But he spoke too late. Moreen realised that there were three divisions in the chest, each having a separate lid. As she raised the one in the centre, a breath of fetid air greeted her nostrils, and she had a vague impression that this was no chest but the entrance to a deep pit. Then all these thoughts were swept away by the crowning horror which rose out of the subterranean darkness.

A great winged creature, clammy white, rose towards her, passed beneath her upraised hands and sailed into the darkness on the right. She heard it flapping its great bat wings against the wall--heard them beating upon a pillar--then saw it coming back towards her into the moonlight--and knew no more.

VI

"Mem Sahib!"

Moreen opened her eyes. She lay, propped against a saddle, at the camp beside the jungle. She shuddered icily.

"Ramsa Lal--how----"

"I carried the Mem Sahib! the treasures of the temple I restored to their resting-place----"

"And the--the other----"

"The door that the Mem Sahib opened she opened by the decree of Fate. It was not for Ramsa Lal to close it. That is a passage----"

"Yes?"

"--To the tomb of the great one who is buried in the temple!"

"Oh! heavens! that white thing----" She raised her hands to her face. "But--the camp----"

"The camp is deserted! they all fled from----"

Moreen sat up, rigidly.

"From what?"

"From something that came for what we forgot!"

"My husband----"

"There was a ring upon his finger. I saw it, and knew where it came from, but forgot to remove it."

Moreen stood up, and turned towards the nearer tent. Ramsa Lal gently detained her.

"Not that way, Mem Sahib."

"But I must see him! I must, I *must* tell him that he wrongs me, cruelly, wickedly! You heard his words-- Oh, God! can he have----"

"It would be useless to tell him, Mem Sahib,--he could not hear you! But that what you would tell him is true I know well; for see--it is the dawn!"

"Ramsa Lal!..."

"The unjust cannot stay in this valley through a night and live to see the dawn, Mem Sahib!"

VII

At about that same hour, Deputy-Commissioner Jack Harringay opened his eyes and looked wonderingly at a grey-haired, white-aproned nurse who sat watching him.

"Don't speak, Mr. Harringay," she said soothingly. "You have been very ill, but you are on the high road to recovery now."

"Nurse!..."

"Please don't speak; I know what you would ask. There has been no scandal. The attack upon you was ascribed to robbers. You have been delirious, Mr. Harringay, and have told me--many things. I am old enough, or nearly old enough, to be your mother, so you will not mind my telling you that a love like yours deserves reward. God has spared your life; be sure it was with a purpose----"

The Blue Monkey

I

A TROPICALLY hot day had been followed by a stuffy and oppressive evening. In the tiny sitting-room of our tiny cottage, my friend--who, for the purposes of this story, I shall call Mr. East--by the light of a vapour lamp was

busily arranging a number of botanical specimens collected that morning. His briar fumed furiously between his teeth, and, his grim, tanned face lowered over his work, he brought to bear upon this self-imposed task all the intense nervous energy which was his.

I sat by the open window alternately watching my tireless companion and the wonderful and almost eerie effects of the moonlight on the heather. Then:

"We came here for quiet--and rest, East," I said, smiling.

"Well!" snapped my friend. "Isn't it quiet enough for you?"

"Undeniably. But I don't remember to have seen you rest from the moment that we left London! I exclude your brief hours of slumber--during which, by the way, you toss about and mutter in a manner far from reposeful."

"No wonder. My nerves are anything but settled yet, I grant you."

Indeed, we had passed through a long and trying ordeal, the particulars whereof have no bearing upon the present matter, and in renting this tiny and remote cottage we had sought complete seclusion and forgetfulness of those evil activities of man which had so long engaged our attention. How ill we had chosen will now appear.

I had turned again to the open window, when my meditations were interrupted by a sound that seemed to come from somewhere away behind the cottage. Cigarette in hand, I leaned upon the sill, listening, then turned and glanced toward the littered table. East, his eyes steely bright in the lamplight, was watching me.

"You heard it?" I said.

"Clearly. A woman's shriek!"

"Listen!"

Tense, expectant, we sat listening for some time, until I began to suspect that we had been deceived by the note of some unfamiliar denizen of the moors. Then, faintly, chokingly, the sound was repeated, seemingly from much nearer.

"Come on!" snapped East.

Hatless, we both hurried around to the rear of the cottage. As we came out upon the slope, a figure appeared on the brow of a mound some two hundred yards away and stood for a moment silhouetted against the moonlit sky. It was that of a woman. She raised her arms at sight of us--and staggered forward.

Just in the nick of time we reached her, for her strength was almost spent. East caught her in his arms.

"Good God!" he said, "it is Miss Baird!"

What could it mean? The girl, who was near to swooning and inarticulate with fatigue and emotion, was the daughter of Sir Jeffrey Baird, our neighbour, whose house, The Warrens, was visible from where we stood.

East half led, half carried her down the slope to the cottage; and there I gave her professional attention, whilst, with horror-bright eyes and parted lips, she fought for mastery of herself. She was a rather pretty girl, but highly emotional, and her pathetically weak mouth was doubtless a maternal heritage, for her father, Sir Jeffrey, had the mouth and jaw of the old fighter that he was.

At last she achieved speech.

"My father!" she whispered brokenly; "oh, my poor father!"

"What!" I began----

"At Black Gap!..."

"Black Gap!" I said; for the place was close upon half a mile away. "Have you come so far?"

"He is lying there! My poor father--dead!"

"What!" cried East, springing up--"Sir Jeffrey--dead? Not drowned?"

"No, no! he is lying on the path this side of the Gap! I ... almost stumbled over ... him. He has been ... murdered! Oh, God help me!..."

East and I stared at one another, speechless with the sudden horror of it. Sir Jeffrey murdered!

Suddenly the distracted girl turned to my friend, clutching frenziedly at his arm.

"Oh, Mr. East!" she cried, "what had my poor father done to merit such an end? What monster has struck him down? You will find him, will you not? I thank God that you are here--for although I know you as 'Mr. East,' my father confided the truth to me, and I am aware that you are really a Secret Service agent, and I even know some of the wonderful things you have done in the past...."

"Very indiscreet!" muttered East, and his jaws snapped together viciously. But--"My dear Miss Baird," he added immediately, in the kindly way that was his own, "rely upon me. Myself and my fellow-worker, the doctor here, had sought to escape from the darker things of life, but it was willed otherwise. I esteemed Sir Jeffrey very highly"--his voice shook--"very highly indeed. I, too, thank God that I am here."

II

Five minutes later, East and I set out across the moor, leaving Miss Baird at the cottage. By reason of the lonely situation, and the fact that the nearest house, The Warrens, was fully a mile and a half away, no other arrangement was possible, since delay could not be entertained.

East had managed to glean some few important facts. Sir Jeffrey, whose museum at The Warrens was justly celebrated, had been to London that day to attend an auction at Sotheby's. His Greek secretary, Mr. Damopolon, and his daughter had accompanied him. Returning by train to Stanby, the nearest station, Miss Baird had called upon friends in the village (Mr. Damopolon had remained in London on business), and Sir Jeffrey had set out in the dusk to walk the two miles to The Warrens; for the car was undergoing repairs.

Pursuing the same path later in the evening, the girl had come upon the body of her father in the dramatically dreadful manner already related. He had no enemies, she declared, or none known to her. She did not believe that her father was carrying a large sum of money, nor--although she had scarcely trusted herself to look at him--did she believe that robbery had been the motive of the crime.

Sir Jeffrey had been carrying a large parcel containing one of his purchases, and I remembered, as we silently pursued our way to the scene of the murder, how East's keen eyes had seemed to dance with excitement when Miss Baird, in reply to a question, had told us what this parcel contained. It was a large figure, in blue porcelain, of a sacred ape, and was of Burmese or Chinese origin; she was uncertain which.

Her father had apparently attached great importance to this strange purchase, and had elected to bear it home in person rather than to trust it to railway transport.

"Did you notice if this parcel was there," East had inquired eagerly, "when you discovered him?"

Miss Baird had shaken her head in reply.

And now we were come to Black Gap, a weird feature in a weird landscape. This was a great hole in the moor, having high clay banks upon one side descending sheer to the tarn, and upon the other being flanked by low, marshy ground about a small coppice. The road from Stanby to The Warrens passed close by the coppice on the south-east.

Regarding this place opinions differed. By some it was supposed to be a natural formation, but it was locally believed to mark the site of an abandoned mine, possibly Roman. Its depth was unknown, and the legend of the coach which lay at the bottom, and which could be seen under certain favourable conditions, has found a place in all the guide-books to that picturesque and wild district.

Whatever its origin, Black Gap was a weird and gloomy spot as one approached and saw through the trees the gleam of the moonlight on its mystic waters. And here, passing a slight southerly bend in the track--for it was no more--we came upon Sir Jeffrey.

He lay huddled in a grotesque and unnatural attitude. His right hand was tightly clenched, whilst with his left he clutched a tuft of rank grass. Strangely enough, his soft hat was still upon his head. His tweed suit, soft collar and, tie all bore evidence of the fierce struggle which the old baronet had put up for his life. A quantity of torn brown paper lay scattered near the body.

I dropped on my knees and made a rapid examination, East directing the ray of a pocket-lamp upon the poor victim.

"Well?" rapped my friend.

"He was struck over the head by some heavy weapon," I said slowly, "and perhaps partly stunned. His hat protected him to a degree, and he tackled his assailant. Death was actually due, I should say, to strangulation. His throat is very

much bruised."

East made no reply. Glancing up from my gruesome task, I observed that he was looking at a faint track, which, commencing amid the confused marks surrounding the body, led in the direction of the coppice. East's steely eyes were widely opened.

"In heaven's name, what have we here!" he said.

A kindred amazement to that which held East claimed me, as I studied more closely the mysterious tracks.

The spot where Sir Jeffrey had fallen was soft ground, whereon the lightest footstep must have left a clear impression. Indeed, around the recumbent figure the ground showed a mass of indistinguishable marks. But proceeding thence, as I have said, in the direction of the neighbouring coppice, was this faint trail.

"It looks," I said, in a voice hushed with something very like awe, "it looks like the track of ... *a child!*"

"Look again!" snapped East.

I stooped over the first set of marks. Clearly indented, I perceived the impressions of two small, bare feet, and, eighteen or twenty inches ahead, those of two small hands. I experienced a sudden chill; my blood seemed momentarily to run coldly in my veins, and I longed to depart from the shadow of the trees, from the neighbourhood of the Black Gap, and from the neighbourhood of the man who had died there. For it seemed to me that a barefooted infant had recently crawled from the side of the dead man into the coppice overhanging the tarn.

Looking up, I found East's steely eyes set upon me strangely.

"Well!" said he, "do you not miss something that you anticipated finding?"

I hesitated, fearfully. Then:

"Sir Jeffrey carries no cane," I began----

"Good! I had failed to note that. Good! But what else?"

Closely I surveyed the body, noting the disarranged garments, the discoloured face.

"What of this torn brown paper?" snapped my friend.

"Good heavens!" I cried; and like a flash my glance sought again those mysterious tracks--those tracks of *something* that had crawled away from the murdered man.

"Where," inquired East deliberately, "is the Burmese porcelain ape of which we have heard? And, since there are no tracks *approaching* the body, where did the creature come from that made those retiring from it, and ... what manner of creature was it?"

III

At East's request (for my friend was a man of very great influence) the police, beyond the unavoidable formalities, took no steps to apprehend the murderer of Sir Jeffrey. East had a long interview with the dead man's daughter, and, shortly afterwards, went off to London, leaving me to my own devices.

The subject of the strange death of the baronet naturally engrossed my attention to the exclusion of all else. Especially, my mind kept reverting to the tracks which we had discovered leading from the dead man's body into the coppice. I scarcely dared to follow my ideas to what seemed to be their logical conclusion.

That the track was that, not of a child, but of an *ape*, I was now convinced. No such track approached where the victim had lain; no track of any kind, other than that of his own heavy footprints, led to the spot ... but the track of an ape receded from it; and the baronet had been carrying an ape (inanimate, certainly, according to all known natural laws), which was missing when his body was found!

"These are the reflections of a madman!" I said aloud. "Am I seriously considering the possibility of a blue porcelain monkey having come to life? If so, since no other footprints have been discovered, I shall be compelled, logically, to assume that the blue porcelain monkey strangled Sir Jeffrey!"

My friend, East, attached very great importance to the missing curio; this he had not disguised from me. But, beyond spending half an hour or so among the trees of the coppice and around the margin of the Black Gap, he had not to my knowledge essayed any quest for it.

Finding my thoughts at once unpleasant and unprofitable company, I suddenly determined to make a call at The Warrens, in order to inquire about the health of poor Miss Baird, and incidentally to learn if there were any new development.

Off I set, and failed to repress a shudder, despite the blazing sunlight, as I passed the gap and the spot where we had found the dead man. A tropical shower in the early morning had quite obliterated the mysterious tracks. Coming to The Warrens, I was shown into the fine old library. That air of hush, so awesome and so significant, prevailed throughout the house whose master lay dead above, and when presently Mr. Damopolon entered, attired in black, he seemed to complete a picture already sombre.

As East and I had several times remarked, he was a singularly handsome man, and moreover, a very charming companion, widely travelled and deeply versed in those subjects to which the late baronet had devoted so many years of his life. I had always liked Damopolon, though, as a rule, I am distrustful of his race; and now, seeing at a glance how hard the death of Sir Jeffrey had hit him, I offered no unnecessary word of condolence, but immediately turned the conversation upon Miss Baird.

"She has but just hurried off to London, doctor," he said, to my surprise. "A telegram from the solicitors rendered her immediate departure unavoidable."

"She has sustained this dreadful blow with exemplary fortitude," I replied. "Are you sure she was strong enough for travel?"

"I myself escorted her to the station; and Mrs. Grierson, the late baronet's sister, has accompanied her to London."

"By the way," I said, "whilst I remember--was Sir Jeffrey carrying a cane at the time of his death?"

"He had with him a heavy ash stick, as usual, when we parted at Sotheby's, doctor; but, of course, he may have left it there, as he had a large parcel to take."

"Ah! that parcel! You can no doubt enlighten me, Mr. Damopolon? What, roughly, were the dimensions of this Burmese idol?"

"The monkey? I don't think it was actually an idol, doctor; it was, rather, a grotesque ornament. Oh, it was about the size of a small Moorish ape, hollow, and weighing perhaps six or seven pounds."

"Was it upon a pedestal?"

"No. It was completely modelled, even to the soles of the feet and the nails."

"Extraordinary!" I muttered. "Uncanny!"

Some little while longer I remained, and then set out, my doubts in no measure cleared up, for the cottage. To my surprise--for I had no idea that I had tarried so long--dusk was come. I will frankly confess it--I experienced a thrill of supernatural dread at the thought that my path led close beside Black Gap. However, it was a glorious evening, and I should have plenty of light for my return journey. I walked briskly across the moorpath toward the scene of the mysterious crime, hoping that I should find East returned when I gained the cottage.

Perhaps in a wandering life I have known more thrilling moments than some men; but never while memory serves shall I forget that, when, coming abreast of the coppice, and glancing hurriedly into the shadow of the trees ... I saw a crouching figure looking out at me!

Speech momentarily failed me; I stood rooted to the spot. Then:

"All right, old man!" I heard. "Shall be with you in a moment!"

It was East!

Fear changed to the wildest astonishment. Carrying a strange-looking bundle, he came out and joined me on the path.

"Did I frighten you?"

"Is it necessary to ask!" I cried. "But--whatever were you doing there by the Black Gap?"

"Fishing! Look what I have caught!"

He held up for my inspection the object which he carried, by means of two loops of stout cord bound about it. It was

a large china figure of an ape!

"The blue monkey!" he snapped. "Come! I am going to The Warrens."

IV

Again I sat in the fine old library of The Warrens. At the further end of the long, book-laden table, facing me, sat East; Mr. Damopolon occupied a chair on the right, and midway between us, in the centre of the table, presiding over that strange meeting, was the fateful blue monkey.

"You see, Mr. Damopolon," said East, "I knew that Sir Jeffrey was carrying this thing"--he indicated the image--"at the time of his death, and, since it had disappeared, I assumed at first that it had been the motive of the crime. Sir Jeffrey had money and other valuables upon him; therefore we were obviously dealing with no ordinary thief.

"Accordingly, I made inquiries respecting the history of the thing, and found that it possessed but little market value and next to no historical importance. It was of comparatively modern Chinese workmanship, and Sir Jeffrey had bought it, apparently, because it amused him, though why he should have taken the trouble to carry it home, heaven only knows. My first idea--that the curio was a very rare and costly piece--was thus knocked on the head.

"I sought another motive for a crime so horrible and, by a stroke of intuition, I found one. You may not have had an opportunity of studying the mysterious tracks which so puzzled us, Mr. Damopolon, before they were obliterated, but my friend, the doctor, will bear me out. They commenced, then, close beside the body of the murdered man, and they were, as I now perceive, made by the feet of this blue monstrosity upon the table here!"

"Impossible," murmured the secretary incredulously.

"So it appeared to me at the time, when, although I had not then seen the image of the monkey, I perceived, by the absolutely regular character of the impressions, that they were made, not by a living creature, but by the model of one which had been firmly pressed into the soft ground at slightly varying intervals. Since no footprints other than those of Sir Jeffrey were to be found in the vicinity, I was unable to account for the presence of the person who had made these impressions. I devoted myself to a close scrutiny of those footprints of Sir Jeffrey's which led up to the scene of the attack. It became apparent, immediately, that some one had *followed* him ... some one who crept silently along behind the unsuspecting victim ... some one so clever that he placed his feet *almost exactly* in the marks made by the baronet!

"Good! I had accounted for the presence of the murderer. He struck Sir Jeffrey with some heavy implement, but failed to stun him. Then began the struggle, which so churned up the ground that all tracks were lost. The murderer prevailed. He was a man of wonderful nerve. Never once did he place his foot upon virgin ground; not one imprint by which he might be identified did he leave behind him!"

"Then how," inquired Damopolon, who was hanging upon every word, "did he leave the scene if----"

"Listen," snapped East. "I found by the body the torn paper in which the china image had been wrapped--but no string! I went all the way to London to learn if the parcel had been tied with string and if Sir Jeffrey had been carrying a stick!"

"But surely," said Damopolon, "I could have saved you the journey, since I was with the late baronet immediately before he set out for home."

"Quite so--but I had another reason for my visit."

East shot a sudden glance from Damopolon to myself, and there ensued a moment of electric silence.

"Beside the track made by the feet of the image," he resumed slowly, "I found a series of wedge-shaped holes, one on either side of each monkey-impression. Do you follow me, Mr. Damopolon?"

"Perfectly," replied the Greek, taking up and lighting a cigarette. "Wedge-shaped holes, you say?"

"They were the clue for which I sought! I saw it all! The china ape had been used as a *stepping-stone*! The cunning criminal had thus gained the firm ground in the coppice without leaving a footprint behind!..."

"But, my dear East," I interrupted, "I cannot follow you. He stepped from beside the body on to the image, which he had placed at a convenient distance?"

"Yes. Then, by means of loops of string--see, they are still attached!--he lifted it forward with his feet----"

"But----"

"Supporting his weight upon two sticks--Sir Jeffrey's and his own! Hence the wedge-shaped holes beside the track! He had actually reached firm ground when his own stick snapped off short, and he made the fatal error of leaving the fragment and the ferrule, imbedded in the hole! Here is the fragment!"

On the table East laid a fragment of an ebony cane, broken off short some three inches above the nickel ferrule.

"Ebony is so brittle, is it not, Mr. Damopolon?" he said.

"It is indeed," agreed Damopolon, standing up as though he believed East to have finished.

"Yet this stick was made of a particularly fine piece," added East. "Carter!" he cried loudly.

The library door opened ... and Detective Sergeant Carter, of New Scotland Yard, entered, carrying a broken ebony stick. Damopolon dropped his cigarette, and, whilst he stooped to recover it:

"Carter and I went fishing this afternoon," said East, "in the Black Gap. The criminal had sought to hide the broken cane--which bears his monogram--and also the image. He had tied them together, filled the image with clay, and dropped them into the water. Fortunately, they stuck upon an outstanding mass of weeds, and we did not fish in vain. Is there any point, Mr. Damopolon, which I have not made clear? I don't know what implement you used to strike Sir Jeffrey, nor do I know what you did with his ash-stick!..."

Clutching wildly at the table, I rose to my feet, my gaze set amazedly upon the man thus accused, upon the man I had called my friend, upon the man who owed so much to the dead baronet. And he?... He tossed his cigarette into the hearth and shrugged his shoulders. But, now, I saw that he was deathly pale. He began speaking, in a hoarse, mechanical voice:

"I struck him with a broken elm branch," he said. "His hat saved him. I completed the matter with my bare hands. I was desperate. You need not tell me that Olive--Miss Baird--has confessed to our secret marriage, nor shall I weary you with the many reasons I had to hate her father and the pressing need I had for the fortune which she inherits at his death. It is finished; I have lost, and----"

"Carter!" cried East. "Quick! quick!"

But though the detective, who had been edging nearer and nearer to the speaker, now sprang upon him with the leap of a panther, he was too late. The sound of a muffled shot echoed through The Warrens, and the Greek fell with an appalling crash fully over the library table, so that the blue monkey slid across its polished surface and was shattered to bits upon the oaken floor!

The Riddle of Ragstaff

I

"WELL, Harry, my boy, and what's the latest news from Venice?"

Harry Lorian stretched his long legs and lay back in his chair.

"I had a letter from the governor this morning, Colonel. He appears to be filling his portfolio with studies of windows and doorways and stair-rails and the other domestic necessities dear to his architectural soul!"

Colonel Reynor laughed in his short, gruff way, as my friend, Lorian, gazing sleepily about the quaint old hall in which we sat, but always bringing his gaze to one point--a certain door--blew rings of smoke straightly upward.

"I suppose," said our host, the Colonel, "most of the material will be used for the forthcoming book?"

"I suppose so," drawled Lorian, glancing for the twentieth time at the yet vacant doorway by the stair-foot. "The idea of architects and artists and other constitutionally languid people, having to write books, fills my soul with black horror."

"He had a glorious time with our old panelling, Harry," laughed the Colonel, waving his cigar vaguely toward the

panelled walls and nooks which gradually were receding into the twilight.

"Yes," said my friend. "He was here quite an unconscionable time--even for an old school chum of the proprietor. I hope you counted the spoons when he left!"

Lorian's disrespectful references to Sir Julius, his father, were characteristic; for he reverences that famous artist with the double love of a son and a pupil.

"Of course we did," chuckled Reynor. "Nothing missing, my boy!"

"That's funny," drawled Lorian. "Because if he didn't steal it from here I can't imagine from where he stole it!"

"Stole what, Harry?"

"Whatever some chap broke into his studio for last night!"

"Eh!" cried the Colonel, sitting suddenly very upright. "Into your father's studio? Burglars?"

"Suppose so," was the reply. "They took nothing that I was aware to be in his possession, though the place was ransacked. I naturally concluded that they had taken something that I was *unaware* to be in his----Ah!"

Sybil Reynor entered by the door which, for the past twenty minutes, had been the focus of Lorian's gaze. The gathering dusk precluded the possibility of my seeing with certainty, but I think her face flushed as her dark eyes rested upon my friend. Her beauty is not of the kind which needs deceptive half-lights to perfect it, but there in the dimness, as she came towards us, she looked very lovely and divinely graceful. I did not envy Lorian his good fortune; but I suppressed a sigh when I saw how my existence had escaped the girl's notice and how the world in her eyes, contained only a Henry Lorian, R.I.

Her mother entered shortly afterwards and a general conversation arose, which continued until the arrival of Ralph Edie and his sister. They were accompanied by Felix Hulme; and their advent completed the small party expected at Ragstaff Park.

"You late arrivals," said Lorian, "have only just time to dress, unless you want to miss everything but the nuts!"

"Oh, Harry!" said Mrs. Reynor, "you are as bad as your father!"

"Worse," said Lorian promptly. "I am altogether more rude and have a bigger appetite!"

With such seeming trivialities, then, opened the drama of Ragstaff, the drama in which Fate had cast four of us for leading roles.

II

Following dinner, the men--or, as my friend has it, "the gunners"--drifted into the hall. The hall at Ragstaff Park is fitted as a smoking lounge. It dates back to Tudor days and affords some magnificent examples of mediaeval panelling. At every point the eye meets the device of a man with a ragged staff--from which the place derives its name, and which is the crest of the Reynors.

A conversation took place to which, at the time, I attached small importance, but which, later, assumed a certain significance.

"Extraordinary business," said Felix Hulme--"that attempted burglary at Sir Julius's studio last night."

"Yes," replied Lorian. "Who told you?"

Hulme appeared to be confused by the abrupt question.

"Oh," he replied, "I heard of it from Baxter, who has the next studio, you know."

"When did you see Baxter?" asked Lorian casually.

"This morning."

"I suppose," said Colonel Reynor to my friend, "a number of your father's drawings are there?"

"Yes," answered Lorian slowly; "but the more valuable ones I have at my own studio, including those intended for use in his book."

Something in his tone caused me to glance hard at him.

"You don't think they were the burglar's objective?" I suggested.

"Hardly," was the reply. "They would be worthless to a thief."

"First I've heard of this attempt, Lorian," said Edie. "Anything missing?"

"No. The thing is an utter mystery. There were some odds and ends lying about which no ordinary burglar could very well have overlooked."

"If any loss had been sustained," said the Colonel, half-jestingly, "I should have put it down to the Riddle!"

"Don't quite follow you, Colonel," remarked Edie. "What riddle?"

"The family Riddle of the Ragstuffs," explained Lorian. "You've seen it--over there by the staircase."

"Oh!" exclaimed the other, "you mean that inscription on the panel--which means nothing in particular? Yes, I have examined it several times. But why should it affect the fortunes of Sir Julius?"

"You see," was the Colonel's reply, "we have a tradition in the family, Edie, that the Riddle brings us luck, but brings misfortune to anyone else who has it in his possession. It's never been copied before; but I let Lorian--Sir Julius--make a drawing of it for his forthcoming book on Decorative Wood-carving. I don't know," he added smilingly, "if the mysterious influence follows the copy or only appertains to the original."

"Let us have another look at it," said Edie. "It has acquired a new interest!"

The whole party of us passed idly across the hall to the foot of the great staircase. From the direction of the drawing-room proceeded the softly played strains of the *Duetto* from *Cavalleria*. I knew Sybil Reynor was the player, and I saw Lorian glance impatiently in the direction of the door. Hulme detected the glance, too, and an expression rested momentarily upon his handsome face which I found myself at a loss to define.

"You see," said the Colonel, holding a candle close to the time-blackened panel, "it is a meaningless piece of mediaeval doggerel roughly carved in the wood. The oak-leaf border is very fine, so your father tells me, Harry"--to Lorian--"but it is probably the work of another hand, as is the man and ragged staff which form the shield at the top."

"Has it ever occurred to you," asked Hulme, "that the writing might be of a very much later date--late Stuart, for instance?"

"No," replied the Colonel abruptly, and turned away. "I am sure it is earlier than that."

I was not the only member of the party who noticed the curt tone of his reply; and when we had all retired for the night I lingered in Lorian's room and reverted to the matter.

"Is the late Stuart period a sore point with the Colonel?" I asked.

Lorian, who was in an unusually thoughtful mood, lighted his pipe and nodded.

"It is said," he explained, "that a Reynor at about that time turned buccaneer and became the terror of the two Atlantics! I don't know what possessed Hulme to say such a thing. Probably he doesn't know about the piratical page in the family records, however. He's a strange chap."

"He is," I agreed. "Everybody seems to know him, yet nobody knows anything *about* him. I first met him at the Travellers' Club. I was unaware, until I came down here this time, that the Colonel was one of his friends."

"Edie brought him down first," replied Lorian. "But I think Hulme had met Sybil--Miss Reynor--in London, before. I may be a silly ass, but somehow I distrust the chap--always have. He seems to know altogether too much about other people's affairs."

I mentally added that he also took too great an interest in a certain young lady to suit Lorian's taste. We chatted upon various matters--principally upon the manners, customs, and manifold beauties of Sybil Reynor--until my friend's pipe went out. Then I bade him good night and went to my own room.

III

With that abruptness characteristic of the coast and season, a high wind had sprung up since the party had separated. Now a continuous booming filled the night, telling how the wrath of the North Atlantic spent itself upon the

western rocks.

To a town-dweller, more used to the vaguely soothing hum of the metropolis, this grander music of the elements was a poor sedative. Sleep evaded me, tired though I was, and I presently found myself drifting into that uncomfortable frame of mind between dreaming and waking, wherein one's brain becomes a torturing parrot-house, filled with some meaningless reiteration.

"The riddle of the ragged staff--the riddle of the ragged staff," was the phrase that danced maddeningly through my brain. It got to that pass with me, familiar enough to victims of insomnia, when the words began to go to a sort of monotonous melody.

Thereupon, I determined to light a candle and read for a while, in the hope of inducing slumber.

The old clock down in the hall proclaimed the half-hour. I glanced at my watch. It was half-past one. The moaning of the wind and the wild song of the sea continued unceasingly.

Then I dropped my paper--and listened.

Amid the mighty sounds which raged about Ragstaff Park it was one slight enough which had attracted my attention. But in the elemental music there was a sameness which rendered it, after a time, negligible. Indeed, I think sleep was not far off when this new sound detached itself from the old--like the solo from its accompaniment.

Something had fallen, crashingly, within the house.

It might be some object insecurely fastened which had been detached in the breeze from an open window. And, realising this, I waited and listened.

For some minutes the wind and the waves alone represented sound. Then my ears, attuned to this stormy conflict, and sensitive to anything apart from it, detected a faint scratching and tapping.

My room was the first along the corridor leading to the west wing, and therefore the nearest to the landing immediately above the hall. I determined that this mysterious disturbance proceeded from downstairs. At another time, perhaps, I might have neglected it, but to-night, and so recently following upon Lorian's story of the attempt upon his father's studio, I found myself keenly alive to the burglarious possibilities of Ragstaff.

I got out of bed, put on my slippers, and, having extinguished the candle, was about to open the door when I observed a singular thing.

A strong light--which could not be that of the moon, for ordinarily the corridor beyond was dark--shone under the door!

Even as I looked in amazement it was gone.

Very softly I turned the knob.

Careful as I was, it slipped from my grasp with a faint *click*. To this, I think, I owed my failure to see more than I did see. But what I saw was sufficiently remarkable.

Cloud-banks raced across the sky tempestuously, and, as I peered over the oaken balustrade down into the hall, one of these impinged upon the moon's disc and, within the space of two seconds or less, had wholly obscured it. Upon where a long, rectangular patch of light, splashed with lozenge-shaped shadows spread from a mullioned window across the polished floor, crept a band of blackness--widened--claimed half--claimed the whole--and left the hall in darkness.

Yet, in the half-second before the coming of the cloud, and as I first looked down, I had seen something--something indefinable. All but immediately it was lost in the quick gliding shadow--yet I could be sure that I had seen--what?

A gleaming, metallic streak--almost I had said a sword--which leapt from my view into the bank of gloom!

Passing the cloud, and the moon anew cutting a line of light through the darkness of the hall, nothing, no one, remained to be seen. I might have imagined the presence of the shining blade, rod, or whatever had seemed to glitter in the moon-rays; and I should have felt assured that such was the case but for the suspicion (and it was nearly a certainty) that a part of the shadow which had enwrapped the mysterious appearance had been of greater depth than the rest--more tangible; in short, had been no shadow, but a substance--the form of one who lurked there.

Doubtful how to act, and unwilling to disturb the house without good reason, I stood hesitating at the head of the stairs.

A grating sound, like that of a rusty lock, and clearly distinguishable above the noise occasioned by the wind, came to my ears. I began slowly and silently to descend the stairs.

At the foot I paused, looking warily about me. There was no one in the hall.

A new cloud swept across the face of the moon, and utter darkness surrounded me again. I listened intently, but nothing stirred.

Briefly I searched all those odd nooks and corners in which the rambling place abounded, but without discovering anything to account for the phenomena which had brought me there at that hour of the night. The big doors were securely bolted, as were all the windows. Extremely puzzled, I returned to my room and to bed.

In the morning I said nothing to our host respecting the mysterious traffic of the night, since nothing appeared to be disturbed in any way.

"Did you hear it blowing?" asked Colonel Reynor during breakfast. "The booming of the waves sounded slap under the house. Good job the wind has dropped this morning."

It was, indeed, a warm and still morning, when on the moorland strip beyond the long cornfield, where the thick fir-tufts marked the warren honeycomb, partridges might be met with in many coveys, basking in the sandy patches.

There were tunnels through the dense bushes to the west, too, which led one with alarming suddenness to the very brink of the cliff. And here went scurrying many a hare before the armed intruder.

Lorian and I worked around by lunch-time to the spinneys east of the cornfield, and, nothing loath to partake of the substantial hospitalities of Ragstaff, made our way up to the house. There is a kind of rock-garden from which you must approach from that side. It affords an uninterrupted view of the lower part of the grounds from the lawn up to the terrace.

Only two figures were in sight; and they must have been invisible from any other point, as we, undoubtedly, were invisible to them.

They were those of a man and a girl. They stood upon the steps leading down from the lawn to the rose-garden. It was impossible to misunderstand the nature of the words which the man was speaking. But I saw the girl turn aside and shake her head. The man sought to take her hand and received a further and more decided rebuff.

We hurried on. Lorian, though I avoided looking directly at him, was biting his lip. He was very pale, too. And I knew that he had recognized, as I had recognized, Sybil Reynor and Felix Hulme.

IV

During lunch, a Mr. Findon, who had driven over with one of the Colonel's neighbours, asked Sybil Reynor whether the peculiar and far from beautiful ring which she invariably wore was Oriental. From his conversation I gathered that he was something of an expert.

"It is generally supposed to be Phoenician, Mr. Findon," she answered; and slipping it from her finger she passed it to him. "It is my lot in life to wear it always, hideous though it is!"

"Indeed! An heirloom, I suppose?"

"Yes," replied the girl; "and an ugly one."

In point of fact, the history of the ring was as curious as that of the Riddle. For generations it had been worn by the heir of Ragstaff from the day of his majority to that of his eldest son's. Colonel Reynor had no son. Hence, following the tradition as closely as circumstances allowed, he had invested Sybil with the ring upon the day that she came of age--some three months prior to the time of which I write.

As Mr. Findon was about to return the ring, Lorian said:

"Excuse me. May I examine it for a moment?"

"Of course," replied Sybil.

He took it in his hand and bent over it curiously. I cannot pretend to explain what impelled me to glance towards Hulme at that moment; but I did do so. And the expression which rested upon his dark and usually handsome face positively alarmed me.

I concluded that, beneath the cool surface, he was a man of hot passions, and I would have ascribed the fixed glare to the jealousy of a rejected suitor in presence of a more favoured rival, had it centred upon Lorian. But it appeared to be focused, particularly, upon the ring.

The incident impressed me very unfavourably. A sense of mystery was growing up around me--pervading the atmosphere of Ragstaff Park.

After lunch Lorian and I again set out in company, but my friend appeared to be in anything but sporting humour. We bore off at a sharp angle from the Colonel and some others who were set upon the rough shooting on the western rim of the moors and made for the honeycombed ground which led one upward to the cliff edge.

Abruptly, we found ourselves upon the sheer brink, with the floor of the ocean at our feet and all the great Atlantic before us.

"Let us relent of our murderous purpose," said Lorian, dropping comfortably on to a patch of velvety turf and producing his pipe. "I have dragged you up here with the malicious intention of talking to you."

I was not sorry to hear it. There was much that I wished to discuss with him.

"I should have stayed to say something to some one," he added, carefully stuffing his briar, "but first I wanted to say something to you." He paused, fumbling for matches. "What," he continued, finding some and striking one, "is Felix Hulme's little game?"

"He wants to marry Miss Reynor."

"I know; but he needn't get so infernally savage because she won't accept him. He looked at me in a positively murderous way at lunch to-day."

"So you noticed that?"

"Yes--and I saw that you noticed it, too."

"Listen," I said. "Leaving Hulme out of the question, there is an altogether more mysterious business afoot." And I told him of the episode of the previous night.

He smoked stolidly whilst I spoke, frowning the while; then:

"Old chap," he said, "I begin to have a sort of glimmering of intelligence. I believe I am threatened with an idea! But it's such an utterly fantastic hybrid that I dare not name it--yet."

He asked me several questions respecting what I had seen, and my replies appeared to confirm whatever suspicion was gathering in his mind. We saw little enough sport, but came in later than anyone.

During dinner there was an odd incident. Lorian said:

"Colonel, d'you mind my taking a picture of the Riddle?"

"Eh!" said the Colonel. "What for? Your father made a drawing of it."

"Yes, I know," replied Lorian. "I mean a photograph."

"Well," mused the Colonel, "I don't know that there can be much objection, since it has been copied once. But have you got a camera here?"

"Ah--no," said my friend thoughtfully, "I haven't. Can anybody lend me one?"

Apparently no one could.

"If you care to drive over to Dr. Mason's after dinner," said our host, "he will lend you one. He has several."

Lorian said he would, and I volunteered to accompany him. Accordingly the Colonel's high dogcart was prepared; and beneath a perfect moon, swimming in a fleckless sky which gave no hint of the storm to come, we set off for the doctor's.

My friend's manoeuvres were a constant source of surprise to me. However, I allowed him to know his own business best, and employed my mind with speculations respecting this mystery, what time the Colonel's spirited grey whisked us along the dusty roads.

We had just wheeled around Dr. Mason's drive, when the fact broke in upon my musings that a Stygian darkness

had descended upon the night, as though the moon had been snuffed, candle-wise.

"Devil of a storm brewing," said Lorian. "Funny how the weather changes at night."

Two minutes after entering the doctor's cosy study, down came the rain.

"Now we're in for it!" said Mason. "I'll send Wilkins to run the dogcart into the stable until it blows over."

The storm proved to be a severe one; and long past midnight, despite the doctor's hospitable attempts to detain us, we set off for Ragstaff Park.

"We can put up the grey ourselves," said Lorian. "I love grooming horses! And by going around into the yard and throwing gravel up at his window, we can awaken Peters without arousing the house. This plan almost startles me by its daring originality. I fear that I detect within myself the symptoms of genius."

So, with one of Dr. Mason's cameras under the seat, we started back through the sweet-smelling lanes; and, at about twenty minutes past one, swung past the gate lodge and up the long avenue, the wheels grinding crisply upon the newly wetted gravel. There was but little moon, now, and the house stood up, an irregular black mass, before us.

Then, from three of the windows, there suddenly leapt out a dazzling white light!

Lorian pulled up the grey with a jerk.

"Good God!" he said. "What's that! An explosion!"

But no sound reached us. Only, for some seconds, the hard, white glare streamed out upon the steps and down on to the drive. Suddenly as it had come--it was gone, and the whole of Ragstaff was in darkness as before!

The horse started nervously, but my friend held him with a firm hand, turning and looking at me queerly.

"That's what shone under your door last night!" he said. "That light was in the hall!"

V

Peters was awakened, the horse stabled and ourselves admitted without arousing another soul. As we came around from the back of the house (we had not entered by the main door), and, candles in hand, passed through the hall, nothing showed as having been disturbed.

"Don't breathe a word of our suspicions to anyone," counselled Lorian.

"What *are* our suspicions?" said I.

"At present," he replied, "indefinable."

To-night the distant murmur of the sea proved very soothing, and I slept soundly. I was early afoot, however, but not so early as Lorian. As I passed around the gallery above the hall, on my way to the bathroom, I saw him folding up the tripod of the camera which he had borrowed from Dr. Mason. The morning sun was streaming through the windows.

"Hullo!" Lorian called to me. "I've got a splendid negative, I think. Peters is rigging up a dark-room in the wine-cellar--delightful site for the purpose! Will you join me in developing?"

Although I was unable to conjecture what my friend hoped to gain by his photographic experiments, I agreed, prompted as much by curiosity as anything else. So, after my tub, I descended to the cellar and splashed about in Hypo., until Lorian declared himself satisfied.

"The second is the best," he pronounced critically, holding the negative up to the red lamp. "I made three exposures in all; but the reflection from the polished wood has rather spoiled the first and also the third."

"Whatever do you want with this photograph, anyway," I said, "when the original is available?"

"My dear chap," he replied, "one cannot squat in the hall fixedly regarding a section of panel like some fakir staring at a palm leaf!"

"Then you intend to study it?"

"Closely!"

As a matter of fact, he did not join us during the whole of the day; but since he spent the greater part of the time in

his own room, I did not proffer my aid. From a remark dropped by the Colonel, I gathered that Sybil had volunteered to assist, during the afternoon, in preparing prints.

I was one of the first in to tea, and Lorian came racing out to meet me.

"Not a word yet," he said, "but if the Colonel is agreeable, I shall tell them all at dinner!"

"Tell them what?" I began----

Then I saw Sybil Reynor standing in the shadow of the porch, and, even from that distance, saw her rosy blushes.

I understood.

"Lucky man!" I cried, and wrung his hand warmly. "The very best of good wishes, old chap. I am delighted!"

"So am I!" replied Lorian. "But come and see the print."

We went into the house together; and Sybil blushed more furiously than ever when I told her how I envied Lorian-- and added that he deserved the most beautiful girl in England, and had won her.

Lorian had a very clear print of the photograph pinned up to dry on the side of his window.

"We shall be busy to-night!" he said mysteriously.

He had planned to preserve his great secret until dinner-time; but, of course, it came out whilst we sat over tea on the balcony. The Colonel was unfeignedly delighted, and there is nothing secretive about Colonel Reynor. Consequently, five minutes after he had been informed how matters were between his daughter and Lorian, all the house knew.

I studied the face of Hulme, to see how he would take the news. But he retained a perfect mastery of himself, though his large dark eyes gleamed at discord with the smile which he wore.

Our photographic experiments were forgotten; and throughout dinner, whereat Sybil looked exquisitely lovely and very shy, and Lorian preserved an unruffled countenance, other topics ruled.

It was late before we found ourselves alone in Lorian's room, with the print spread upon the table beneath the light of the shaded lamp.

We bent over it.

"Now," said Lorian, "I assume that this is some kind of cipher!"

I stared at him surprisedly.

"And," he continued, "you and I are going to solve it if we sit up all night!"

"How do you propose to begin?"

"Well, as it appears to mean nothing in particular, as it stands, I thought of beginning by assuming that the letters have other values altogether. Therefore, upon the basis that *e* is the letter which most frequently occurs in English, with *a, o, i, d, h, n, r*, afterwards, I had thought of resolving it into its component letters."

"But would that rule apply to mediaeval English?"

"Ah," said Lorian thoughtfully, "most sage counsellor! A wise and timely thought! I'm afraid it wouldn't."

"What now?"

Lorian scratched his head in perplexity.

"Suppose," he suggested, "we write down the words plainly, and see if, treating each one separately, we can find other meanings to them."

Accordingly, upon a sheet of paper, I wrote:

Wherso eer thee doome bee
Looke untoe ye strypped tree
Offe ragged staffe. Upon itte ley
Golde toe greene ande kay toe kay.

Our efforts in the proposed direction were rewarded with poor success. Some gibberish even less intelligible than the original was the only result of our labour.

Lorian threw down his pencil and began to reload his pipe.

"Let us consider possible meanings to the original words," he said. "Do you know of anything in the neighbourhood which might answer to the description of a 'strypped tree'?"

I shook my head.

"What has occasioned your sudden interest in the thing?" I asked wearily.

"It is a long story," he replied; "and I have an idea that there's no time to be lost in solving the Riddle!"

However, even Lorian's enthusiasm flagged at last. We were forced to admit ourselves hopelessly beaten by the Riddle. I went to my own room feeling thoroughly tired. But I was not destined to sleep long. A few minutes after closing my eyes (or so it seemed), came a clamouring at the door.

I stumbled sleepily out of bed, and, slipping on my dressing-gown, admitted Lorian. Colonel Reynor stood immediately behind him.

"Most extraordinary business!" began the latter breathlessly. "Sybil had--*you* tell him, Harry!"

"Well," said Lorian, "it is not unexpected! Listen: Sybil woke up a while ago, with the idea that she had forgotten something or lost something--you know the frame of mind! She went to her dressing-table and found the family ring missing!"

"*The ring!*" burst in the Colonel excitedly. "Amazing!"

"She remembered having taken it off, during the evening, to--er--to put another one on! But she was unable to recall having replaced it. She determined to run down and see if she had left it upon the seat in the corner of the library. Well, she went downstairs in her dressing-gown, and, carrying a candle, very quietly, in order to wake no one, crossed to the library and searched unavailingly. She heard a faint noise outside in the hall."

Lorian paused. Felix Hulme had joined the party.

"What's the disturbance?" he asked.

"Oh," said Lorian, turning to him, "it's about Sybil. She was down in the library a while ago to look for something, and heard a sort of grating sound out in the hall. She came out, and almost fell over an iron-bound chest, about a foot and a half long, which stood near the bottom of the staircase!"

"Good heavens, Lorian!" I cried, "how had it come there?"

"Sybil says," he resumed, "that she could not believe her eyes. She stooped to examine the thing ... and with a thrill of horror saw it to be roughly marked *with a skull and cross-bones!*"

"My dear Lorian," said Hulme, "are you certain that Miss Reynor was awake?"

"She woke *us* quickly enough!" interrupted the Colonel. "Poor girl, she was shaking dreadfully. Thought it was a supernatural appearance. She's with her mother now."

"But the box!" I cried. "Where is the box?"

"That's the mystery," answered Colonel Reynor. "I was downstairs two minutes later, and there was nothing of the kind to be seen! Has our Ragstaff ghost started walking again, I wonder? You ought to know, Hulme; you're in the Turret Room--that is the authentic haunted chamber!"

"I was aroused by the bell ringing," replied Hulme. "I am a very light sleeper. But I heard or saw nothing supernatural."

"By the way, Hulme," said my friend, "the Turret Room is directly above the hall. I have a theory. Might I come up with you for a moment?"

"Certainly," replied Hulme.

We all went up to the Turret Room. Having climbed the stairs to this apartment, you enter it by descending three steps. It is octagonal and panelled all around. My friend tapped the panels and sounded all the oaken floor-boards.

Then, professing himself satisfied, he bade Hulme good night, and accompanied me to my room.

VI

Ragstaff Park slumbered once more. But Lorian sat upon the edge of my bed, smoking and thinking hard. He had been to his own room for the print of the Riddle, and it lay upon a chair before him.

"Listen to this," he said suddenly: "(a) Some one breaks into the governor's studio, and takes nothing. His drawings of the Ragstaff Riddle happen to be at my studio. (b) You hear a noise in the night, and see (1) a bright light; (2) a gleaming rod. (c) You and I see a bright light on the following night, and presumably proceeding from the same place; i.e., the hall. (d) Something I have not mentioned before--Hulme has a camera in his kit! And he doesn't want the fact known!"

"What do you mean?"

"I tested him the other night, by inquiring if anyone could lend me a camera. He did not volunteer! The morning following the mysterious business in the hall, observed by you, I saw a photographic printing frame in his window! He must have one of those portable developers with him."

"And to what does all this point?"

"To the fact that he has made at least three attempts to obtain a copy of the Riddle, and has at last succeeded!"

"Three!"

"I really think so. The evidence points to him as the person who broke into the studio. He made a bad slip. He referred to the matter, and cited Horace Baxter as his informant. Baxter is away!"

"But this is serious!"

"I should say so! He couldn't attempt to photograph the panel in daylight, so he employed magnesium ribbon at night! First time his tripod slipped. It is evidently one of the light, telescopic kind. His negative proved useless. It was one of the metal legs of the tripod which you saw shining! The second time he was more successful. That was the light of his magnesium ribbon you and I saw from the drive!"

"But, Lorian, I went down and searched the hall!"

"Now we come on to the, at present, conjectural part," explained Lorian. "My theory is that Hulme, somewhere or other, has come across some old documents which give the clue to those secret passages said to exist in Ragstaff, but which the Colonel has never been able to locate. I feel assured that there is some means of secret communication between the Turret Room and the hall. I further believe that Hulme has in some way got upon the track of another secret--that of the Riddle."

"But what *is* the secret of the Riddle?"

"In my opinion the Riddle is a clue to another hiding-place, evidently not connected with the maze of passages; possibly what is known as a Priest's Hole. As you know, Hulme asked Sybil to marry him. I believe the man to be in financial straits; so that we must further assume the Riddle to conceal the whereabouts of a treasure, since the Reynors are far from wealthy."

"The *chest!* Lorian! The chest!" I cried.

"Quite so. But what immediately preceded its appearance? The loss of the family ring! If I am not greatly in error, Hulme found that ring! And the ring is the key to the riddle! Do you recall the shape of the bezel? Simply *a square peg of gold!* Look at the photograph!"

He was excited, for once.

"What does it say?" he continued: "'Ye strypped tree!' That means the device of leaves, twigs, and acorns--stripped *from* a tree--see? Here, at the bottom of the panel, is such a group, and (this is where we have been so blind!) intertwined with the design is the word *CAEG*--Ancient Saxon for *key!* Look! 'Golde toe Greene and kay toe kay!' Amongst the *green* leaves is a square hole. The *gold* knob on the ring fits it!"

For a moment I was too greatly surprised for speech. Then:

"You think Hulme discovered this?"

"I do. And I think Sybil's mislaying her ring gave him his big chance. He had got the chest out whilst she was in the library. He must have been inside somewhere looking for it when she passed through the hall. Then, hearing her approach from the library, he was forced to abandon his heavy 'find' and hide in the secret passage which communicates with his room. Directly she ran upstairs he returned for the chest!"

I looked him hard in the face.

"We don't want a scene, Lorian," I began. "Besides, it's just possible you may be wrong."

"I agree," said Lorian. "Come up to his room, now."

Passing quietly upstairs, we paused before the door of the Turret Room. A faint light showed under it. Lorian glanced at me--then knocked.

"Who's there?" came sharply.

"Lorian," answered my friend. "I want a chat with you about the secret passage and the old treasure chest--*before speaking to the Colonel!*"

There was a long silence, then:

"Just a moment," came hoarsely. "Don't come in until I call."

We looked at one another doubtfully. A long minute passed. I could hear a faint sound within. At last came Hulme's voice:

"All right. Come in."

As Lorian threw the door open, a faint *click* sounded from somewhere.

The Turret Room was empty!

"By heaven! he's given us the slip!" cried my friend.

We glanced around the room. A candle burnt upon the table. And upon the bed stood an iron-barred chest, with a sheet of notepaper lying on its lid!

Lorian pounced upon the note. We read it together.

"Mr. Henry Lorian" (it went), "I realize that you have found me out. I will confess that I had no time to open the chest. But as matters stand I only ask you not to pursue me. I have taken nothing not my own. The ring, and an interesting document which I picked up some years ago, are on the table. Offer what explanation of my disappearance you please. I am in your hands."

We turned again to the table. Upon a piece of worn parchment lay the missing ring. Lorian spread out the parchment and bent over it.

"Why," I cried, "it is a plan of Ragstaff Park!"

"With a perfect network of secret passages!" added my friend, "and some instructions, apparently, as to how to enter them. It bears the initials 'R. R.' and, in brackets, 'Capt. S.' I begin to understand."

He raised the candle and stepped across to the ancient chest. It bore a roughly designed skull and cross-bones, and, in nearly defaced red characters, the words:

"CAPTAIN SATAN."

"Captain Satan!" I said. "He was one of the most bloodthirsty pirates who ever harried the Spanish Main!"

"He was," agreed Lorian; "and his real name was Roderick Reynor. He evidently solved the riddle some generations earlier than Hulme--and stored his bloodstained hoard in the ancient hiding-place. Also, you see, he knew about the passages."

"What shall we do?"

"Hulme has surrendered. You can see that the chest has not been opened. Therefore there is only one thing that we *can* do. We must keep what we know to ourselves, return the chest to its hiding-place, and proclaim that we have found the missing ring!"

Down to the hall we bore the heavy chest. The square knob on the ring fitted, as Lorian had predicted, into the hole half hidden among the oak leaves of the design. Without much difficulty we forced back the fastening (it proved to be of a very simple pattern), and slid the whole panel aside. A small, square chamber was revealed by the light of the candle--quite empty.

"As I had surmised," said my friend; "a Priest's Hole."

We carried the chest within, and reclosed the panel, which came to with a sharp *click*.

* * * * *

The story which we invented to account for Hulme's sudden departure passed muster; for one topic usurped the interests of all--the ghostly box, with its piratical emblem.

"My boy," Colonel Reynor said to Lorian, "I cannot pretend to explain what Sybil saw. But it bears curiously upon a certain black page in the family history. If the chest had been tangible, and had contained a fortune, I would not have opened it. Let all pertaining to that part of our records remain buried, say I."

"Which determines our course," explained Lorian to me. "The chest is not ours, and the Colonel evidently would rather not know about it. I regret that I lack the morals of a burglar."

The Master of Hollow Grange

I

JACK DILLON came to Hollow Grange on a thunderous black evening when an ebony cloud crested the hill-top above, and, catching the upflung rays of sunset, glowed redly 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.

The man who had driven him from the station glanced at him, with a curiosity thinly veiled.

"What about your things, sir?" he inquired.

Dillon stared rather blankly at the ivy-covered lodge, which, if appearances were to be trusted, was unoccupied.

"Wait a moment; I will ring," he said curtly; for this furtive curiosity, so ill concealed, had manifested itself in the manner of the taxi-driver from the moment that Dillon had directed him to drive to Hollow Grange.

He pushed open the gate and tugged at the iron ring which was suspended from the wall of the lodge. A discordant clangour rewarded his efforts, the cracked note of a bell that 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 furtive, something akin to the half-veiled curiosity in the eyes of the man who stood watching him; something fearful, too, in both, as though man and bell would whisper: "Return! Beware of disturbing the dwellers in this place."

But Dillon angrily recalled himself to the realities. He felt that these ghostly imaginings were born of the Boche-maltreated flesh, were products of lowered tone; that he would have perceived no query in the glance of the taxi-driver and heard no monkish whisper in the clang of the bell had he been fit, had he been fully recovered from the effects of his wound. Monkish whisper? Yes, that was it--his mind had supplied, automatically, an aptly descriptive term: the cracked bell spoke with the voice of ancient monasteries, had in it the hush of cloisters and the sigh of renunciation.

"Hang it all!" muttered Dillon. "This won't do."

A second time he awoke the ghostly bell-voice, but nothing responded to its call; man, bird, and beast had seemingly deserted Hollow Grange. He was conscious of a sudden nervous irritation, as he turned brusquely and met the inquiring glance of the taxi-man.

"I have arrived before I was expected," he said. "If you will put my things in the porch here I will go up to the house and get a servant to fetch them. They will be safe enough in the meantime."

His own words increased his irritability; for were they not in the nature of an apology on behalf of his silent and unseen host? Were they not a concession to that nameless query in the man's stare? Moreover, deep within his own consciousness, some vague thing was stirring; so that, the man dismissed and promptly departing, Dillon stood glancing from the little stack of baggage in the lodge porch up the gloomy, narrow, and over-arched drive, indignantly aware that he also carried a question in his eyes.

The throb of the motor mounting the steep, winding lane grew dim and more dim until it was borne away entirely upon the fitful breeze. Faintly he 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 extend over the valley.

Amid that ominous stillness of nature he 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 Hollow Grange was demonstrated by the presence of luxuriant weeds in the carriage way. Having proceeded for some distance, until the sheer hillside seemed to loom over him like the wall of a tower, Dillon paused, peering about in the ever-growing darkness. He was aware of a physical chill; certainly no ray of sunlight ever penetrated to this tunnel through the firs. Could he have mistaken the path and be proceeding, not toward the house, but away from it and into the midnight of the woods mantling the hills?

There was something uncomfortable in that reflection; momentarily he knew a childish fear of the darkening woods, and walked forward rapidly, self-assertively. Ten paces brought him 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.

He pressed on with greater assurance until the house became visible. Now he perceived that he had indeed strayed from the carriage-sweep in some way, for the path that he was following terminated at the foot of a short flight of moss-covered brick steps. He mounted the steps and found himself at the bottom of a terrace. The main entrance was far to his left and separated from the terrace by a neglected lawn. That portion of the place was Hanoverian and ugly, whilst the wing nearest to him was Tudor and picturesque. Excepting the yellow light shining out from a sunken window almost at his feet, no illuminations were visible about the house, although the brewing storm had already plunged the hollow into premature night.

Indeed, there was no sign of occupancy about the strange-looking mansion, which might have hidden forgotten for centuries in the horseshoe of the hills. He had sought for rest and quiet; here he should find them. 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, crept up from the wilderness below and down from the fir-woods above.

A thought struggled to assume form in his mind. There was something reminiscent about this house of the woods, this silent house which struck no chord of human companionship, in which was no warmth of life or love. Suddenly, the thought leapt into complete being.

This was the palace of the sleeping beauty to which he had penetrated. It was the fairy-tale dear to childhood which had been struggling for expression in his mind ever since he had emerged from the trees on to the desolate terrace. With the departure of the station cab had gone the last link with to-day, and now he was translated to the goblin realm of fable.

He had crossed the terrace and the lawn, and stood looking through an open French window into a room that evidently adjoined the hall. A great still darkness had come, and on a little table in the room a reading-lamp was burning. It had a quaint, mosaic shade which shut in much of the light, but threw a luminous patch directly on a heap of cushions strewn upon the floor. Face downward in this silken nest, her chin resting upon her hands and her elfin curly brown hair tousled bewitchingly, lay a girl so audaciously pretty that Dillon hesitated to accept the evidence of his eyes.

The crunching of a piece of gravel beneath his foot led to the awakening of the sleeping beauty. She raised her head quickly and then started upright, a lithe, divinely petite figure in a green velvet dress, having short fur-trimmed sleeves that displayed her pretty arms. For an instant it was a startled nymph that confronted him; then a distracting dimple appeared in one fair cheek, and:

"Oh! how you frightened me!" said the girl, speaking with a slight French accent which the visitor found wholly entrancing. "You must be Jack Dillon? I am Phryne."

Dillon bowed.

"How I envy Hyperides!" he said.

A blush quickly stained the lovely face of Phryne, and the roguish eyes were lowered, whereby the penitent Dillon, who had jested in the not uncommon belief that a pretty girl is necessarily brainless, knew that the story of the wonder-woman of Thespiæ was familiar to her modern namesake.

"I am afraid," declared Phryne, with a return of her mischievous composure, "that you are very wicked."

Dillon, who counted himself a man of the world, was temporarily at a loss for a suitable rejoinder. The cause of his hesitancy was twofold. In the first place he had reached the age of disillusionment, whereat a man ceases to believe that a perfectly lovely woman exists in the flesh, and in the second place he had found such a fabulous being in a house of gloom and silence to which, a few moments ago, he had deeply regretted having come.

His father, who had accepted the invitation from an old college friend on his son's behalf, had made no mention of a Phryne, whereas Phryne clearly took herself for granted and evidently knew all about Jack Dillon. The latter experienced a volcanic change of sentiment; Hollow Grange was metamorphosed, and assumed magically the guise of a Golden House, an Emperor's pleasure palace, a fair, old-world casket holding this lovely jewel. But who was she?--and in what spirit should he receive her bewildering coquetries?

"I trust," he said, looking into the laughing eyes, "that you will learn to know me better."

Phryne curtsied mockingly.

"You have either too much confidence in your own character or not enough in my wisdom," she said.

Dillon stepped into the room, and, stooping, took up a book which lay open upon the floor. It was a French edition of *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius.

The hollow was illuminated by a blinding flash of lightning, and Phryne's musical laughter was drowned in the thunder that boomed and crashed in deepening peals over the hills. In a sudden tropical torrent the rain descended, as Dr. Kassimere entered the room.

II

Jack Dillon leant from his open window and looked out over the valley to where a dull red glow crowned the hill-top. There was a fire somewhere in the neighbourhood of the distant town; probably a building had been struck by lightning. The storm had passed, although thunder was still audible dimly, like the roll of muffled drums or a remote bombardment. Stillness had reclaimed Hollow Grange.

He was restless, uneasy; he sought to collate his impressions of the place and its master. Twelve years had elapsed since his one previous meeting with Dr. Kassimere, and little or no memory of the man had remained. So much had intervened; the war--and Phryne. Now that he was alone and could collect his ideas he knew of what Dr. Kassimere's gaunt, wide-eyed face had reminded him: it was of Thoth, the Ibis-headed god whose figure he had seen on the walls of the temples during his service in Egypt.

"Kassimere was always a queer fish, Jack," his father had said; "but most of his eccentricities were due to his passion for study. The Grange is the very place Sir Francis" (the specialist) "would have chosen for your convalescence, and you'll find nothing dangerously exciting in Kassimere's atmosphere!"

Yet there was that about Dr. Kassimere which he did not and could not like; his quietly cordial welcome, his courteous regret that his guest's arrival by an earlier train (a circumstance due to reduced service) had led to his not being met at the station; the charming simplicity with which he confessed to the smallness of his household, and to the pleasure which it afforded him to have the son of an old chum beneath his roof--all these kindly overtures had left the bird-like eyes cold, hard, watchful, calculating. The voice was the voice of a friend and a gentleman, but the face was the face of Thoth.

The mystery of Phryne was solved in a measure. She was Dr. Kassimere's adopted daughter and the orphaned child of Louis Devant, the famous Paris cartoonist, who had died penniless in 1911, at the height of his success. In his selection of a name for her, the brilliant and dissolute artist had exhibited a breadth of mind which Phryne inherited in an almost embarrassing degree.

Her mental equipment was bewildering: the erudition of an Oxford don spiced with more than a dash of Boul' Mich', which made for complexity. Her curious learning was doubtless due to the setting of a receptive mind amid such

environment, but how she had retained her piquant vivacity in Hollow Grange was less comprehensible. The servants formed a small and saturnine company, only two--the housekeeper, Mrs. Harman, a black and forbidding figure, and Madame Charny, a French companion--sleeping in the house. Gawly, a surly creature who neglected the gardens and muttered savagely over other duties, together with his wife, who cooked, resided at the lodge. There were two maids, who lived in the village....

The glow from the distant fire seemed to be reflected upon the firs bordering the terrace below; then Dillon, watching the dull, red light, remembered that Dr. Kassimere's laboratory adjoined the tiny chapel, and that, though midnight drew near, the doctor was still at work there.

Owls and other night birds hooted and shrieked among the trees and many bats were in flight. He found himself thinking of the pyramid bats of Egypt, and of the ibis-headed Thoth who was the scribe of the under-world.

Dr. Kassimere had made himself medically responsible for his case, and had read attentively the letters which Dillon had brought from his own physician. He was to prescribe on the following day, and to-night the visitor found Morpheus a treacherous god. Furtive activities disturbed the house, or so it seemed to the sleepless man tossing on his bed; alert intelligences within Hollow Grange responded to the night-life of the owls without, and he seemed to lie in the shadow of a watchfulness that never slumbered.

III

"There's many a fine walk hereabouts," said the old man seated in the arm-chair in the corner of the *Threshers' Inn* bar-parlour.

Dillon nodded encouragingly.

"There's Ganton-on-the-Hill," continued the ancient. "You can see the sea from there in clear weather; and many's the time I've heard the guns in France from Upper Crobury of a still night. Then, four mile away, there's the haunted Grange, though nobody's allowed past the gate. Not as nobody wants to be," he added, reflectively.

"The haunted Grange?" questioned Dillon. "Where is that?"

"Hollow Grange?" said the old man. "Why, it lies----"

"Oh, Hollow Grange--yes! I know where Hollow Grange is, but I was unaware that it was reputed to be haunted."

"Ah," replied the other, pityingly, "you're new to these parts; I see that the minute I set eyes on you. Maybe you was wounded in France, and you're down here to get well, like?"

"Quite so. Your deductive reasoning is admirable."

"Ah," said the sage, chuckling with self-appreciation, "I ain't lived in these here parts for nigh on seventy-five years without learning to use my eyes, I ain't. For seventy-four years and seven months," he added proudly, "I ain't been outside this here county where I was born, and I can use my eyes, I can; I know a thing I do, when I see it. Maybe it was providence, as you might say, what brought you to the *Threshers* to-day."

"Quite possibly," Dillon admitted.

"He was just such another as you," continued the old man with apparent irrelevance. "You don't happen to be stopping at Hainingham Vicarage?"

"No," replied Dillon.

"Ah! he was stopping at Hainingham Vicarage and he'd been wounded in France. How he got to know Dr. Kassimere I can't tell you; not at parson's, anyway. Parson won't never speak to him. Only last Sunday week he preached agin him; not in so many words, but I could see his drift. He spoke about them heathen women livin' on an island--sort of female Robinson Crusoes, I make 'em out, I do--as saves poor shipwrecked sailors from the sea and strangles of 'em ashore."

Dillon glanced hard at the voluble old man.

"The sirens?" he suggested, conscious of a sudden hot surging about his heart.

"Ah, that's the women I mean."

"But where is the connection?"

"Ah, you're new to these parts, you are. That Dr. Kassimere he keeps a siren down in Hollow Grange. They see her--

these here strangers (same as the shipwrecked sailors parson told about)--and it's all up with 'em."

Dillon stifled a laugh, in which anger would have mingled with contempt. To think that in the twentieth century a man of science was like to meet with the fate of Dr. Dee in the days of Elizabeth! Truly there were dark spots in England. But could he credit the statement of this benighted elder that a modern clergyman had actually drawn an analogy between Phryne Devant and the sirens? It was unbelievable.

"What was the unhappy fate," he asked, masking his intolerance, "of the young man staying at the Vicarage?"

"The same as them afore him," came the startling reply; "for he warn't the first, and maybe"--with a shrewd glance of the rheumy old eyes--"he won't be the last. Them sirens has the powers of darkness. I know, 'cause I've seen one--her at the Grange; and though I'm an old man, nigh on seventy-five, I'll never forget her face, I won't, and the way she smiled at me!"

"But," persisted Dillon, patiently, "what became of this particular young man, the one who was staying at the Vicarage?"

The ancient sage leant forward in his chair and tapped the speaker upon the knee with the stem of his clay pipe.

"Ask them as knows," he said, with impressive solemnity. "Nobody else can tell you!"

And, having permitted an indiscreet laugh to escape him, not another word on the subject could Dillon induce the old man to utter, he strictly confining himself, in his ruffled dignity, to the climatic conditions and the crops.

When Dillon, finally, set out upon the four-mile walk back to the Grange, he realised, with annoyance, that the senile imaginings of his bar-parlour acquaintance lingered in his mind. That Dr. Kassimere dwelt outside the social life of the county he had speedily learnt; but for this he had been prepared. That he might possibly be, not a recluse, but a pariah, was a new point of view. Trivial things, to which hitherto he had paid scant attention, began to marshal themselves as evidence. The two village "helpers," he knew, received extravagant wages, because, as Phryne had confessed, they had "found it almost impossible to get girls to stay." Why?

Of the earlier guest, or guests, who had succumbed to the siren lure of Phryne, he had heard no mention. Why? Save at meal-times he rarely saw his host, who frankly left him to the society of Phryne. Again--why? Dr. Kassimere, in his jealously locked laboratory, was at work day and night upon his experiments. What were these experiments? What was the nature of the doctor's studies?

He had now been for nearly three weeks at Hollow Grange, and never had Dr. Kassimere spoken of his work. And Phryne? The sudden, new thought of Phryne was so strange, so wonderful and overwhelming, that it reacted physically; and he pulled up short in the middle of a field-path, as though some palpable obstacle blocked the way.

Why had he set out alone that day, when all other days had been spent in the girl's company? He had deliberately sought solitude--because of Phryne; because he wanted to think calmly, judicially, to arraign himself before his own judgment, remote from the witchery of her presence. He had tried to render his mind a void, wherein should linger not one fragrant memory of her delicate beauty and charm, so that he might return unbiased to his judgment. He had returned; he was judged.

He loved Phryne madly, insanely. His future, his life, lay in the hollow of her hands.

IV

"Yes," admitted Phryne, "it is true. There were two of them."

"And"--Dillon hesitated--"were they in love with you?"

"Of course," said Phryne, naively.

"But you----"

Phryne shook her curly head.

"I rather liked the French boy, but I do not believe anything that a Frenchman says to a girl; and Harry, the other, was handsome, but so silly...."

"So you did not love either of them?"

"Of course not."

"But," said Dillon, and impulsively he swept her into his arms, "you are going to love me."

One quick upward glance she gave, but instantly lowered her eyes and withheld her bewitching face from him.

"Am I?" she whispered. "You are so conceited."

But as she spoke the words he kissed her, and she surrendered sweetly, nestling her head against his shoulder for a moment. Then, leaping back, bright-eyed and blushing, she turned and ran like a startled fawn across the terrace and into the house.

He saw no more of her until dinner-time, and spent the interval in a kind of suspended consciousness that was new and perturbing. Within him life pulsed at delirious speed, but the universe seemed to have slowed upon its course so that each hour became as two. Throughout dinner, Phryne was deliciously shy to the point of embarrassment; and Dillon, who several times surprised the bird-eyes of Dr. Kassimere studying the girl's face, detained his host, and being a young man of orderly mind, formally asked his consent to an engagement.

The doctor's joy was seemingly so unfeigned that Dillon almost liked him for a moment. He placed no obstacle in the path of the suitor for his adopted daughter's hand, graciously expressing every confidence in the future. His joy was genuine enough, Dillon determined; but from what source did it actually spring? The Thoth-like eyes were exultant, and all the old mistrust poured back in a wave upon the younger man. Was this distrust becoming an obsession? Why should he eternally be seeking an ulterior motive for every act in this man's life?

He went to look for Phryne, and found her in the spot where he had first seen her, prone in a nest of cushions. She sprang up as he entered the room, and glanced at him in that new way which set his heart leaping....

And because of the magic of her presence, it was not until later, when he stood alone in his own room, that he could order the facts gleaned from her.

There was some grain of truth in the story of the ancient gossip at the *Threshers* after all. A young French lieutenant of artillery had received an invitation to spend a leave at Hollow Grange. His Gallic soul had been fired by Phryne's beauty, and although his advances had been met with rebuff, he had asked Dr. Kassimere's permission to pay his court to the girl. On the same evening he had departed hurriedly, and Phryne had supposed, since the doctor never referred to him again, that he had been sent about his business. Then came a strange letter, which Phryne had shown to Dillon. Its tone throughout was of passionate anger, and one passage recurred again and again to Dillon's mind. "I would give my life for you gladly," it read, "but my soul belongs to God...."

Phryne had counted him demented and Dr. Kassimere had agreed with her. But there was Harry Waywright, the nephew of the vicar of St. Peter's at Hainingham. An accidental meeting with Phryne had led to a courtesy call--and the inevitable. It had all the seeming of a case of love-sickness, and the unhappy youth grew seriously ill. From pestering her daily he changed his tactics to studiously avoiding her, until, meeting her in the village one morning, he greeted her with, "I can't do it, Phryne! tell him I can't do it. He can rely upon my word; but I'm going away to try to forget!"

Dr. Kassimere had professed entire ignorance of the meaning of the words. A faint shadow had crossed Phryne's face as she spoke of these matters, but, as a result of her extraordinary beauty, she was somewhat callous where languishing admirers were concerned, and she had dismissed the gloomy twain with a shrug of her charming shoulders.

"Mad!" she had said. "It seems my fate always to meet mad-men!"

The night silence had descended again upon Hollow Grange, disturbed only by the mournful cry of the owl and the almost imperceptible note of the bat. But to the nervous alertness of Dillon, a deep unrest seemed to stir within the house; yet--an unrest not physical but spiritual; it was as the shadow of a sleepless watcher--a shadow creeping over his soul.

What was the explanation lying at the back of it all? Vainly he sought for a theory, however wild, however improbable, that should embrace all the facts known to him and serve either to banish his black doubts or to focus them. Upon one thing he had determined: There was some thing or some one in Hollow Grange that he *feared*, some centre from whence fear radiated.

Phryne, for one fleeting moment, had revealed to him that she, too, had known this formless dread, but only latterly; probably from lack of a more definite date, she had spoken of this fear as first visiting her at about the time of the Frenchman's advent.

"Slowly, he has changed towards me," she had whispered, referring to Dr. Kassimere. "He watches me, sometimes, in a strange way. Oh, he has been so good, so very kind and good, but--I shall be glad when----"

Could some part of the mystery be explained away by the doctor's increasing absorption in his studies, which led him to regard the charge of a ward, and a wayward one at that, as unduly onerous and disturbing? Might it not fairly be supposed that ignorant superstition and the ravings of unrequited passion accounted for the rest?

At the nature of Dr. Kassimere's studies he could not even guess. The greater number of the works in the library related to mysticism in one form or another, although there was a sprinkling of exact science to leaven the whole.

"He can rely upon my word," Waynwright had said. Regarding what, or regarding whom, had he given his word?

The cry of a night-hawk came, as if in answer; the hoot of an owl, as if in mockery. Out beyond the terrace a dull red light showed from Dr. Kassimere's laboratory.

V

Enlightenment came about in this fashion--seeking to quench a feverish thirst, Dillon discovered that no glass had been left in his room. He determined to fetch one from the buffet cupboard downstairs. Softly, in slippers, he descended the stairs and was crossing the hallway when he kicked something--a small book, he thought--that lay there upon the floor. Groping, he found it, slipped it into the pocket of his dressing-gown, and entered the dining-room. He found a tumbler without difficulty, in the dark, noted the presence of a heavy, oppressive odour, and returned upstairs. Now he made another discovery. He had forgotten the nightly draught of medicine prescribed by Dr. Kassimere; a new unopened phial stood upon the dressing-table.

He mixed himself a mild whisky and soda from the decanter and siphon which his host's hospitality caused nightly to be placed in his room, and then, seized by a sudden thought, took out the little book which he had found in the hall.

It was a faded manuscript, in monkish Latin; a copy of an unpublished work of Paracelsus. Many passages had been rendered into English, and the translations, in Dr. Kassimere's minute, cramped writing, were interposed between the bound pages. In these again were interpolated marginal notes, some in the shape of unintelligible symbols, others in that of chemical formulae. Several passages were marked in red ink. And, having perused the first of these which he chanced upon, a clammy moisture broke out upon his skin, accompanied by so marked a nervous trembling that he was forced to seat himself upon the bed.

The secret of this man's ghastly life-work was in his hands; he knew, now, what bargain Dr. Kassimere had proposed to the Frenchman and to the other; he knew why he had adopted the lovely daughter of Louis Devant--and he knew why he, Jack Dillon, had been invited to Hollow Grange. That such a ghoul in human shape could live and have his being amid ordinary mankind was a stupendous improbability which, ten minutes earlier, he would have laughed to scorn.

"My God!" he whispered. "My God!"

His glance fell upon the unopened phial on his dressing-table, and from his soul a silent thanksgiving rose to heaven that he had left that potion untasted. He realised that his own case differed from those of his predecessors in two particulars: He was actually in residence under Dr. Kassimere's roof and receiving treatment from the man's hands. No option was to be offered to *him*; the great experiment, the *Magnum Opus*, was to be performed without his consent!

And Phryne!--Phryne, the other innocent victim of this fiend's lust for knowledge! The thought restored his courage. More than life itself depended upon his coolness and address; he must act, at once. The monstrous possibility hinted at by von Hohenheim--in his earliest published work, *Practica D. Theophrasti Paracelsi*, printed at Augsburg in 1529, was, in this hideous pamphlet, elaborated and brought within the bounds of practical experiment.

He crept to the door, opened it, and stood listening intently. That silence which seemed like a palpable cloud--a cloud masking the presence of one who watched--lay over the house. Slowly he descended to the hall and dropped the horror which the evil genius of von Hohenheim had conceived, upon the spot where it had lain when his foot had discovered it.

A creaking sound warned him of some one's approach, and he had barely time to slip behind some draperies ere a cowed figure bearing a lantern came out into the hall. It was Dr. Kassimere, wearing a loose gown having a monkish hood--and he was searching for something.

Nothing in his experience--not the blood-lust seen in the eyes of men in battle--had prepared him for that which transfigured the face of Dr. Kassimere. The strange semblance of Thoth was there no more; it had given place to another, more active malevolence, to a sort of Satanic *eagerness* indescribably terrifying; it was the face of one possessed.

Like some bird of prey he pounced upon the book, thrust it into the pocket of his gown, and began furtively to retrace his steps. As he entered the big dining-room, Dillon was close upon his heels.

Dr. Kassimere passed into the small room beyond and turned from thence into the library. Dillon, observing every precaution, followed. From the library the doctor entered the short, narrow passage leading to that quaint relic of bygone days and ways--the tiny chapel. At the entrance Dillon paused, watchful. Once, the man in the monkish robe turned, on the time-worn step of the altar, and looked back over his shoulder, revealing a face that might well have been that of Asmodeus himself.

On the left of the altar was the cupboard wherein, no doubt, in past ages, the priest had kept his vestments. The oppressive odour which Dillon had first observed in the dining-room was very perceptible in the chapel; and as Dr. Kassimere opened the door of the cupboard and stepped within, an explanation of the presence of this deathly smell in the house occurred to Dillon's mind. The laboratory adjoined the Grange on this side; here was a private entrance known to, and used by, Dr. Kassimere alone.

His surmise proved to be correct. Occasioning scarcely a sound, the secret door opened, and a fiery glow leapt out across the altar steps, accompanied by a wave of heated air laden with the nauseous, unnameable smell. Within the redly lighted doorway, Dr. Kassimere paused, and glanced at a watch which he wore upon his wrist. Then for a moment he disappeared, to reappear carrying a small squat bottle and a contrivance of wire and gauze the sight of which created in Dillon a sense of physical nausea. It was a chloroform-mask! Both he placed upon a vaguely seen table and again approached the door.

Weakly, Dillon fell back, pressing himself, closely against the chapel wall, as the doctor, this time leaving the secret entrance open--with a purpose in view which the watcher shudderingly recognized--recrossed the chapel and went off, softly treading, in the direction of the library.

All his courage, moral and physical, was called upon now, and knowing, by some intuition of love, what and whom he should find there, he stepped unsteadily into Dr. Kassimere's laboratory....

That there were horrors--monstrosities that may not be described, whose names may not be written--in the place, he realised, in some subconscious fashion; but--prone upon a low, metal couch of most curious workmanship lay Phryne, in her night-robe, still--white; perfect in her pale beauty as her namesake who posed for Praxiteles.

Dillon reeled, steadied himself, and sank upon his knees by the couch.

"Phryne!" he whispered, locking his arms about her--"my Phryne!..."

Then he remembered the gauze mask and even detected the sickly, sweet smell of the anaesthetic. Anger gave him new strength; he raised the girl in his arms and turned towards the door communicating with the chapel.

Framed in the opening was the hooded figure of Dr. Kassimere, confronting him. His face was immobile again, with the immobility of ibis-headed Thoth; his eyes were hard, his voice was cold.

"What is the meaning of this outrage?" he demanded sternly. "Phryne has been taken suddenly ill; an immediate operation may be necessary----"

"Out of my way!" said Dillon, advancing past a huge glass jar filled with reddish liquid that stood upon a pedestal between the couch and the door.

"Be careful, you fool!" shrieked Dr. Kassimere, frenziedly, his calm dropping from him like a cloak and a new and dreadful light coming into the staring eyes.

But he was too late. Dillon's foot had caught the pedestal. With a resounding crash the thing overturned; as Dr. Kassimere sprang forward, he slipped in the slimy stream that was pouring over the laboratory floor--and fell...

Laying Phryne upon the altar, her head resting against the age-worn communion rails, Dillon turned and closed the secret door dividing the house of God from the house of Satan. One glimpse, in the red furnace glow, he had of Dr. Kassimere, writhing upon the slimy floor, shrieking, blaspheming--and fighting, fighting madly, as a man fights for life and more than life....

He had not yet carried the unconscious girl beyond the dining-room, when, above that other smell, he detected the odour of burning wood. A fire had broken out in the laboratory.

* * * * *

Mrs. Jack Dillon mourns her guardian (no trace of whom was ever found in the charred remains of Hollow Grange) to

this day; for she retains no memory of the night of the great fire, but believes that, overcome by the fumes, she was rescued and carried insensible from the house, by her lover. In the latter's bosom the grim secret is locked, with the memory of a demoniac figure, fighting, fighting....

The Curse of a Thousand Kisses

INTRODUCTORY

S AVILLE GRAINGER will long be remembered by the public as a brilliant journalist and by his friends as a confirmed misogynist. His distaste for the society of women amounted to a mania, and to Grainger a pretty face was like a red rag to a bull. This was all the more extraordinary and, for Grainger, more painful, because he was one of the most handsome men I ever knew--very dark, with wonderful flashing eyes and the features of an early Roman--or, as I have since thought, of an aristocratic Oriental; aquiline, clean-cut, and swarthy. At any mixed gathering at which he appeared, women gravitated in his direction as though he possessed some magnetic attraction for the sex, and Grainger invariably bolted.

His extraordinary end--never explained to this day--will be remembered by some of those who read of it; but so much that affected whole continents has occurred in the interval that to the majority of the public the circumstances will no longer be familiar. It created a considerable stir in Cairo at the time, as was only natural, but when the missing man failed to return, the nine days' wonder of his disappearance was forgotten in the excitement of some new story or another.

Briefly, Grainger, who was recuperating at Mena House after a rather severe illness in London, went out one evening for a stroll, wearing a light dust-coat over his evening clothes and smoking a cigarette. He turned in the direction of the Great Pyramid--and never came back. That is the story in its bald entirety. No one has ever seen him since--or ever reported having seen him.

If the following story is an elaborate hoax--perpetrated by Grainger himself, for some obscure reason remaining in hiding, or by another well acquainted with his handwriting--I do not profess to say. As to how it came into my possession, that may be told very briefly. Two years after Grainger's disappearance I was in Cairo, and although I was not staying at Mena House I sometimes visited friends there. One night as I came out of the hotel to enter the car which was to drive me back to the Continental, a tall native, dressed in white and so muffled up that little more of his face than two gleaming eyes was visible, handed me a packet--a roll of paper, apparently--saluted me with extraordinary formality, and departed.

No one else seemed to have noticed the man, although the chauffeur, of course, was nearly as close to him as I was, and a servant from the hotel had followed me out and down the steps. I stood there in the dusk, staring at the packet in my hand and then after the tall figure--already swallowed up in the shadow of the road. Naturally I assumed that the man had made some mistake, and holding the package near the lamp of the car I examined it closely.

It was a roll of some kind of parchment, tied with a fragment of thin string, and upon the otherwise blank outside page my name was written very distinctly!

I entered the car, rather dazed by the occurrence, which presented several extraordinary features, and, unfastening the string, began to read. Then, in real earnest, I thought I must be dreaming. Since I append the whole of the manuscript I will make no further reference to the contents here, but will content myself with mentioning that it was written--with dark-brown ink--in Saville Grainger's unmistakable hand upon some kind of parchment or papyrus which has defied three different experts to whom I have shown it, but which, in short, is of unknown manufacture. The twine with which it was tied proved to be of finely plaited reed.

That part of Grainger's narrative, if the following amazing statement is really the work of Grainger, which deals with events up to the time that he left Mena House--and the world--I have been able to check. The dragoman, Hassan Abdel-Kebir, was still practising his profession at Mena House at the time of my visit, and he confirmed the truth of Grainger's story in regard to the heart of lapis-lazuli, which he had seen, and the meeting with the old woman in the Muski--of which Grainger had spoken to him.

For the rest, the manuscript shall tell Grainger's story.

THE MANUSCRIPT

I

Two years have elapsed since I quitted the world, and the presence in Egypt of a one-time colleague, of which I have been advised, prompts me to put on record these particulars of the strangest, most wonderful, and most beautiful experience which has ever befallen any man. I do not expect my story to be believed. The scepticism of the material world of Fleet Street will consume my statement with its devouring fires. But I do not care. The old itching to make a "story" is upon me. As a "story" let this paper be regarded.

Where the experience actually began I must leave to each reader to judge for himself. I, personally, do not profess to know, even now. But the curtain first arose upon that part of the story which it is my present purpose to chronicle one afternoon near the corner of the Street of the Silversmiths in Cairo. I was wandering in those wonderful narrow, winding lanes, unaccompanied, for I am by habit a solitary being; and despite my ignorance of the language and customs of the natives I awakened to the fact that a link of sympathy--of silent understanding--seemed to bind me to these busy brown men.

I had for many years cherished a secret ambition to pay a protracted visit to Egypt, but the ties of an arduous profession hitherto had rendered its realisation impossible. Now, a stranger in a strange land, I found myself *at home*. I cannot hope to make evident to my readers the completeness of this recognition. From Shepheard's, with its throngs of cosmopolitan travellers and its hosts of pretty women, I had early fled in dismay to the comparative quiet of Mena House. But the only real happiness I ever knew--indeed, as I soon began to realise, had ever known--I found among the discordant cries and mingled smells of perfume and decay in the native city. The desert called to me sweetly, but it was the people, the shops, the shuttered houses, the noise and the smells of the Eastern streets which gripped my heart.

Delightedly I watched the passage of those commercial vehicles, narrow and set high upon monstrous wheels, which convey loads of indescribable variety along streets no wider than the "hall" of a small suburban residence. The Parsees in the Khan Khalil with their carpets and shining silk-ware, the Arab dealers, fierce swarthy tradesmen from the desert, and the smooth-tongued Cairenes upholding embroidered cloths and gauzy *yashmaks* to allure the eye--all these I watched with a kind of gladness that was almost tender, that was unlike any sentiment I had ever experienced toward my fellow-creatures before.

Mendicants crying the eternal "*Bakshish!*", *Sakhas* with their skins of Nile water, and the other hundred and one familiar figures of the quarter filled me with a great and glad contentment.

I purposely haunted the Muski during the heat of the day because at that hour it was comparatively free from the presence of Europeans and Americans. Thus, on the occasion of which I write, coming to the end of the street in which the shops of the principal silversmiths are situated, I found myself to be the only white man (if I except the Greeks) in the immediate neighbourhood.

A group of men hurrying out of the street as I approached it first attracted my attention. They were glancing behind them apprehensively as though at a rabid dog. Then came a white-bearded man riding a tiny donkey and also glancing back apprehensively over his shoulder. He all but collided with me in his blind haste; and, stepping quickly aside to avoid him, I knocked down an old woman who was coming out of the street.

The man who had been the real cause of the accident rode off at headlong speed and I found myself left with the poor victim of my clumsiness in a spot which seemed miraculously to have become deserted. If the shopkeepers remained in their shops, they were invisible, and must have retreated into the darkest corners of the caves in the wall which constitute native emporiums. Pedestrians there were none.

I stooped to the old woman, who lay moaning at my feet ... and as I did so, I shrank. How can I describe the loathing, the repulsion which I experienced? Never in the whole of my career had I seen such a hideous face. A ragged black veil which she wore had been torn from its brass fastenings as she fell, and her countenance was revealed in all its appalling ugliness. Yellow, shrivelled, toothless, it was scarcely human; but, above all, it repelled because of its aspect of *extreme age*. I do not mean that it was like the face of a woman of eighty; it was like that of a woman who had miraculously survived deace for several centuries! It was a witch-face, a deathly face.

And as I shrank, she opened her eyes, moaning feebly, and groping with claw-like hands as if darkness surrounded her. Furthermore I saw a new pain, and a keener pain, light up those aged eyes. She had detected my involuntary movement of loathing.

Those who knew me will bear testimony to the fact that I was not an emotional man or one readily impressionable by any kind of human appeal. Therefore they will wonder the more to learn that this pathetic light in the old woman's eyes changed my revulsion to a poignant sorrow. I had roughly knocked her from her feet and now hesitated to assist her to rise again! Truly, she was scorned and rejected by all. A wave of tenderness, that cannot be described, that could not be resisted, swept over me. My eyes grew misty and a great remorse claimed me.

"Poor old soul!" I whispered.

Stooping, I gently raised the shrivelled, ape-like head, resting it against my knee; and, bending down, I kissed the old woman on the brow!

I record the fact, but even now, looking back upon its happening, and seeking to recapture the cold, solitary Saville Grainger who has left the world, I realise the wonder of it. That *I* should have given rein to such an impulse! That such an impulse should have stirred me! Which phenomenon was the more remarkable?

The result of my act--regretted as soon as performed--was singular. The aged, hideous creature sighed in a manner I can never forget, and an expression that almost lent comeliness to her features momentarily crept over her face. Then she rose to her feet with difficulty, raised her hands as if blessing me, and muttering something in Arabic went shuffling along the deserted street, stooping as she walked.

Apparently the episode had passed unnoticed. Certainly if anyone witnessed it he was well concealed. But, conscious of a strange embarrassment, with which were mingled other tumultuous emotions, I turned out of the Street of the Silversmiths and found myself amid the normal activities of the quarter again. The memory of the Kiss was repugnant, I wanted to wipe my lips--but something seemed to forbid the act; a lingering compassion that was almost a yearning.

For once in my life I desired to find myself among normal, healthy, moderately brainless Europeans. I longed for the smell of cigar-smoke, for the rattle of the cocktail-maker and the sight of a pretty face. I hurried to Shepherd's.

II

The same night, after dinner, I walked out of Mena House to look for Hassan Abd-el-Kebir, the dragoman with whom I had contracted for a journey, by camel, to Sakhara on the following day. He had promised to attend at half-past eight in order to arrange the time of starting in the morning, together with some other details.

I failed to find him, however, among the dragomans and other natives seated outside the hotel, and to kill time I strolled leisurely down the road toward the electric-tram terminus. I had taken no more than ten paces, I suppose, when a tall native, muffled to the tip of his nose in white and wearing a white turban, appeared out of the darkness beside me, thrust a small package into my hand, and, touching his brow, his lips and his breast with both hands, bowed and departed. I saw him no more!

Standing there in the road, I stared at the little package stupidly. It consisted of a piece of fine white silk fastened about some small, hard object. Evidently, I thought, there had been a mistake. The package could not have been intended for me.

Returning to the hotel, I stood near a lamp and unfastened the silk, which was delicately perfumed. It contained a piece of lapis-lazuli carved in the form of a heart, beautifully mounted in gold and bearing three Arabic letters, inlaid in some way, also in gold!

At this singular ornament I stared harder than ever. Certainly the muffled native had made a strange mistake. This was a love-token--and emphatically not for *me*!

I was standing there lost in wonderment, the heart of lapis-lazuli in my palm, when the voice of Hassan disturbed my stupor.

"Ah, my gentleman, I am sorry to be late but----"

The voice ceased. I looked up.

"Well?" I said.

Then I, too, said no more. Hassan Abd-el-Kebir was glaring at the ornament in my hand as though I had held, not a very choice example of native jewellery, but an adder or a scorpion!

"What's the matter?" I asked, recovering from my surprise. "Do you know to whom this amulet belongs?"

He muttered something in guttural Arabic ere replying to my question. Then:

"It is the heart of lapis," he said, in a strange voice. "It is the heart of lapis!"

"So much is evident," I cried, laughing. "But does it alarm you?"

"Please," he said softly, and held out a brown hand--"I will see."

I placed the thing in his open palm and he gazed at it as one might imagine an orchid hunter would gaze at a new species of *Odontoglossum*.

"What do the figures mean?" I asked.

"They form the word *alf*," he replied.

"*Alf*? Somebody's name!" I said, still laughing.

"In Arab it mean ten hundred," he whispered.

"A thousand?"

"Yes--one thousand."

"Well?"

Hassan returned the ornament to me, and his expression was so strange that I began to grow really annoyed. He was looking at me with a mingling of envy and compassion which I found to be quite insufferable.

"Hassan," I said sternly, "you will tell me all you know about this matter. One would imagine that you suspected me of stealing the thing!"

"Ah, no, my gentleman!" he protested earnestly. "But I will tell you, yes, only you will not believe me."

"Never mind. Tell me."

Thereupon Hassan Abd-el-Kebir told me the most improbable story to which I had ever listened. Since to reproduce it in his imperfect English, with my own frequent interjections, would be tedious, I will give it in brief. Some of the historical details, imperfectly related by Hassan as I learned later, I have corrected.

In the reign of the Khalif El-Mamun--a son of Harun er-Rashid and brother of the prototype of Beckford's *Vathek*--one Shawar was Governor of Egypt, and the daughter of the Governor, Scheherazade, was famed throughout the domains of the Khalif as the most beautiful maiden in the land. Wazirs and princes sought her hand in vain. Her heart was given to a handsome young merchant of Cairo, Ahmad er-Madi, who was also the wealthiest man in the city. Shawar, although an indulgent father, would not hear of such a union, however, but he hesitated to destroy his daughter's happiness by forcing her into an unwelcome marriage. Finally, passion conquered reason in the breasts of the lovers and they fled, Scheherazade escaping from the palace of her father by means of a rope-ladder smuggled into the *harem* apartments by a slave whom Ahmad's gold had tempted, and meeting Ahmad outside the gardens where he waited with a fleet horse.

Even the guard at the city gate had been bought by the wealthy merchant, and the pair succeeded in escaping from Cairo.

The extensive possessions of Ahmad were confiscated by the enraged father and a sentence of death was passed upon the absent man--to be instantly put into execution in the event of his arrest anywhere within the domain of the Khalif.

Exiled in a distant oasis, the Sheikh of which was bound to Ahmad by ties of ancient friendship, the prospect which had seemed so alluring to Scheherazade became clouded. Recognising this change in her attitude, Ahmad er-Madi racked his brains for some scheme whereby he might recover his lost wealth and surround his beautiful wife with the luxury to which she had been accustomed. In this extremity he had recourse to a certain recluse who resided in a solitary spot in the desert far from the haunts of men and who was widely credited with magical powers.

It was a whole week's journey to the abode of the wizard, and, unknown to Ahmad, during his absence a son of the Khalif, visiting Egypt, chanced to lose his way on a hunting expedition, and came upon the secret oasis in which Scheherazade was hiding. This prince had been one of her most persistent suitors.

The ancient magician consented to receive Ahmad, and the first boon which the enamoured young man craved of

him was that he might grant him a sight of Scheherazade. The student of dark arts consented. Bidding Ahmad to look into a mirror, he burned the secret perfumes and uttered the prescribed incantation. At first mistily, and then quite clearly, Ahmad saw Scheherazade, standing in the moonlight beneath a tall palm tree--her lips raised to those of her former suitor!

At that the world grew black before the eyes of Ahmad. And he, who had come a long and arduous journey at the behest of love, now experienced an equally passionate hatred. Acquainting the magician with what he had seen, he demanded that he should exercise his art in visiting upon the false Scheherazade the most terrible curse that it lay within his power to invoke!

The learned man refused; whereupon Ahmad, insane with sorrow and anger, drew his sword and gave the magician choice of compliance or instant death. The threat sufficed. The wizard performed a ghastly conjuration, calling down upon Scheherazade the curse of an ugliness beyond that of humanity, and which should remain with her not for the ordinary span of a lifetime but for incalculable years, during which she should continue to live in the flesh, loathed, despised, and shunned of all!

"Until one thousand compassionate men, unasked and of their own free will, shall each have bestowed a kiss upon thee," was the exact text of the curse. "Then thou shalt regain thy beauty, thy love--and death."

Ahmad er-Madi staggered out from the cavern, blinded by a hundred emotions--already sick with remorse; and one night's stage on his return journey dropped dead from his saddle ... stricken by the malignant will of the awful being whose power he had invoked! I will conclude this wild romance in the words of Hassan, the dragoman, as nearly as I can recall them.

"And so," he said, his voice lowered in awe, "Scheherazade, who was stricken with age and ugliness in the very hour that the curse was spoken, went out into the world, my gentleman. She begged her way from place to place, and as the years passed by accumulated much wealth in that manner. Finally, it is said, she returned to Cairo, her native city, and there remained. To each man who bestowed a kiss upon her--and such men were rare--she caused a heart of lapis to be sent, and upon the heart was engraved in gold the number of the kiss! It is said that these gifts ensured to those upon whom they were bestowed the certain possession of their beloved! Once before, when I was a small child, I saw such an amulet, and the number upon it was nine hundred and ninety-nine."

The thing was utterly incredible, of course; merely a picturesque example of Eastern imagination; but just to see what effect it would have upon him, I told Hassan about the old woman in the Muski. I had to do so. Frankly, the coincidence was so extraordinary that it worried me. When I had finished:

"It was she--Scheherazade," he said fearfully. "And it was the *last* kiss!"

"What then?" I asked.

"Nothing, my gentleman. I do not know!"

III

Throughout the expedition to Sakhara on the following day I could not fail to note that Hassan was covertly watching me--and his expression annoyed me intensely. It was that compound of compassion and resignation which one might bestow upon a condemned man.

I charged him with it, but of course he denied any such sentiment. Nevertheless, I knew that he entertained it, and, what was worse, I began, in an uncomfortable degree, to share it with him! I cannot make myself clearer. But I simply felt the normal world to be slipping from under my feet, and, no longer experiencing a desire to clutch at modernity as I had done after my meeting with the old woman, I found myself to be reconciled to my fate!

To my fate? ... to what fate? I did not know; but I realised, beyond any shade of doubt, that something tremendous, inevitable, and ultimate was about to happen to me. I caught myself unconsciously raising the heart of lapis-lazuli to my lips! Why I did so I had no idea; I seemed to have lost identity. I no longer knew myself.

When Hassan parted from me at Mena House that evening he could not disguise the fact that he regarded the parting as final; yet my plans were made for several weeks ahead. Nor did I quarrel with the man's curious attitude. *I* regarded the parting as final, also!

In a word I was becoming reconciled--to something. It is difficult, all but impossible, to render such a frame of mind comprehensible, and I shall not even attempt the task, but leave the events of the night to speak for themselves.

After dinner I lighted a cigarette, and avoiding a particularly persistent and very pretty widow who was waiting to waylay me in the lounge, I came out of the hotel and strolled along in the direction of the Pyramid. Once I looked back--bidding a silent farewell to Mena House! Then I took out the heart of lapis-lazuli from my pocket and kissed it rapturously--kissed it as I had never kissed any object or any person in the whole course of my life!

And why I did so I had no idea.

All who read my story will be prepared to learn that in this placid and apparently feeble frame of mind I slipped from life, from the world. It was not so. The modern man, the Saville Grainger once known in Fleet Street, came to life again for one terrible, strenuous moment ... and then passed out of life for ever.

Just before I reached the Pyramid, and at a lonely spot in the path--for this was not a "Sphinx and Pyramid night"--that is to say, the moon was not at the full--a tall, muffled native appeared at my elbow. He was the same man who had brought me the heart of lapis-lazuli, or his double. I started.

He touched me lightly on the arm.

"Follow," he said--and pointed ahead into the darkness below the plateau.

I moved off obediently. Then--suddenly, swiftly, came revolt. The modern man within me flared into angry life. I stopped dead, and

"Who are you? Where are you leading me?" I cried.

I received no reply.

A silk scarf was slipped over my head by some one who, silently, must have been following me, and drawn tight enough to prevent any loud outcry but not so as to endanger my breathing. I fought like a madman. I knew, and the knowledge appalled me, that I was fighting for life. Arms like bands of steel grasped me; I was lifted, bound and carried--I knew not where....

Placed in some kind of softly padded saddle, or, as I have since learned, into a *shibriyeh* or covered litter on a camel's back, I felt the animal rise to its ungainly height and move off swiftly. As suddenly as revolt had flamed up, resignation returned. I was contented. My bonds were unnecessary; my rebellion was ended. I yearned, wildly, for the end of the desert journey! Some one was calling me and all my soul replied.

For hours, as it seemed, the camel raced ceaselessly on. Absolute silence reigned about me. Then, in the distance I heard voices, and the gait of the camel changed. Finally the animal stood still. Came a word of guttural command, and the camel dropped to its knees. Pillowed among a pile of scented cushions, I experienced no discomfort from this usually painful operation.

I was lifted out of my perfumed couch and set upon my feet. Having been allowed to stand for a while until the effects of remaining so long in a constrained position had worn off, I was led forward into some extensive building. Marble pavements were beneath my feet, fountains played, and the air was heavy with burning ambergris.

I was placed with my back to a pillar and bound there, but not harshly. The bandage about my head was removed. I stared around me.

A magnificent Eastern apartment met my gaze--a great hall open on one side to the desert. Out upon the sands I could see a group of men who had evidently been my captors and my guards. The one who had unfastened the silk scarf I could not see, but I heard him moving away behind the pillar to which I was bound.

Stretched upon a luxurious couch before me was a woman.

If I were to seek to describe her I should inevitably fail, for her loveliness surpassed everything which I had ever beheld--of which I had ever dreamed. I found myself looking into her eyes, and in their depths I found all that I had missed in life, and lost all that I had found.

She smiled, rose, and taking a jewelled dagger from a little table beside her, approached me. My heart beat until I felt almost suffocated as she came near. And when she bent and cut the silken lashing which bound me, I knew such rapture as I had hitherto counted an invention of Arabian poets. I was raised above the joys of common humanity and tasted the joy of the gods. She placed the dagger in my hand.

"My life is thine," she said. "Take it."

And clutching at the silken raiment draping her beautiful bosom, she invited me to plunge the blade into her heart!

The knife dropped, clattering upon the marble pavement. For one instant I hesitated, watching her, devouring her with my eyes; then I swept her to me and pressed upon her sweet lips the thousand and first kiss....

(NOTE.--The manuscript of Saville Grainger finishes here.)

The Turquoise Necklace

I

"HE is the lord of the desert, Effendi," declared Mohammed the dragoman. "From the Valley of Zered to Damascus he is known and loved, but feared. They say"--he lowered his voice--"that he is a great *welee*, and that he is often seen in the street of the attars, having the appearance of a simple old man; but in the desert he is like a bitter apple, a viper and a calamity! Overlord is he of the Bedouins, and all the sons of the desert bow to Ben Azreem, Sheikh of the Ibn-Rawallah."

"What is a *welee*, exactly?" asked Graham.

"A man of God, Effendi, favoured beyond other men."

"And this Arab Sheikh is a *welee*?"

"So it is said. He goes about secretly aiding the poor and afflicted, when he may be known by his white beard----"

"There are many white beards in Egypt," said Graham.

But the other continued, ignoring the interruption:

"And in the desert, Ben Azreem, a horseman unrivalled, may be known by the snow-white horse which he rides, or if he is not so mounted, by his white camel, swifter than the glance of envy, more surefooted than the eager lover who climbs to his enslaver's window."

"Indeed!" said Graham dryly. "Well, I hope I may have the pleasure of meeting this mysterious notability before I leave the country."

"Unless you journey across the sands for many days, it is unlikely. For when he comes into Egypt he reveals himself to none but the supremely good,"--Graham stared--"and the supremely wicked!" added Mohammed.

The poetic dragoman having departed, Graham leaned over to his wife, who had sat spellbound, her big blue eyes turned to the face of Mohammed throughout his romantic narrative.

"These wild native legends appeal to you, don't they?" he said, smiling and patting her hand affectionately. "You superstitious little colleen!"

Eileen Graham blushed, and the blush of a pretty Irish bride is a very beautiful thing.

"Don't you believe it at all, then?" she asked softly.

"I believe there may be such a person as Ben Azreem, and possibly he's a very imposing individual. He may even indulge in visits, incognito, to Cairo, in the manner of the late lamented Harun er-Rashid of *Arabian Nights* memory, but I can't say that I believe in *welees* as a class!"

His wife shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"There is something that I have to tell you, which I suppose you will also refuse to believe," she said, with mock indignation. "You remember the Arabs whom we saw at the exhibition in London?"

Graham started.

"The gentlemen who were advertised as 'chiefs from the Arabian Desert'? I remember *one* in particular."

"That is the one I mean," said Eileen.

Her husband looked at her curiously.

"Your explanation is delightfully lucid, dear!" he said jocularly. "My memories of the gentleman known as El-Suleym, I believe, are not pleasant; his memories of me must be equally unfavourable. He illustrated the fact that savages should never be introduced into civilised society, however fascinating they may be personally. Mrs. Marstham was silly enough to take the man up, and because of the way he looked at you, I was wise enough to knock him down! What then?"

"Only this--I saw him, to-day!"

"Eileen!" There was alarm in Graham's voice. "Where? Here, or in Cairo?"

"As we were driving away from the mosque of the Whirling Dervishes. He was one of a group who stood by the bridge."

"You are certain?"

"Quite certain."

"Did he see you?"

"I couldn't say. He gave no sign to show that he had seen me."

John Graham lighted a cigarette with much care.

"It doesn't matter, anyway," he said, carelessly. "You are as safe here as at the *Ritz*."

But there was unrest in the glance which he cast out across the prospect touched by moon-magic into supernatural beauty.

In the distance gleamed a fairy city of silvern minarets, born, it seemed, from the silvern stream. Beyond lay the night mystery of the desert, into whose vastness marched the ghostly acacias. The discordant chattering and chanting from the river-bank merged into a humming song, not unmusical. The howling of the dogs, even, found a place in the orchestral scheme.

Behind him, in the hotel, was European and American life--modernity; before him was that other life, endless and unchanging. There was something cold, sombre, and bleak in the wonderful prospect, something shocking in the presence of those sight-seeing, careless folk, the luxurious hotel, *all* that was Western and new, upon that threshold of the ancient, changeless desert.

A menace, too, substantial yet cloaked with the mystery of the motherland of mysteries, had arisen now. Although he had assured Eileen that Gizeh was as safe as Piccadilly, he had too much imagination to be unaware that from the Egypt of Cook's to the Egypt of secrets is but a step.

None but the very young or very sanguine traveller looks for adventure nowadays in the neighbourhood of Mena House. When the intrepid George Sandys visited and explored the Great Pyramid, it was at peril of his life, but Graham reflected humorously that the most nervous old ladies now performed the feat almost daily. Yet out here in the moonlight where the silence was, out beyond the radius of "sights," lay a land unknown to Europe, as every desert is unknown.

It was a thought that had often come to him, but it came to-night with a force and wearing a significance which changed the aspect of the sands, the aspect of all Egypt.

He glanced at the charming girl beside him. Eileen, too, was looking into the distance with far-away gaze. The pose of her head was delightful, and he sat watching her in silence. Within the hotel the orchestra had commenced softly to play; but Graham did not notice the fact. He was thinking how easily one could be lost out upon that grey ocean, with its islands of priestly ruins.

"It is growing rather chilly, dear," he said suddenly; "even for fur wraps. Suppose we go in?"

II

The crowd in the bazaar was excessive, and the bent old figure which laboured beneath a nondescript burden, wrapped up in a blue cloth, passed from the noisiness out into the narrow street which ran at right-angles with the lane

of many shops.

Perhaps the old Arab was deaf, perhaps wearied to the point of exhaustion; but, from whatever cause, he ignored, or was unaware of, the oncoming *arabeeyeh*, whose driver had lost control of his horse. Even the shrill scream of the corpulent, white-veiled German lady, who was one of its passengers, failed to arouse him. Out into the narrow roadway he staggered, bent almost double.

Graham, accompanied by Mohammed, was some distance away, haggling with a Greek thief who held the view that a return of three hundred and fifty per cent. spelled black ruination.

Eileen, finding the air stifling, had walked on in the direction of the less crowded street above. Thus it happened that she, and the poor old porter, alone, were in the path of the onward-whirling carriage.

Many women so placed would have stood, frozen with horror, have been struck down by the frantic animal; some would have had sufficient presence of mind to gain the only shelter attainable in time--that of a deep-set doorway. Few would have acted as Eileen acted.

It was under the stimulus of that Celtic impetuosity--that generous madness which seems to proceed, not from the mind, but from the heart--that she leapt, not back, but forward.

She never knew exactly what took place, nor how she escaped destruction; but there was a roaring in her ears, above it rising the Teutonic screams of the lady in the *arabeeyeh*; there was a confused chorus of voices, a consciousness of effort; and she found herself, with wildly beating heart, crouching back into the recess which once had held a *mastabah*.

From some place invisible, around a bend in the tortuous street, came sounds of shouting and that of lashing hoofs. The runaway was stopped. At her feet lay a shapeless bundle wrapped in a blue cloth, and beside her, leaning back against the whitewashed wall, and breathing with short, sobbing breaths, was the old porter.

Now, her husband had his arms about her, and Mohammed, with frightened eyes, hovered in the background. Without undue haste, all the bazaar gradually was coming upon the scene.

"My darling, are you hurt?"

John Graham's voice shook. He was deathly pale.

Eileen smiled reassuringly.

"Not a bit, dear," she said breathlessly. "But I am afraid the poor old man is."

"You are quite sure you are not hurt?"

"I was not so much as touched, though honestly I don't know how either of us escaped. But do see if the old man is injured."

Graham turned to the rescued porter, who now had recovered his composure.

"Mohammed, ask him if he is hurt," he directed.

Mohammed put the question. A curious group surrounded the party. But the old man, ignoring all, knelt and bowed his bare head to the dust at Eileen's feet.

"Oh, John," cried the girl, "ask him to stand up! I feel ashamed to see such a venerable old man kneeling before me!"

"Tell him it is--nothing," said Graham hastily to Mohammed, "and--er----"--he fumbled in his pocket--"give him this."

But Mohammed, looking ill at ease, thrust aside the proffered *bakshish*--a novel action which made Graham stare widely.

"He would not take it, Effendi," he whispered. "See, his turban lies there; he is a *hadj*. He is praying for the eternal happiness of his preserver, and he is interceding with the Prophet (*Salla--'llahu 'aleyhi wasellum*), that she may enjoy the delights of Paradise equally with all true Believers!"

"Very good of him," said Graham, who, finding the danger passed and his wife safe, was beginning to feel embarrassed. "Thank him, and tell him that she is greatly indebted!"

He took Eileen's arm, and turned to force a way through the strangely silent group about. But the aged porter seized the hem of the girl's white skirt, gently detaining her. As he rose upon his knees, Mohammed, with marks of unusual

deference, handed him his green turban. The old man, still clutching Eileen's dress, signed that his dirty bundle should likewise be passed to him. This was done.

Graham was impatient to get away. But---

"Humour him for a moment, dear," said Eileen softly. "We don't want to hurt the poor old fellow's feelings."

Into the bundle the old man plunged his hand, and drew out a thin gold chain upon which hung a queerly cut turquoise. He stood upright, raised the piece of jewellery to his forehead and to his lips, and held it out, the chain stretched across his open palms, to Eileen.

"He must be some kind of pedlar," said Graham.

Eileen shook her head, smiling.

"Mohammed, tell him that I cannot possibly take his chain," she directed. "But thank him all the same, of course."

Mohammed, his face averted from the statuesque old figure, bent to her ear.

"Take it!" he whispered. "Take it! Do not refuse!"

There was a sort of frightened urgency in his tones, so that both Graham and his wife looked at him curiously.

"Take it, then, Eileen," said Graham quickly. "And, Mohammed, you must find out who he is, and we will make it up to him in some way."

"Yes, yes, Effendi," agreed the man readily.

Eileen accordingly accepted the present, glancing aside at her husband to intimate that they must not fail to pay for it. As she took the chain in her hands, the donor said something in a low voice.

"Hang it round your neck," translated Mohammed.

Eileen did so, whispering:

"You must not lose sight of him, Mohammed."

Mohammed nodded; and the old man, replacing his turban and making a low obeisance, spoke rapidly a few words, took up his bundle, and departed. The silent bystanders made way for him.

"Come on," said Graham; "I am anxious to get out of this. Find a carriage, Mohammed. We'll lunch at Shepherd's."

A carriage was obtained, and they soon left far behind them the scene of this odd adventure. With Mohammed perched up on the box, Graham and his wife could discuss the episode without restraint. Graham, however, did most of the talking, for Eileen was strangely silent.

"It is quite a fine stone," he said, examining the necklace so curiously acquired. "We must find some way of repaying the old chap which will not offend his susceptibilities."

Eileen nodded absently; and her husband, with his eyes upon the dainty white figure, found gratitude for her safety welling up like a hot spring in his heart. The action had been characteristic; and he longed to reprove her for risking her life, yet burned to take her in his arms for the noble impulse that had prompted her to do so.

He wondered anxiously if her silence could be due to the after-effects of that moment of intense excitement.

"You don't feel unwell, darling?" he whispered.

She smiled at him radiantly, and gave his hand a quick little squeeze.

"Of course not," she said.

But she remained silent to the end of the short drive. This was not due to that which her husband feared, however, but to the fact that she had caught a glimpse, amongst the throng at the corner of the bazaar, of the handsome, sinister face of El-Suleym, the Bedouin.

III

The moon poured radiance on the desert. At the entrance to a camel-hair tent stood a tall, handsome man, arrayed in

the picturesque costume of the Bedouin. The tent behind him was upheld by six poles. The ends and one side were pegged to the ground, and the whole of that side before which he stood was quite open, with the exception of a portion before which hung a goat-hair curtain.

This was the "house of hair" of the Sheikh El-Suleym, of the Masr-Bishareen--El-Suleym, "the Regicide" outcast of the great tribe of the Bishareen. At some distance from the Sheikh's tent were some half a dozen other and smaller tents, housing the rascally following of this desert outcast.

Little did those who had engaged the picturesque El-Suleym, to display his marvellous horsemanship in London, know that he and those that came with him were a scorn among true sons of the desert, pariahs of that brotherhood which extends from Zered to the Nile, from Tanta to the Red Sea; little did those who had opened their doors in hospitality to the dashing horseman dream that they entertained a petty brigand, sought for by the Egyptian authorities, driven out into ostracism by his own people.

And now before his tent he stood statuesque in the Egyptian moonlight, and looked towards Gizeh, less than thirty miles to the north-east.

As El-Suleym looked towards Gizeh, Graham and his wife were seated before Mena House looking out across the desert. The adventure of the morning had left its impression upon both of them, and Eileen wore the gold chain with its turquoise pendant. Graham was smoking in silence, and thinking, not of the old porter and his odd Eastern gratitude, but of another figure, and one which often came between his mental eye and the beauties of that old, beautiful land. Eileen, too, was thinking of El-Suleym; for the Bedouin now was associated in her mind with the old pedlar, since she had last seen the handsome, sinister face amid the throng at the entrance to the bazaar.

Telepathy is a curious fact. Were Graham's reflections *en rapport* with his wife's, or were they both influenced by the passionate thoughts of that other mind, that subtle, cunning mind of the man who at that moment was standing before his house of hair and seeking with his eagle glance to defy distance and the night?

"Have you seen--him, again?" asked Graham abruptly. "Since the other day at the bridge?"

Eileen started. Although he had endeavoured to hide it from her, she was perfectly well aware of her husband's intense anxiety on her behalf. She knew, although he prided himself upon having masked his feelings, that the presence of the Bedouin in Egypt had cast a cloud upon his happiness. Therefore she had not wished to tell him of her second encounter with El-Suleym. But to this direct question there could be only one reply.

"I saw him again--this morning," she said, toying nervously with the pendant at her neck.

Graham clasped her hand tensely.

"Where?"

"Outside the bazaar, in the crowd."

"You did not--tell me."

"I did not want to worry you."

He laughed dryly.

"It doesn't worry me, Eileen," he said carelessly. "If I were in Damascus or Aleppo, it certainly might worry me to know that a man, no doubt actively malignant towards us, was near, perhaps watching; but Cairo is really a prosaically safe and law-abiding spot. We are as secure here as we should be at--Shepherd's Bush, say!"

He laughed shortly. Voices floated out to them, nasal, guttural, strident; voices American, Teutonic, Gallic, and Anglo-Saxon. The orchestra played a Viennese waltz. Confused chattering, creaking, and bumping sounded from the river. Out upon the mud walls dogs bayed the moon.

But beyond the native village, beyond the howling dogs, beyond the acacia ranks out in the silver-grey mystery of the sands hard by, an outpost of the Pharaohs, where a ruined shrine of Horus bared its secret places to the peeping moon, the Sheikh of the Masr-Bishareen smiled.

Graham felt strangely uneasy, and sought by light conversation to shake off the gloom which threatened to claim him.

"That thief, Mohammed," he said tersely, "has no more idea than Adam, I believe, who your old porter friend really is."

"Why do you think so?" asked Eileen.

"Because he's up in Cairo to-night, searching for him!"

"How do you know?"

"I cornered him about it this afternoon, and although I couldn't force an admission from him--I don't think anybody short of an accomplished K.C. could--he was suspiciously evasive! I gave him four hours to procure the name and address of the old gentleman to whom we owe the price of a turquoise necklace. He has not turned up yet!"

Eileen made no reply. Her Celtic imagination had invested the morning's incident with a mystic significance which she could not hope to impart to her hard-headed husband.

A dirty and ragged Egyptian boy made his way on to the verandah, furtively glancing about him, as if anticipating the cuff of an unseen hand. He sidled up to Graham, thrusting a scrap of paper on to the little table beside him.

"For me?" said Graham.

The boy nodded; and whilst Eileen watched him interestedly, Graham, tilting the communication so as to catch the light from the hotel windows, read the following:

"He is come to here but cannot any farther. I have him waiting the boy will bring you.

"Your obedient Effendi,
MOHAMMED."

Graham laughed grimly, glancing at his watch.

"Only half an hour late," he said, standing up, "Wait here, Eileen; I shall not be many minutes."

"But I should like to see him, too. He might accept the price from me where you would fail to induce him to take it."

"Never fear," said her husband; "he wouldn't have come if he meant to refuse. What shall I offer him?"

"Whatever you think," said Eileen, smiling; "be generous with the poor old man."

Graham nodded and signed to the boy that he was ready to start.

The night swallowed them up; and Eileen sat waiting, whilst the band played softly and voices chatted incessantly around her.

Some five minutes elapsed; ten; fifteen. It grew to half an hour, and she became uneasy. She stood up and began to pace up and down the verandah. Then the slinking figure of the Egyptian youth reappeared.

"Graham Effendi," he said, showing his gleaming teeth, "says you come too."

Eileen drew her wrap more closely about her and smiled to the boy to lead the way.

They passed out from the hotel, turned sharply to the left, made in the direction of the river, then bore off to the right in the direction of the sand-dunes. The murmuring life of Mena House died into remoteness; the discordance of the Arab village momentarily took precedence; then this, in turn, was lost, and they were making out desert-ward to the hollow which harbours the Sphinx. Great events in our lives rarely leave a clear-cut impression; often the turning-point in one's career is a confused memory, a mere clash of conflicting ideas. Trivial episodes are sharp silhouettes; unforgettable; great happenings but grey, vague things in life's panorama. Thus, Eileen never afterwards could quite recall what happened that night. The thing that was like to have wrecked her life had no sharp outlines to etch themselves upon the plate of memory. Vaguely she wondered to what meeting-place the boy was leading her. Faintly she was conscious of a fear of the growing silence, of a warning instinct whispering her to beware of the loneliness of the desert.

Then the boy was gone; the silence was gone; harsh voices were in her ears--a cloth was whipped about her face and strong arms lifted her. She was not of a stock that swoon or passively accept violence. She strove to cry out, but the band was too cunningly fastened to allow of it; she struck out with clenched fists and not unshrewdly, for twice her knuckles encountered a bearded face and a suppressed exclamation told that the blows were not those of a weakling. She kicked furiously and drew forth a howl of pain from her captor. Her hands flew up to the bandage, but were roughly seized, thrust down and behind her, and tied securely.

She was thrown across a saddle, and with a thrill of horror knew herself a captive. Out into the desert she was borne,

into that unknown land which borders so closely upon the sight-seeing track of Cook's. And her helplessness, her inability to fight, broke her spirit, born fighter that she was; and the jarring of the saddle of the galloping horse, the dull thud of the hoofs on the sand, the iron grip which held her, fear, anger, all melted into a blank.

IV

Mohammed the dragoman, with two hotel servants, came upon Graham some time later, gagged and bound behind a sand hillock less than five hundred yards from Mena House. They had him on his feet in an instant, unbound; and his face was ghastly--for he knew too well what the outrage portended.

"Quick!" he said hoarsely. "How long is she gone?"

Mohammed was trembling wildly.

"Nearly an hour, Effendi--nearly an hour. Allah preserve us, what shall we do? I heard it in Cairo to-night--it is all over the bazaars--the Sheikh El-Suleym with the Masr-Bishareen is out. They travel like the wind, Effendi. It is not four days since they stopped a caravan ten miles beyond Bir-Amber, now they are in Lower Egypt. Allah preserve her!" he ran on volubly--"who can overtake the horsemen of the Bishareen?"

So he ran on, wildly, panting as they raced back to the hotel. The place was in an uproar. It was an event which furnished the guests with such a piece of local colour as none but the most inexperienced tourist could have anticipated.

An Arab raid in these days of electric tramways! A captive snatched from the very doors of Mena House! One would as little expect an Arab raid upon the *Ritz*!

The authorities at headquarters, advised of the occurrence, found themselves at a loss how to cope with this stupendous actuality. The desert had extended its lean arm and snatched a captive to its bosom. Cairo had never before entirely realised the potentialities of that all-embracing desert. There are a thousand ways, ten thousand routes, across that ruin-dotted wilderness. Justly did the ancient people worship in the moon the queenly Isis; for when the silver emblem of the goddess claims the sands for her own, to all save the desert-born they become a place of secrets. Here is a theatre for great dramas, wanting only the tragedian. The outlawed Sheikh of the Bishareen knew this full well, but, unlike others who know it, he had acted upon his convictions and revealed to wondering Egypt what Bedouin craft and a band of intrepid horsemen can do, aided by a belt of sand, and cloaked by night.

Graham was distracted. For he was helpless, and realised it. Already the news was in Cairo, and the machinery of the Government at work. But what machinery, save that of the Omniscient, could avail him now?

A crowd of visitors flocked around him, offering frightened consolation. He broke away from them violently--swearing--a primitive man who wanted to be alone with his grief. The idea uppermost in his mind was that of leaping upon a horse and setting out in pursuit. But in which direction should he pursue? One declared that the Arabs must have rode this way, another that, and yet another a third.

Some one shouted--the words came to him as if through a thick curtain--that the soldiers were coming.

"What the hell's the good of it!" he said, and turned away, biting his lips.

When a spruce young officer came racing up the steps to gather particulars, Graham stared at him dully, said, "The Arabs have got her--my wife," and walked away.

The hoof-clatter and accompanying martial disturbance were faint in the distance when Mohammed ran in to where Graham was pacing up and down in an agony of indecision--veritably on the verge of insanity. The dragoman held a broken gold chain in his hand, from which depended a big turquoise that seemed to blink in the shaded light.

"Effendi," he whispered, and held it out upon trembling fingers, "it is her necklet! I found it yonder,"--pointing eastward. "*Sallee 'a-nebee!* it is her necklet!"

Graham turned, gave one wild glance at the thing, and grasped the man by the throat, glaring madly upon him.

"You dog!" he shouted. "You were in the conspiracy! It was you who sent the false messages!"

A moment he held him so, then dropped his hands. Mohammed fell back, choking; but no malice was in the velvet eyes. The Eastern understands and respects a great passion.

"Effendi," he gasped--"I am your faithful servant, and--I cannot write! *Wa-Allah!* and by His mercy, this will save her if

anything can!"

He turned and ran fleetly out, Graham staring after him.

It may seem singular that John Graham remained thus inert--inactive. But upon further consideration his attitude becomes explainable. He knew the futility of a blind search, and dreaded being absent if any definite clue should reach the hotel. Meanwhile, he felt that madness was not far off.

"They say that they have struck out across the Arabian Desert, Mr. Graham--probably in the direction of the old caravan route."

Graham did not turn; did not know nor care who spoke.

"It's four hundred miles across to the caravan route," he said slowly; "four hundred miles of sand--of sand."

V

The most simple Oriental character is full of complexity. Mohammed the dragoman, by birth and education a thief, by nature a sluggard, spared no effort to reach Cairo in the shortest space of time humanly possible. The source of his devotion is obscure. Perhaps it was due to a humble admiration which John Graham's attempt to strangle him could not alter, or perhaps to a motive wholly unconnected with mundane matters. Certain it is that a sort of religious fervour latterly had possessed the man. From being something of a scoffer (for Islam, like other creeds, daily loses adherents), he was become a most devout Believer. To what this should be ascribed I shall leave you to judge.

Exhausted, tottering with his giant exertions, he made his way through the tortuous streets of Old Cairo--streets where ancient palaces and mansions of wealthy Turks displayed their latticed windows, and, at that hour, barred doors to the solitary, panting wayfarer.

Upon one of these barred doors he beat. It was that of an old palace which seemed to be partially in ruins. After some delay, the door was opened and Mohammed admitted. The door was reclosed. And, following upon the brief clamour, silence claimed the street again.

Much precious time had elapsed since Eileen Graham's disappearance from the hotel by the Pyramids, when a belated and not too sober Greek, walking in the direction of Cairo, encountered what his muddled senses proclaimed to be an apparition--that of a white-robed figure upon a snow-white camel, which sped, silent, and with arrow-like swiftness, past him towards Gizeh. About this vision of the racing camel (a more beautiful creature than any he had seen since the last to carry the Mahmal), about the rider, spectral in the moonlight, white-bearded, there was that which suggested a vision of the Moslem Prophet. Ere the frightened Greek could gather courage to turn and look after the phantom rider, man and camel were lost across the sands.

Mena House was in an uproar. No one beneath its roof had thought of sleep that night. Futile searches were being conducted in every direction, north, south, east, and west. Graham, feeling that another hour of inactivity would spell madness, had succumbed to the fever to be up and doing, and had outdistanced all, had left the boy far behind and was mercilessly urging his poor little mount out into the desert, well knowing that in all probability he was riding further and further away from the one he sought, yet madly pressing on. He felt that to stop was to court certain insanity; he must press on and on; he must search--search.

His mood had changed, and from cursing fate, heaven, everything and every one, he was come to prayer.

He, then, was the next to see the man on the white camel, and, like the Greek, he scarcely doubted that it was a wraith of his tortured imagination. Indeed, he took it for an omen. The Prophet had appeared to him to proclaim that the desert, the home of Islam, had taken Eileen from him. The white-robed figure gave no sign, looked neither to the right nor to the left, but straight ahead, with eagle eyes.

Graham pulled up his donkey, and sat like a shape of stone, until the silver-grey distance swallowed up the phantom.

Out towards the oasis called the Well of Seven Palms, the straggling military company proceeded in growing weariness. The officer in charge had secured fairly reliable evidence to show that the Arabs had struck out straight for the Red Sea. Since he was not omniscient, he could not know that they had performed a wide detour which would lead them back an hour before dawn to the camp by the Nile beside the Temple of Horus, where El-Suleym waited for his captive.

It was at the point in their march when, to have intercepted the raiders, they should have turned due south instead of proceeding toward the oasis, that one of them pulled up, rubbed his eyes, looked again and gave the alarm.

In another moment they all saw it--a white camel; not such a camel as tourists are familiar with, the poor hacks of the species, but a swan-like creature, white as milk, bearing a white-robed rider who ignored utterly the presence of the soldiers, who answered by no word or sign to their challenge, but who passed them like a cloud borne along by a breeze and melted vaporously into the steely distances of the desert. The captain was hopelessly puzzled.

"Too late to bring him down," he muttered, "and no horse that was ever born could run down a racing camel. Most mysterious."

Twenty miles south of their position, and exactly at right-angles to their route, rode the Bishareen horsemen, the foremost with Eileen Graham across his saddle. And now, eighteen miles behind the Bishareen, a white camel, of the pure breed which yearly furnishes the stately bearer of the Mahmal, spurned the sand and like a creature of air gained upon the Arabs, wild riders though they were, mile upon mile, league upon league.

Within rifle-shot of the camp, and with the desert dawn but an hour ahead, only a long sand-ridge concealed from the eyes of the Bishareen troupe that fleet shape which had struck wonder to the hearts of all beholders. Despite their start of close upon two hours, despite the fact that the soldiers were now miles, and hopeless miles, in their rear, the racer of the desert had passed them!

Eileen Graham had returned to full and agonizing consciousness. For hours, it seemed, her captives had rode and rode in silence. Now a certain coolness borne upon the breeze told her that they were nearing the river again. Clamour sounded ahead. They were come to the Arab camp. But ere they reached it they entered some lofty building which echoed hollowly to the horses' tread. She was lifted from her painful position, tied fast against a stone pillar, and the bandage was unfastened from about her head.

She saw that she was lashed to one of the ruined pillars which once had upheld the great hall of a temple. About her were the crumbling evidences of the sacerdotal splendour that was Ancient Egypt. The moon painted massive shadows upon the debris, and carpeted the outer place with the black image of a towering propylaeum. Upon the mound which once had been the stone avenue of approach was the Bedouin camp. It was filled with a vague disturbance. She was quite alone; for those who had brought her there were leading their spent horses out to the camp.

Eileen could not know what the hushed sounds portended; but actually they were due to the fact that the outlaw chief, wearied with that most exhausting passion--the passion of anticipation--had sought his tent, issuing orders that none should disturb him. Many hours before he knew they could return, he had stood looking out across the sands, but at last had decided to fit himself, by repose, for the reception of his beautiful captive.

A sheikh's tent has two apartments--one sacred to the lord and master, the other sheltering his harem. To the former El-Suleym had withdrawn; and now his emissaries stood at the entrance, where the symbolic spear was stuck, blade upward, in the sand. Those who had thrown in their lot with El-Suleym, called the Regicide, had learnt that a robber chief whose ambitions have been whetted by a sojourn in Europe is a hard master, though one profitable to serve. They hesitated to arouse him, even though their delicate task was well accomplished.

And whilst they debated before the tent, which stood alone, as is usual, at some little distance from the others, amid which moved busy figures engaged in striking camp, Eileen, within the temple, heard a movement behind the pillar to which she was bound.

She was in no doubt respecting the identity of her captor, and the author of the ruse by which she had been lured from the hotel, and now, unable to turn, it came to her that this was *he*, creeping to her through the moon-patched shadows. With eyes closed, and her teeth clenched convulsively, she pictured the sinister, approaching figure. Then, from close beside her, came a voice:

"Only I can save you from him. Do not hesitate, do not speak. Do as I tell you."

Eileen opened her eyes. She could not see the speaker, but the voice was oddly familiar. Her fevered brain told her that she had heard it before, but speaking Arabic. It was the voice of an old man, but a strong, vibrant voice.

"It is the will of Allah, whose name be exalted, that I repay!"

A lean hand held before her eyes a broken gold chain, upon which depended a turquoise. She knew the voice, now: it was that of the old pedlar! But his English, except for the hoarse Eastern accent, was flawless, and this was the tone of no broken old man, but of one to be feared and respected.

Her reason, she thought, must be tricking her. How could the old pedlar, however strong in his queer gratitude, save her now? Then the hand came again before her eyes, and it held a tiny green phial.

"Be brave. Drink, quickly. They are coming to take you to him. It is the only escape!"

"Oh, God!" she whispered, and turned icily cold.

This was the boon he brought her. This was the road of escape, escape from El-Suleym--the road of death! It was cruel, unspeakably horrible, with a bright world just opening out to her, with youth, beauty, and---- She could not think of her husband.

"God be merciful to him!" she murmured. "But he would prefer me dead to----"

"Quick! They are here!"

She placed her lips to the phial, and drank.

It seemed that fire ran through every vein in her body. Then came chill. It grew, creeping from her hands and her feet inward and upward to her heart.

"Good-bye ... dear..." she whispered, and sobbed once, dryly.

The ropes held her rigidly upright.

VI

"*Wa-llah!* she is dead, and we have slain her!"

El-Suleym's Bedouins stood before the pillar in the temple, and fear was in their eyes. They unbound the girl, beautiful yet in her marble pallor, and lowered her rigid body to the ground. They looked one at another, and many a glance was turned toward the Nile.

Then the leader of the party extended a brown hand, pointing to the tethered horses. They passed from the temple, muttering. No one among them dared to brave the wrath of the terrible sheikh. As they came out into the paling moonlight, the camp seemed to have melted magically; for ere dawn they began their long march to the lonely oasis in the Arabian Desert which was the secret base of the Masr-Bishareen's predatory operations.

Stealthily circling the camp, which buzzed with subdued activity--even the dogs seemed to be silent when the sheikh slept--they came to the horses. Solitary, a square silhouette against the paling blue, stood the sheikh's tent, on top of the mound, which alone was still untouched.

The first horseman had actually leapt into the saddle, and the others, with furtive glances at the ominous hillock, were about to do likewise, when a low wail, weird, eerie, rose above the muffled stirring of the camp.

"*Allah el-'Azeen!*" groaned one of the party--"what is that?"

Again the wail sounded--and again. Other woman voices took it up. It electrified the whole camp. Escape, undetected, was no longer possible. Men, women, and children were abandoning their tasks and standing, petrified with the awe of it, and looking towards the sheikh's tent.

As they looked, as the frightened fugitives hesitated, looking also, from the tent issued forth a melancholy procession. It was composed of the women of El-Suleym's household. They beat their bared breasts and cast dust upon their heads.

For within his own sacred apartment lay the sheikh in his blood--a headless corpse.

And now those who had trembled before him were hot to avenge him. Riders plunged out in directions as diverse as the spokes of a wheel. Four of them rode madly through the temple where they had left the body of their captive, leaping the debris, and circling about the towering pillars, as only Arab horsemen can. Out into the sands they swept; and before them, from out of a hollow, rose an apparition that brought all four up short, their steeds upreared upon their haunches.

It was the figure of a white-bearded man, white-robed and wearing the green turban, mounted upon a camel which, to the eyes of the four, looked in its spotless whiteness a creature of another world. Before the eagle-eyed stranger lay the still form of Eileen Graham, and as the camel rose to its feet, its rider turned, swung something high above him, and hurled it back at the panic-stricken pursuers. Right amongst their horses' feet it rolled, and up at them in the moonlight from out a mass of blood-clotted beard, stared the glassy eyes of El-Suleym!

The sun was high in the heavens when the grey-faced and haggard-eyed searchers came straggling back to Mena House. Two of them, who had come upon Graham ten miles to the east, brought him in. He was quite passive, and offered no protest, spoke no word, but stared straight in front of him with a set smile that was dreadful to see.

No news had come from the company of soldiers; no news had come from anywhere. It was ghastly, inconceivable; people looked at one another and asked if it could really be possible that one of their number had been snatched out from their midst in such fashion.

Officials, military and civil, literally in crowds, besieged the hotel. Amid that scene of confusion no one missed Mohammed; but when all the rest had given up in despair, he, a solitary, patient figure, stood out upon a distant mound watching the desert road to the east. He alone saw the return of the white camel with its double burden, from a distance of a hundred yards or more; for he dared approach no closer, but stood with bowed head pronouncing the *fathah* over and over again. He saw it kneel, saw its rider descend and lift a girl from its back. He saw him force something between her lips, saw him turn and make a deep obeisance toward Mecca. At that he, too, knelt and did likewise. When he arose, camel and rider were gone.

He raced across the sands as Eileen Graham opened her eyes, and supported her as she struggled to her feet, pale and trembling.

* * * * *

"I don't understand it at all," said Graham.

Eileen smiled up at him from the long cane chair. She was not yet recovered from her dreadful experience. "Perhaps," she said softly, "you will not laugh in future at my Irish stories of the 'good people'!"

Graham shook his head and turned to Mohammed.

"What does it all mean, Mohammed?" he said. "Thank God it means that I have got her back, but how was it done? She returned wearing the turquoise necklace, which I last saw in your hand."

Mohammed looked aside.

"I took it to him, Effendi. It was the token by which he knew her need."

"The pedlar?"

"The pedlar, Effendi."

"You knew where to find him, then?"

"I knew where to find him, but I feared to tell you; feared that you might ridicule him."

He ceased. He was become oddly reticent. Graham shrugged his shoulders, helplessly.

"I only hope the authorities will succeed in capturing the Bishareen brigands," he said grimly.

"The authorities will never capture them," replied the dragoman with conviction. "For five years they have lived by plunder, and laughed at the Government. But before another moon is risen"--he was warming to his usual eloquence now--"no Masr-Bishareen will remain in the land, they will be exterminated--purged from the desert!"

"Indeed," said Graham; "by whom?"

"By the Rawallah, Effendi."

"Are they a Bedouin tribe?"

"The greatest of them all."

"Then why should they undertake the duty?"

"Because it is the will of the one who saved her for you, Effendi! I am blessed that I have set eyes upon him, spoken with him. Paradise is assured to me because my hand returned to him his turban when it lay in the dust!"

Graham stared, looking from his wife, who lay back smiling dreamily, to Mohammed, whose dark eyes burnt with a strange fervour--the fervour of one mysteriously converted to an almost fanatic faith.

"Are you speaking of our old friend, the pedlar?"

"I am almost afraid to speak of him, Effendi, for he is the chosen of heaven, a cleanser of uncleanness; the scourge of God, who holds His flail in his hand--the broom of the desert!"

Graham, who had been pacing up and down the room, paused in front of Mohammed.

"Who is he, then?" he asked quietly. "I owe him a debt I can never hope to repay, so I should at least like to know his real name."

"I almost fear to speak it, Effendi." Mohammed's voice sank to a whisper, and he raised the turquoise hanging by the thin chain about Eileen's throat, and reverently touched it with his lips. "He is the *welée*--Ben Azreem, Sheikh of the Ibn-Rawallah!"

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