

"Very well, then. No coffee."

"One cigarette, and then to business."

The grey blue smoke curled up.

"What are we going to do?" said the Father.

He was sitting bolt upright as if ready for action. Indeed there was no suggestion of repose in the attitudes of either of the men.

"Hide ourselves, and watch Napoleon. By the way—that reminds me."

He got up, went to a corner of the room, picked up a piece of green baize and threw it over the cage.

"I'll pull that off when we are hidden."

"And tell me first if you have had any manifestation of this supposed presence during the last few days?"

"Merely an increasingly intense sensation of something here, perpetually watching me, perpetually attending to all my doings."

"Do you feel that it follows you about?"

"Not always. It was in this room when you arrived. It is here now—I feel. But, in going down to dinner, we seemed to get away from it. The conclusion is that it remained here. Don't let us talk about it just now."

They spoke of other things till their cigarettes were finished. Then, as they threw away the smouldering ends, Guildea said:

"Now, Murchison, for the sake of this experiment, I suggest that we should conceal ourselves behind the curtains on either side of the cage, so that the bird's attention may not be drawn towards us and so distracted from that which we want to know more about. I will pull away the green baize when we are hidden. Keep perfectly still, watch the bird's proceedings, and tell me afterwards how you feel about them, how you explain them. Tread softly."

The Father obeyed, and they stole towards the curtains that fell before the two windows. The Father concealed himself behind those on the left of the cage, the Professor behind those on the right. The latter, as soon as they were hidden, stretched out his arm, drew the baize down from the cage, and let it fall on the floor.

The parrot, which had evidently fallen asleep in the warm darkness, moved on its perch as the light shone upon it, ruffled the feathers round its throat, and lifted first one foot and then the other. It turned its head round on its supple, and apparently elastic, neck, and, diving its beak into the down upon its back,



made some searching investigations with, as it seemed, a satisfactory result, for it soon lifted its head again, glanced around its cage, and began to address itself to a nut which had been fixed between the bars for its refreshment. With its curbed beak it felt and tapped the nut, at first gently, then with severity. Finally it plucked the nut from the bars, seized it with its rough, gray toes, and, holding it down firmly on the perch, cracked it and pecked out its contents, scattering some on the floor of the cage and letting the fractured shell fall into the china bath that was fixed against the bars. This accomplished, the bird paused meditatively, extended one leg backwards, and went through an elaborate process of wing-stretching that made it look as if it were lopsided and deformed. With its head reversed, it again applied itself to a subtle and exhaustive search among the feathers of its wing. This time its investigation seemed interminable, and Father Murchison had time to realise the absurdity of the whole position, and to wonder why he had lent himself to it. Yet he did not find his sense of humour laughing at it. On the contrary, he was smitten by a sudden gust of horror. When he was talking to his friend and watching him, the Professor's manner, generally so calm, even so prosaic, vouched for the truth of his story and the well-adjusted balance of his mind. But when he was hidden this was not so. And Father Murchison, standing behind his curtain, with his eyes upon the unconcerned Napoleon, began to whisper to himself the word—madness, with a quickening sensation of pity and of dread.

The parrot sharply contracted one wing, ruffled the feathers around its throat again, then extended its other leg backwards, and proceeded to the cleaning of its other wing. In the still room the dry sound of the feathers being spread was distinctly audible. Father Murchison saw the blue curtains behind which Guildea stood tremble slightly, as if a breath of wind had come through the window they shrouded. The clock in the far room chimed, and a coal dropped into the grate, making a noise like dead leaves stirring abruptly on hard ground. And again a gust of pity and of dread swept over the Father. It seemed to him that he had behaved very foolishly, if not wrongly, in encouraging what must surely be the strange dementia of his friend. He ought to have declined to lend himself to a proceeding that, ludicrous, even childish in itself, might well be dangerous in the encouragement it gave to a diseased expectation. Napoleon's protruding leg,



extended wing and twisted neck, his busy and unconscious devotion to the arrangement of his person, his evident sensation of complete loneliness, most comfortable solitude, brought home with vehemence to the Father the undignified buffoonery of his conduct ; the more piteous buffoonery of his friend. He seized the curtains with his hands and was about to thrust them aside and issue forth, when an abrupt movement of the parrot stopped him. The bird, as if sharply attracted by something, paused in its pecking, and, with its head still bent backward and twisted sideways on its neck, seemed to listen intently. Its round eye looked glistening and strained, like the eye of a disturbed pigeon. Contracting its wing, it lifted its head and sat for a moment erect on its perch, shifting its feet mechanically up and down, as if a dawning excitement produced in it an uncontrollable desire of movement. Then it thrust its head forward in the direction of the further room and remained perfectly still. Its attitude so strongly suggested the concentration of its attention on something immediately before it, that Father Murchison instinctively stared about the room, half expecting to see Pitting advance softly, having entered through the hidden door. He did not come, and there was no sound in the chamber. Nevertheless, the parrot was obviously getting excited and increasingly attentive. It bent its head lower and lower, stretching out its neck until, almost falling from the perch, it half extended its wings, raising them slightly from its back, as if about to take flight, and fluttering them rapidly up and down. It continued this fluttering movement for what seemed to the Father an immense time. At length, raising its wings as far as possible, it dropped them slowly and deliberately down to its back, caught hold of the edge of its bath with its beak, hoisted itself on to the floor of the cage, waddled to the bars, thrust its head against them, and stood quite still in the exact attitude it always assumed when its head was being scratched by the Professor. So complete was the suggestion of this delight conveyed by the bird, that Father Murchison felt as if he saw a white finger gently pushed among the soft feathers of its head, and he was seized by a most strong conviction that something, unseen by him but seen and welcomed by Napoleon, stood immediately before the cage.

The parrot presently withdrew its head, as if the coaxing finger had been lifted from it, and its pronounced air of acute physical enjoyment faded into one of marked attention and alert curiosity.



Pulling itself up by the bars it climbed again upon its perch, sidled to the left side of the cage, and began apparently to watch something with profound interest. It bowed its head oddly, paused for a moment, then bowed its head again. Father Murchison found himself conceiving—from this elaborate movement of the head—a distinct idea of a personality. The bird's proceedings suggested extreme sentimentality combined with that sort of weak determination which is often the most persistent. Such weak determination is a very common attribute of persons who are partially idiotic. Father Murchison was moved to think of these poor creatures who will often, so strangely and unreasonably, attach themselves with persistence to those who love them least. Like many priests, he had had some experience of them, for the amorous idiot is peculiarly sensitive to the attraction of preachers. This bowing movement of the parrot recalled to his memory a terrible, pale woman who for a time haunted all churches in which he ministered, who was perpetually endeavouring to catch his eye, and who always bent her head with an obsequious and cunningly conscious smile when she did so. The parrot went on bowing, making a short pause between each genuflection, as if it waited for a signal to be given that called into play its imitative faculty.

“Yes, yes, it's imitating an idiot,” Father Murchison caught himself saying as he watched.

And he looked again about the room, but saw nothing ; except the furniture, the dancing fire, and the serried ranks of the books. Presently the parrot ceased from bowing, and assumed the concentrated and stretched attitude of one listening very keenly. He opened his beak, showing his black tongue, shut it, then opened it again. The Father thought he was going to speak, but he remained silent, although it was obvious that he was trying to bring out something. He bowed again two or three times, paused, and then, again opening his beak, made some remark. The Father could not distinguish any words, but the voice was sickly and disagreeable, a cooing and, at the same time, querulous voice, like a woman's, he thought. And he put his ear nearer to the curtain, listening with almost feverish attention. The bowing was resumed, but this time Napoleon added to it a sidling movement, affectionate and affected, like the movement of a silly and eager thing, nestling up to someone, or giving someone a gentle and furtive nudge. Again the Father thought of that terrible, pale woman who had haunted churches. Several times he had come



upon her waiting for him after evening services. Once she had hung her head smiling, and lolled out her tongue and pushed against him sideways in the dark. He remembered how his flesh had shrunk from the poor thing, the sick loathing of her that he could not banish by remembering that her mind was all astray. The parrot paused, listened, opened his beak, and again said something in the same dove-like, amorous voice, full of sickly suggestion and yet hard, even dangerous, in its intonation. A loathsome voice, the Father thought it. But this time, although he heard the voice more distinctly than before, he could not make up his mind whether it was like a woman's voice or a man's—or perhaps a child's. It seemed to be a human voice, and yet oddly sexless. In order to resolve his doubt he withdrew into the darkness of the curtains, ceased to watch Napoleon and simply listened with keen attention, striving to forget that he was listening to a bird, and to imagine that he was overhearing a human being in conversation. After two or three minutes' silence the voice spoke again, and at some length, apparently repeating several times an affectionate series of ejaculations with a cooing emphasis that was unutterably mawkish and offensive. The sickliness of the voice, its falling intonations and its strange indelicacy, combined with a die-away softness and meretricious refinement, made the Father's flesh creep. Yet he could not distinguish any words, nor could he decide on the voice's sex or age. One thing alone he was certain of as he stood still in the darkness—that such a sound could only proceed from something peculiarly loathsome, could only express a personality unendurably abominable to him, if not to everybody. The voice presently failed, in a sort of husky gasp, and there was a prolonged silence. It was broken by the Professor, who suddenly pulled away the curtains that hid the Father and said to him :

“Come out now, and look.”

The Father came into the light, blinking, glanced towards the cage, and saw Napoleon poised motionless on one foot with his head under his wing. He appeared to be asleep. The Professor was pale, and his mobile lips were drawn into an expression of supreme disgust.

“Faugh !” he said.

He walked to the windows of the further room, pulled aside the curtains and pushed the glass up, letting in the air. The bare trees were visible in the grey gloom outside. Guildea leaned out for a



minute drawing the night air into his lungs. Presently he turned round to the Father, and exclaimed abruptly :

“ Pestilent ! Isn't it ? ”

“ Yes—most pestilent.”

“ Ever hear anything like it ? ”

“ Not exactly.”

“ Nor I. It gives me nausea, Murchison, absolute physical nausea.”

He closed the window and walked uneasily about the room.

“ What d'you make of it ? ” he asked, over his shoulder.

“ How d'you mean exactly ? ”

“ Is it man's, woman's, or child's voice ? ”

“ I can't tell, I can't make up my mind.”

“ Nor I.”

“ Have you heard it often ? ”

“ Yes, since I returned from Westgate. There are never any words that I can distinguish. What a voice ! ”

He spat into the fire.

“ Forgive me,” he said, throwing himself down in a chair.

“ It turns my stomach—literally.”

“ And mine,” said the Father truly.

“ The worst of it is,” continued Guildea, with a high, nervous accent, “ that there's no brain with it, none at all—only the cunning of idiocy.”

The Father started at this exact expression of his own conviction by another.

“ Why d'you start like that ? ” asked Guildea, with a quick suspicion which showed the unnatural condition of his nerves.

“ Well, the very same idea had occurred to me.”

“ What ? ”

“ That I was listening to the voice of something idiotic.”

“ Ah ! That's the devil of it, you know, to a man like me. I could fight against brain—but this ! ”

He sprang up again, poked the fire violently, then stood on the hearth-rug with his back to it, and his hands thrust into the high pockets of his trousers.

“ That's the voice of the thing that's got into my house,” he said. “ Pleasant, isn't it ? ”

And now there was really horror in his eyes, and his voice.

“ I must get it out,” he exclaimed. “ I must get it out. But how ? ”



He tugged at his short black beard with a quivering hand.

"How?" he continued. "For what is it? Where is it?"

"You feel it's here—now?"

"Undoubtedly. But I couldn't tell you in what part of the room."

He stared about, glancing rapidly at everything.

"Then you consider yourself haunted?" said Father Murchison.

He, too, was much moved and disturbed, although he was not conscious of the presence of anything near them in the room.

"I have never believed in any nonsense of that kind, as you know," Guildea answered. "I simply state a fact, which I cannot understand, and which is beginning to be very painful to me. There is something here. But whereas most so-called hauntings have been described to me as inimical, what I am conscious of is that I am admired, loved, desired. This is distinctly horrible to me, Murchison, distinctly horrible."

Father Murchison suddenly remembered the first evening he had spent with Guildea, and the latter's expression almost of disgust, at the idea of receiving warm affection from anyone. In the light of that long ago conversation, the present event seemed supremely strange, and almost like a punishment for an offence committed by the Professor against humanity. But, looking up at his friend's twitching face, the Father resolved not to be caught in the net of his hideous belief.

"There can be nothing here," he said. "It's impossible."

"What does that bird imitate, then?"

"The voice of someone who has been here."

"Within the last week then. For it never spoke like that before, and mind, I noticed that it was watching and striving to imitate something before I went away, since the night that I went into the Park, only since then."

"Somebody with a voice like that must have been here while you were away," Father Murchison repeated, with a gentle obstinacy.

"I'll soon find out."

Guildea pressed the bell. Pitting stole in almost immediately.

"Pitting," said the Professor, speaking in a high, sharp voice, "did anyone come into this room during my absence at the sea?"

"Certainly not, sir, except the maids—and me, sir."



"Not a soul? You are certain?"

"Perfectly certain, sir."

The cold voice of the butler sounded surprised, almost resentful. The Professor flung out his hand towards the cage.

"Has the bird been here the whole time?"

"Yes, sir."

"He was not moved, taken elsewhere, even for a moment?"

Pitting's pale face began to look almost expressive, and his lips were pursed.

"Certainly not, sir."

"Thank you. That will do."

The butler retired, moving with a sort of ostentatious rectitude. When he had reached the door, and was just going out, his master called:

"Wait a minute, Pitting."

The butler paused. Guildea bit his lips, tugged at his beard uneasily two or three times, and then said:

"Have you noticed—er—the parrot talking lately in a—a very peculiar, very disagreeable voice?"

"Yes, sir—a soft voice like, sir."

"Ha! Since when?"

"Since you went away, sir. He's always at it."

"Exactly. Well, and what did you think of it?"

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"What do you think about his talking in this voice?"

"Oh, that it's only his play, sir."

"I see. That's all, Pitting."

The butler disappeared and closed the door noiselessly behind him.

Guildea turned his eyes on his friend.

"There, you see!" he ejaculated.

"It's certainly very odd," said the Father. "Very odd indeed. You are certain you have no maid who talks at all like that?"

"My dear Murchison! Would you keep a servant with such a voice about you for two days?"

"No."

"My housemaid has been with me for five years, my cook for seven. You've heard Pitting speak. The three of them make up my entire household. A parrot never speaks in a voice it has not heard. Where has it heard that voice?"

"But we hear nothing?"



"No. Nor do we see anything. But it does. It feels something too. Didn't you observe it presenting its head to be scratched?"

"Certainly it seemed to be doing so."

"It was doing so."

Father Murchison said nothing. He was full of increasing discomfort that almost amounted to apprehension.

"Are you convinced?" said Guildea, rather irritably.

"No. The whole matter is very strange. But till I hear, see or feel—as you do—the presence of something, I cannot believe."

"You mean that you will not?"

"Perhaps. Well, it is time I went."

Guildea did not try to detain him, but said, as he let him out:

"Do me a favour, come again to-morrow night."

The Father had an engagement. He hesitated, looked into the Professor's face and said:

"I will. At nine I'll be with you. Good-night."

When he was on the pavement he felt relieved. He turned round, saw Guildea stepping into his passage, and shivered.

v

Father Murchison walked all the way home to Bird Street that night. He required exercise after the strange and disagreeable evening he had spent, an evening upon which he looked back already as a man looks back upon a nightmare. In his ears, as he walked, sounded the gentle and intolerable voice. Even the memory of it caused him physical discomfort. He tried to put it from him, and to consider the whole matter calmly. The Professor had offered his proof that there was some strange presence in his house. Could any reasonable man accept such proof? Father Murchison told himself that no reasonable man could accept it. The parrot's proceedings were, no doubt, extraordinary. The bird had succeeded in producing an extraordinary illusion of an invisible presence in the room. But that there really was such a presence the Father insisted on denying to himself. The devoutly religious, those who believed implicitly in the miracles recorded in the Bible, and who regulate their lives by the messages they suppose themselves to receive directly from the Great Ruler of a hidden World, are seldom inclined to accept any notion of



supernatural intrusion into the affairs of daily life. They put it from them with anxious determination. They regard it fixedly as hocus-pocus, childish if not wicked.

Father Murchison inclined to the normal view of the devoted churchman. He was determined to incline to it. He could not—so he now told himself—accept the idea that his friend was being supernaturally punished for his lack of humanity, his deficiency in affection, by being obliged to endure the love of some horrible thing, which could not be seen, heard, or handled. Nevertheless, retribution did certainly seem to wait upon Guildea's condition. That which he had unnaturally dreaded and shrunk from in his thought he seemed to be now forced unnaturally to suffer. The Father prayed for his friend that night before the little, humble altar in the barely-furnished, cell-like chamber where he slept.

On the following evening, when he called in Hyde Park Place, the door was opened by the housemaid, and Father Murchison mounted the stairs, wondering what had become of Pitting. He was met at the library door by Guildea and was painfully struck by the alteration in his appearance. His face was ashen in hue, and there were lines beneath his eyes. The eyes themselves looked excited and horribly forlorn. His hair and dress were disordered and his lips twitched continually, as if he were shaken by some acute nervous apprehension.

"What has become of Pitting?" asked the Father, grasping Guildea's hot and feverish hand.

"He has left my service."

"Left your service!" exclaimed the Father in utter amazement.

"Yes, this afternoon."

"May one ask why?"

"I'm going to tell you. It's all part and parcel of this—this most odious business. You remember once discussing the relations men ought to have with their servants?"

"Ah!" cried the Father, with a flash of inspiration. "The crisis has occurred?"

"Exactly," said the Professor, with a bitter smile. "The crisis has occurred. I called upon Pitting to be a man and a brother. He responded by declining the invitation. I upbraided him. He gave me warning. I paid him his wages and told him he could go at once. And he has gone. What are you looking at me like that for?"

"I didn't know," said Father Murchison, hastily dropping his



eyes, and looking away. "Why," he added. "Napoleon is gone too."

"I sold him to-day to one of those shops in Shaftesbury Avenue."

"Why?"

"He sickened me with his abominable imitation of—his intercourse with—well, you know what he was at last night. Besides, I have no further need of his proof to tell me I am not dreaming. And, being convinced as I now am, that all I have thought to have happened has actually happened, I care very little about convincing others. Forgive me for saying so, Murchison, but I am now certain that my anxiety to make you believe in the presence of something here really arose from some faint doubt on that subject—within myself. All doubt has now vanished."

"Tell me why."

"I will."

Both men were standing by the fire. They continued to stand while Guildea went on:

"Last night I felt it."

"What?" cried the Father.

"I say that last night, as I was going upstairs to bed, I felt something accompanying me and nestling up against me."

"How horrible!" exclaimed the Father, involuntarily.

Guildea smiled drearily.

"I will not deny the horror of it. I cannot, since I was compelled to call on Pitting for assistance."

"But—tell me—what was it, at least what did it seem to be?"

"It seemed to be a human being. It seemed, I say; and what I mean exactly is that the effect upon me was rather that of human contact than of anything else. But I could see nothing, hear nothing. Only, three times, I felt this gentle, but determined, push against me, as if to coax me and to attract my attention. The first time it happened I was on the landing outside this room, with my foot on the first stair. I will confess to you, Murchison, that I bounded upstairs like one pursued. That is the shameful truth. Just as I was about to enter my bedroom, however, I felt the thing entering with me, and, as I have said, squeezing, with loathsome, sickening tenderness, against my side. Then——"

He paused, turned towards the fire and leaned his head on his arm. The Father was greatly moved by the strange helplessness



and despair of the attitude. He laid his hand affectionately on Guildea's shoulder.

"Then?"

Guildea lifted his head. He looked painfully abashed.

"Then, Murchison, I am ashamed to say, I broke down, suddenly, unaccountably, in a way I should have thought wholly impossible to me. I struck out with my hands to thrust the thing away. It pressed more closely to me. The pressure, the contact became unbearable to me. I shouted out for Pitting. I—I believe I must have cried—'Help.'"

"He came, of course?"

"Yes, with his usual soft, unemotional quiet. His calm—its opposition to my excitement of disgust and horror—must, I suppose, have irritated me. I was not myself, no, no!"

He stopped abruptly. Then—

"But I need hardly tell you that," he added, with most piteous irony.

"And what did you say to Pitting?"

"I said that he should have been quicker. He begged my pardon. His cold voice really maddened me, and I burst out into some foolish, contemptible diatribe, called him a machine, taunted him, then—as I felt that loathsome thing nestling once more to me—begged him to assist me, to stay with me, not to leave me alone—I meant in the company of my tormentor. Whether he was frightened, or whether he was angry at my unjust and violent manner and speech a moment before, I don't know. In any case he answered that he was engaged as a butler, and not to sit up all night with people. I suspect he thought I had taken too much to drink. No doubt that was it. I believe I swore at him as a coward—I! This morning he said he wished to leave my service. I gave him a month's wages, a good character as a butler, and sent him off at once."

"But the night? How did you pass it?"

"I sat up all night."

"Where? In your bedroom?"

"Yes—with the door open—to let it go."

"You felt that it stayed?"

"It never left me for a moment, but it did not touch me again. When it was light I took a bath, lay down for a little while, but did not close my eyes. After breakfast I had the explanation with Pitting and paid him. Then I came up here. My nerves were in a



very shattered condition. Well, I sat down, tried to write, to think. But the silence was broken in the most abominable manner."

"How?"

"By the murmur of that appalling voice, that voice of a love-sick idiot, sickly but determined. Ugh!"

He shuddered in every limb. Then he pulled himself together, assumed, with a self-conscious effort, his most determined, most aggressive, manner, and added:

"I couldn't stand that. I had come to the end of my tether; so I sprang up, ordered a cab to be called, seized the cage and drove with it to a bird shop in Shaftesbury Avenue. There I sold the parrot for a trifle. I think, Murchison, that I must have been nearly mad then, for, as I came out of the wretched shop, and stood for an instant on the pavement among the cages of rabbits, guinea-pigs, and puppy dogs, I laughed aloud. I felt as if a load was lifted from my shoulders, as if in selling that voice I had sold the cursed thing that torments me. But when I got back to the house it was here. It's here now. I suppose it will always be here."

He shuffled his feet on the rug in front of the fire.

"What on earth am I to do?" he said. "I'm ashamed of myself, Murchison, but—but I suppose there are things in the world that certain men simply can't endure. Well, I can't endure this, and there's an end of the matter."

He ceased. The Father was silent. In presence of this extraordinary distress he did not know what to say. He recognised the uselessness of attempting to comfort Guildea, and he sat with his eyes turned, almost moodily, to the ground. And while he sat there he tried to give himself to the influences within the room, to feel all that was within it. He even, half-unconsciously, tried to force his imagination to play tricks with him. But he remained totally unaware of any third person with them. At length he said:

"Guildea, I cannot pretend to doubt the reality of your misery here. You must go away, and at once. When is your Paris lecture?"

"Next week. In nine days from now."

"Go to Paris to-morrow then; you say you have never had any consciousness that this—this thing pursued you beyond your own front door!"

"Never—hitherto."

"Go to-morrow morning. Stay away till after your lecture. And then let us see if the affair is at an end. Hope, my dear friend, hope."



He had stood up. Now he clasped the Professor's hand.

"See all your friends in Paris. Seek distractions. I would ask you also to seek—other help."

He said the last words with a gentle, earnest gravity and simplicity that touched Guildea, who returned his handclasp almost warmly.

"I'll go," he said. "I'll catch the ten o'clock train, and to-night I'll sleep at an hotel, at the Grosvenor—that's close to the station. It will be more convenient for the train."

As Father Murchison went home that night he kept thinking of that sentence: "It will be more convenient for the train." The weakness in Guildea that had prompted its utterance appalled him.

## VI

No letter came to Father Murchison from the Professor during the next few days, and this silence reassured him, for it seemed to betoken that all was well. The day of the lecture dawned, and passed. On the following morning, the Father eagerly opened the *Times*, and scanned its pages to see if there were any report of the great meeting of scientific men which Guildea had addressed. He glanced up and down the columns with anxious eyes, then suddenly his hands stiffened as they held the sheets. He had come upon the following paragraph:

"We regret to announce that Professor Frederic Guildea was suddenly seized with severe illness yesterday evening while addressing a scientific meeting in Paris. It was observed that he looked very pale and nervous when he rose to his feet. Nevertheless, he spoke in French fluently for about a quarter of an hour. Then he appeared to become uneasy. He faltered and glanced about like a man apprehensive, or in severe distress. He even stopped once or twice, and seemed unable to go on, to remember what he wished to say. But, pulling himself together with an obvious effort, he continued to address the audience. Suddenly, however, he paused again, edged furtively along the platform, as if pursued by something which he feared, struck out with his hands, uttered a loud, harsh cry and fainted. The sensation in the hall was indescribable. People rose from their seats. Women screamed, and, for a moment, there was a veritable panic. It is



feared that the Professor's mind must have temporarily given way owing to overwork. We understand that he will return to England as soon as possible, and we sincerely hope that necessary rest and quiet will soon have the desired effect, and that he will be completely restored to health and enabled to prosecute further the investigations which have already so benefited the world."

The Father dropped the paper, hurried out into Bird Street, sent a wire of inquiry to Paris, and received the same day the following reply: "Returning to-morrow. Please call evening. Guildea." On that evening the Father called in Hyde Park Place, was at once admitted, and found Guildea sitting by the fire in the library, ghastly pale, with a heavy rug over his knees. He looked like a man emaciated by a long and severe illness, and in his wide open eyes there was an expression of fixed horror. The Father started at the sight of him, and could scarcely refrain from crying out. He was beginning to express his sympathy when Guildea stopped him with a trembling gesture.

"I know all that," Guildea said, "I know. This Paris affair——" He faltered and stopped.

"You ought never to have gone," said the Father. "I was wrong. I ought not to have advised your going. You were not fit."

"I was perfectly fit," he answered, with the irritability of sickness. "But I was—I was accompanied by that abominable thing."

He glanced hastily round him, shifted his chair and pulled the rug higher over his knees. The Father wondered why he was thus wrapped up. For the fire was bright and red and the night was not very cold.

"I was accompanied to Paris," he continued, pressing his upper teeth upon his lower lip.

He paused again, obviously striving to control himself. But the effort was vain. There was no resistance in the man. He writhed in his chair and suddenly burst forth in a tone of hopeless lamentation.

"Murchison, this being, thing—whatever it is—no longer leaves me even for a moment. It will not stay here unless I am here, for it loves me, persistently, idiotically. It accompanied me to Paris, stayed with me there, pursued me to the lecture hall, pressed against me, caressed me while I was speaking. It has returned with me here. It is here now,"—he uttered a sharp cry—



"now, as I sit here with you. It is nestling up to me, fawning upon me, touching my hands. Man, man, can't you feel that it is here?"

"No," the Father answered truly.

"I try to protect myself from its loathsome contact," Guildea continued, with fierce excitement, clutching the thick rug with both hands. "But nothing is of any avail against it. Nothing. What is it? What can it be? Why should it have come to me that night?"

"Perhaps as a punishment," said the Father, with a quick softness.

"For what?"

"You hated affection. You put human feeling aside with contempt. You had, you desired to have, no love for anyone. Nor did you desire to receive any love from anything. Perhaps this is a punishment."

Guildea stared into his face.

"D'you believe that?" he cried.

"I don't know," said the Father. "But it may be so. Try to endure it, even to welcome it. Possibly then the persecution will cease."

"I know it means me no harm," Guildea exclaimed, "it seeks me out of affection. It was led to me by some amazing attraction which I exercise over it ignorantly. I know that. But to a man of my nature that is the ghastly part of the matter. If it would hate me, I could bear it. If it would attack me, if it would try to do me some dreadful harm, I should become a man again. I should be braced to fight against it. But this gentleness, this abominable solicitude, this brainless worship of an idiot, persistent, sickly, horribly physical, I cannot endure. What does it want of me? What would it demand of me? It nestles to me. It leans against me. I feel its touch, like the touch of a feather, trembling about my heart, as if it sought to number my pulsations, to find out the inmost secrets of my impulses and desires. No privacy is left to me." He sprang up excitedly. "I cannot withdraw," he cried, "I cannot be alone, untouched, unworshipped, unwatched for even one-half second. Murchison, I am dying of this, I am dying."

He sank down again in his chair, staring apprehensively on all sides, with the passion of some blind man, deluded in the belief that by his furious and continued effort he will attain sight. The Father knew well that he sought to pierce the veil of the invisible, and have knowledge of the thing that loved him.



"Guildea," the Father said, with insistent earnestness, "try to endure this—do more—try to give this thing what it seeks."

"But it seeks my love."

"Learn to give it your love and it may go, having received what it came for."

"T'sh! You talk like a priest. Suffer your persecutors. Do good to them that despitefully use you. You talk as a priest."

"As a friend I spoke naturally, indeed, right out of my heart. The idea suddenly came to me that all this—truth or seeming, it doesn't matter which—may be some strange form of lesson. I have had lessons—painful ones. I shall have many more. If you could welcome——"

"I can't! I can't!" Guildea cried fiercely. "Hatred! I can give it that—always that, nothing but that—hatred, hatred."

He raised his voice, glared into the emptiness of the room, and repeated, "Hatred!"

As he spoke the waxen pallor of his cheeks increased, until he looked like a corpse with living eyes. The Father feared that he was going to collapse and faint, but suddenly he raised himself upon his chair and said, in a high and keen voice, full of suppressed excitement:

"Murchison, Murchison!"

"Yes. What is it?"

An amazing ecstasy shone in Guildea's eyes.

"It wants to leave me" he cried. "It wants to go! Don't lose a moment! Let it out! The window—the window!"

The Father, wondering, went to the near window, drew aside the curtains and pushed it open. The branches of the trees in the garden creaked drily in the light wind. Guildea leaned forward on the arms of his chair. There was silence for a moment. Then Guildea, speaking in a rapid whisper, said:

"No, no. Open this door—open the hall door. I feel—I feel that it will return the way it came. Make haste—ah, go!"

The Father obeyed—to soothe him, hurried to the door and opened it wide. Then he glanced back to Guildea. He was standing up, bent forward. His eyes were glaring with eager expectation, and, as the Father turned, he made a furious gesture towards the passage with his thin hands.

The Father hastened out and down the stairs. As he descended in the twilight he fancied he heard a slight cry from the room behind him, but he did not pause. He flung the hall door open,



standing back against the wall. After waiting a moment—to satisfy Guildea, he was about to close the door again, and had his hand on it, when he was attracted irresistibly to look forth towards the park. The night was lit by a young moon, and, gazing through the railings, his eyes fell upon a bench beyond them.

Upon the bench something was sitting, huddled together very strangely.

The Father remembered instantly Guildea's description of that former night, that night of Advent, and a sensation of horror-stricken curiosity stole through him.

Was there then really something that had indeed come to the Professor? And had it finished its work, fulfilled its desire and gone back to its former existence?

The Father hesitated a moment in the doorway. Then he stepped out resolutely and crossed the road, keeping his eyes fixed upon this black or dark object that leaned so strangely upon the bench. He could not tell yet what it was like, but he fancied it was unlike anything with which his eyes were acquainted. He reached the opposite path, and was about to pass through the gate in the railings, when his arm was brusquely grasped. He started, turned round, and saw a policeman eyeing him suspiciously.

"What are you up to?" said the policeman.

The Father was suddenly aware that he had no hat upon his head, and that his appearance, as he stole forward in his cassock, with his eyes intently fixed upon the bench in the Park, was probably unusual enough to excite suspicion.

"It's all right, policeman," he answered quickly, thrusting some money into the constable's hand.

Then, breaking from him, the Father hurried towards the bench, bitterly vexed at the interruption. When he reached it, nothing was there. Guildea's experience had been almost exactly repeated and, filled with unreasonable disappointment, the Father returned to the house, entered it, shut the door and hastened up the narrow stairway into the library.

On the hearthrug, close to the fire, he found Guildea lying with his head lolled against the armchair from which he had recently risen. There was a shocking expression of terror on his convulsed face. On examining him the Father found that he was dead.

The doctor, who was called in, said that the cause of death was failure of the heart.



When Father Murchison was told this, he murmured :

“ Failure of the heart ! It was that then ! ”

He turned to the doctor and said :

“ Could it have been prevented ? ”

The doctor drew on his gloves and answered :

“ Possibly, if it had been taken in time. Weakness of the heart required a great deal of care. The Professor was too much absorbed in his work. He should have lived very differently.”

The Father nodded.

“ Yes, yes,” he said, sadly.

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“ *Saki* ” (H. H. Munro)

## THE OPEN WINDOW

*from* BEASTS AND SUPER-BEASTS

Bodley Head, 1914

“ My aunt will be down presently, Mr. Nuttel,” said a very self-possessed young lady of fifteen ; “ in the meantime you must try and put up with me.”

Framton Nuttel endeavoured to say the correct something which should duly flatter the niece of the moment without unduly discounting the aunt that was to come. Privately he doubted more than ever whether these formal visits on a succession of total strangers would do much towards helping the nerve cure which he was supposed to be undergoing.

“ I know how it will be,” his sister had said when he was preparing to migrate to this rural retreat ; “ you will bury yourself down there and not speak to a living soul, and your nerves will be worse than ever from moping. I shall just give you letters of introduction to all the people I know there. Some of them, as far as I can remember, were quite nice.”

Framton wondered whether Mrs. Sappleton, the lady to whom he was presenting one of the letters of introduction, came into the nice division.

“ Do you know many of the people round here ? ” asked the niece, when she judged that they had had sufficient silent communion.



“Hardly a soul,” said Framton. “My sister was staying here, at the rectory, you know, some four years ago, and she gave me letters of introduction to some of the people here.”

He made the last statement in a tone of distinct regret.

“Then you know practically nothing about my aunt?” pursued the self-possessed young lady.

“Only her name and address,” admitted the caller. He was wondering whether Mrs. Sappleton was in the married or widowed state. An indefinable something about the room seemed to suggest masculine habitation.

“Her great tragedy happened just three years ago,” said the child; “that would be since your sister’s time.”

“Her tragedy?” asked Framton; somehow in this restful country spot tragedies seemed out of place.

“You may wonder why we keep that window wide open on an October afternoon,” said the niece, indicating a large French window that opened on to a lawn.

“It is quite warm for the time of the year,” said Framton; “but has that window got anything to do with the tragedy?”

“Out through that window, three years ago to a day, her husband and her two young brothers went off for their day’s shooting. They never came back. In crossing the moor to their favourite snipe-shooting ground they were all three engulfed in a treacherous piece of bog. It had been that dreadful wet summer, you know, and places that were safe in other years gave way suddenly without warning. Their bodies were never recovered. That was the dreadful part of it.” Here the child’s voice lost its self-possessed note and became falteringly human. “Poor aunt always thinks that they will come back some day, they and the little brown spaniel that was lost with them, and walk in at that window just as they used to do. That is why the window is kept open every evening till it is quite dusk. Poor dear aunt, she has often told me how they went out, her husband with his white waterproof coat over his arm, and Ronnie, her youngest brother, singing ‘Bertie, why do you bound?’ as he always did to tease her, because she said it got on her nerves. Do you know, sometimes on still, quiet evenings like this, I almost get a creepy feeling that they will all walk in through that window——”

She broke off with a little shudder. It was a relief to Framton when the aunt bustled into the room with a whirl of apologies for being late in making her appearance.



“ I hope Vera has been amusing you ? ” she said.

“ She has been very interesting,” said Framton.

“ I hope you don't mind the open window,” said Mrs. Sappleton briskly ; “ my husband and brothers will be home directly from shooting, and they always come in this way. They've been out for snipe in the marshes to-day, so they'll make a fine mess over my poor carpets. So like you men-folk, isn't it ? ”

She rattled on cheerfully about the shooting and the scarcity of birds, and the prospects for duck in the winter. To Framton it was all purely horrible. He made a desperate but only partially successful effort to turn the talk on to a less ghastly topic ; he was conscious that his hostess was giving him only a fragment of her attention, and her eyes were constantly straying past him to the open window and the lawn beyond. It was certainly an unfortunate coincidence that he should have paid his visit on this tragic anniversary.

“ The doctors agree in ordering me complete rest, an absence of mental excitement, and avoidance of anything in the nature of violent physical exercise,” announced Framton, who laboured under the tolerably wide-spread delusion that total strangers and chance acquaintances are hungry for the least detail of one's ailments and infirmities, their cause and cure. “ On the matter of diet they are not so much in agreement,” he continued.

“ No ? ” said Mrs. Sappleton, in a voice which only replaced a yawn at the last moment. Then she suddenly brightened into alert attention—but not to what Framton was saying.

“ Here they are at last ! ” she cried. “ Just in time for tea, and don't they look as if they were muddy up to the eyes ! ”

Framton shivered slightly and turned towards the niece with a look intended to convey sympathetic comprehension. The child was staring out through the open window with dazed horror in her eyes. In a chill shock of nameless fear Framton swung round in his seat and looked in the same direction.

In the deepening twilight three figures were walking across the lawn towards the window ; they all carried guns under their arms, and one of them was additionally burdened with a white coat hung over his shoulders. A tired brown spaniel kept close at their heels. Noiselessly they neared the house, and then a hoarse young voice chanted out of the dusk : “ I said, Bertie, why do you bound ? ”



Framton grabbed wildly at his stick and hat ; the hall-door, the gravel-drive, and the front gate were dimly-noted stages in his headlong retreat. A cyclist coming along the road had to run into the hedge to avoid imminent collision.

"Here we are, my dear," said the bearer of the white mackintosh, coming in through the window ; "fairly muddy, but most of it's dry. Who was that who bolted out as we came up ?"

"A most extraordinary man, a Mr. Nuttel," said Mrs. Sappleton ; "could only talk about his illnesses, and dashed off without a word of good-bye or apology when you arrived. One would think he had seen a ghost."

"I expect it was the spaniel," said the niece calmly ; "he told me he had a horror of dogs. He was once hunted into a cemetery somewhere on the banks of the Ganges by a pack of pariah dogs, and had to spend the night in a newly dug grave with the creatures snarling and grinning and foaming just above him. Enough to make anyone lose their nerve."

Romance at short notice was her speciality.

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*Arthur Machen*

## THE NOVEL OF THE BLACK SEAL

*from* THE THREE IMPOSTORS

John Lane, 1895

*Related by the young lady in Leicester Square*

### PROLOGUE

"I see you are a determined rationalist," said the lady. "Did you not hear me say that I have had experiences even more terrible ? I too was once a sceptic, but after what I have known I can no longer affect to doubt."

"Madam," replied Mr. Phillipps, "no one shall make me deny my faith. I will never believe, nor will I pretend to believe, that two and two make five, nor will I on any pretences admit the existence of two-sided triangles."



“ You are a little hasty,” rejoined the lady. “ But may I ask you if you ever heard the name of Professor Gregg, the authority on ethnology and kindred subjects ? ”

“ I have done much more than merely hear of Professor Gregg,” said Phillipps. “ I always regarded him as one of our most acute and clear-headed observers ; and his last publication, the ‘ Text-book of Ethnology,’ struck me as being quite admirable in its kind. Indeed, the book had but come into my hands when I heard of the terrible accident which cut short Gregg’s career. He had, I think, taken a country house in the West of England for the summer, and is supposed to have fallen into a river. So far as I remember, his body was never recovered.”

“ Sir, I am sure that you are discreet. Your conversation seems to declare as much, and the very title of that little work of yours which you mentioned assures me that you are no empty trifler. In a word, I feel that I may depend on you. You appear to be under the impression that Professor Gregg is dead ; I have no reason to believe that that is the case.”

“ What ? ” cried Phillipps, astonished and perturbed. “ You do not hint that there was anything disgraceful ? I cannot believe it. Gregg was a man of clearest character ; his private life was one of great benevolence ; and though I myself am free from delusions, I believe him to have been a sincere and devout Christian. Surely you cannot mean to insinuate that some disreputable history forced him to flee the country ? ”

“ Again you are in a hurry,” replied the lady. “ I said nothing of all this. Briefly, then, I must tell you that Professor Gregg left this house one morning in full health both in mind and body. He never returned, but his watch and chain, a purse containing three sovereigns in gold, and some loose silver, with a ring that he wore habitually, were found three days later on a wild and savage hill-side, many miles from the river. These articles were placed beside a limestone rock of fantastic form ; they had been wrapped into a parcel with a kind of rough parchment which was secured with gut. The parcel was opened, and the inner side of the parchment bore an inscription done with some red substance ; the characters were undecipherable, but seemed to be a corrupt cuneiform.”

“ You interest me intensely,” said Phillipps. “ Would you mind continuing your story ? The circumstance you have mentioned seems to me of the most inexplicable character, and I thirst for an elucidation.”



The young lady seemed to meditate for a moment, and she then proceeded to relate the

## NOVEL OF THE BLACK SEAL

I must now give you some fuller particulars of my history. I am the daughter of a civil engineer, Steven Lally by name, who was so unfortunate as to die suddenly at the outset of his career, and before he had accumulated sufficient means to support his wife and her two children.

My mother contrived to keep the small household going on resources which must have been incredibly small ; we lived in a remote country village, because most of the necessaries of life were cheaper than in a town, but even so we were brought up with the severest economy. My father was a clever and well-read man, and left behind him a small but select collection of books, containing the best Greek, Latin, and English classics, and these books were the only amusement we possessed. My brother, I remember, learnt Latin out of Descartes' *Meditationes*, and I, in place of the little tales which children are usually told to read, had nothing more charming than a translation of the *Gesta Romanorum*. We grew up thus, quiet and studious children, and in course of time my brother provided for himself in the manner I have mentioned. I continued to live at home ; my poor mother had become an invalid, and demanded my continual care, and about two years ago she died after many months of painful illness. My situation was a terrible one ; the shabby furniture barely sufficed to pay the debts I had been forced to contract, and the books I dispatched to my brother, knowing how he would value them. I was absolutely alone ; I was aware how poorly my brother was paid ; and though I came up to London in the hope of finding employment, with the understanding that he would defray my expenses, I swore it should only be for a month, and that if I could not in that time find some work, I would starve rather than deprive him of the few miserable pounds he had laid by for his day of trouble. I took a little room in a distant suburb, the cheapest that I could find ; I lived on bread and tea, and I spent my time in vain answering of advertisements, and vainer walks to addresses I had noted. Day followed on day, and week on week, and still I was unsuccessful, till at last the term I had appointed drew to a close, and I saw before me the grim prospect of slowly dying of starvation. My landlady was



good-natured in her way ; she knew the slenderness of my means, and I am sure that she would not have turned me out of doors ; it remained for me then to go away, and to try to die in some quiet place. It was winter then, and a thick white fog gathered in the early part of the afternoon, becoming more dense as the day wore on ; it was a Sunday, I remember, and the people of the house were at chapel. At about three o'clock I crept out and walked away as quickly as I could, for I was weak from abstinence. The white mist wrapped all the streets in silence, a hard frost had gathered thick upon the bare branches of the trees, and frost crystals glittered on the wooden fences, and on the cold, cruel ground beneath my feet. I walked on, turning to right and left in utter haphazard, without caring to look up at the names of the streets, and all that I remember of my walk on that Sunday afternoon seems but the broken fragments of an evil dream. In a confused vision I stumbled on, through roads half town and half country, grey fields melting into the cloudy world of mist on one side of me, and on the other comfortable villas with a glow of firelight flickering on the walls, but all unreal ; red brick walls and lighted windows, vague trees, and glimmering country, gas-lamps beginning to star the white shadows, the vanishing perspectives of the railway line beneath high embankments, the green and red of the signal lamps—all these were but momentary pictures flashed on my tired brain and senses numbed by hunger. Now and then I would hear a quick step ringing on the iron road, and men would pass me well wrapped up, walking fast for the sake of warmth, and no doubt eagerly foretasting the pleasures of a glowing hearth, with curtains tightly drawn about the frosted panes, and the welcomes of their friends ; but as the early evening darkened and night approached, foot-passengers got fewer and fewer, and I passed through street after street alone. In the white silence I stumbled on, as desolate as if I trod the streets of a buried city ; and as I grew more weak and exhausted, something of the horror of death was folding thickly round my heart. Suddenly, as I turned a corner, some one accosted me courteously beneath the lamp-post, and I heard a voice asking if I could kindly point the way to Avon Road. At the sudden shock of human accents I was prostrated, and my strength gave way ; I fell all huddled on the sidewalk, and wept and sobbed and laughed in violent hysteria. I had gone out prepared to die, and as I stepped across the threshold that had sheltered me, I consciously bade adieu to all hopes and all remembrances ; the door clanged behind



me with the noise of thunder, and I felt that an iron curtain had fallen on the brief passages of my life, that henceforth I was to walk a little way in a world of gloom and shadow ; I entered on the stage of the first act of death. Then came my wandering in the mist, the whiteness wrapping all things, the void streets, and muffled silence, till when that voice spoke to me it was as if I had died and life returned to me. In a few minutes I was able to compose my feelings, and as I rose I saw that I was confronted by a middle-aged gentleman of pleasing appearance, neatly and correctly dressed. He looked at me with an expression of great pity, but before I could stammer out my ignorance of the neighbourhood, for indeed I had not the slightest notion of where I had wandered, he spoke.

“ My dear madam,” he said, “ you seem in some terrible distress. You cannot think how you alarmed me. But may I inquire the nature of your trouble ? I assure you that you can safely confide in me.”

“ You are very kind,” I replied, “ but I fear there is nothing to be done. My condition seems a hopeless one.”

“ Oh, nonsense, nonsense ! You are too young to talk like that. Come, let us walk down here and you must tell me your difficulty. Perhaps I may be able to help you.”

There was something very soothing and persuasive in his manner, and as we walked together I gave him an outline of my story, and told of the despair that had oppressed me almost to death.

“ You were wrong to give in so completely,” he said, when I was silent. “ A month is too short a time in which to feel’s one’s way in London. London, let me tell you, Miss Lally, does not lie open and undefended ; it is a fortified place, fossed and double moated with curious intricacies. As must always happen in large towns, the conditions of life have become hugely artificial, no mere simple palisade is run up to oppose the man or woman who would take the place by storm, but serried lines of subtle contrivances, mines, and pitfalls which it needs a strange skill to overcome. You, in your simplicity, fancied you had only to shout for these walls to sink into nothingness, but the time is gone for such startling victories as these. Take courage ; you will learn the secret of success before very long.”

“ Alas ! sir,” I replied, “ I have no doubt your conclusions are correct, but at the present moment I seem to be in a fair way to die of starvation. You spoke of a secret ; for Heaven’s sake tell it me, if you have any pity for my distress.”



He laughed genially. "There lies the strangeness of it all. Those who know the secret cannot tell it if they would ; it is positively as ineffable as the central doctrine of Freemasonry. But I may say this, that you yourself have penetrated at least the outer husk of the mystery," and he laughed again.

"Pray do not jest with me," I said. "What have I done, *que sais-je* ? I am so far ignorant that I have not the slightest idea of how my next meal is to be provided."

"Excuse me. You ask what you have done. You have met me. Come, we will fence no longer. I see you have self-education, the only education which is not infinitely pernicious, and I am in want of a governess for my two children. I have been a widower for some years ; my name is Gregg. I offer you the post I have named, and shall we say a salary of a hundred a year ? "

I could only stutter out my thanks, and slipping a card with his address, and a banknote by way of earnest, into my hand, Mr. Gregg bade me good-bye, asking me to call in a day or two.

Such was my introduction to Professor Gregg, and can you wonder that the remembrance of despair and the cold blast that had blown from the gates of death upon me made me regard him as a second father ! Before the close of the week I was installed in my new duties. The professor had leased an old brick manor-house in a western suburb of London, and here, surrounded by pleasant lawns and orchards, and soothed with the murmur of ancient elms that rocked their boughs above the roof, the new chapter of my life began. Knowing as you do the nature of the professor's occupations, you will not be surprised to hear that the house teemed with books, and cabinets full of strange, and even hideous, objects filled every available nook in the vast low rooms. Gregg was a man whose one thought was for knowledge, and I too before long caught something of his enthusiasm, and strove to enter into his passion of research. In a few months I was perhaps more his secretary than the governess of the two children, and many a night I have sat at the desk in the glow of the shaded lamp while he, pacing up and down in the rich gloom of the firelight, dictated to me the substance of his "Textbook of Ethnology." But amidst these more sober and accurate studies I always detected a something hidden, a longing and desire for some object to which he did not allude ; and now and then he would break short in what he was saying and lapse into reverie, entranced, as it seemed to me, by some distant prospect of adventurous discovery. The textbook



was at last finished, and we began to receive proofs from the printers, which were entrusted to me for a first reading, and then underwent the final revision of the professor. All the while his weariness of the actual business he was engaged on increased, and it was with the joyous laugh of a schoolboy when term is over that he one day handed me a copy of the book. "There," he said, "I have kept my word ; I promised to write it, and it is done with. Now I shall be free to live for stranger things ; I confess it, Miss Lally, I covet the renown of Columbus ; you will, I hope, see me play the part of an explorer."

"Surely," I said, "there is little left to explore. You have been born a few hundred years too late for that."

"I think you are wrong," he replied ; "there are still, depend upon it, quaint, undiscovered countries and continents of strange extent. Ah, Miss Lally ! believe me, we stand amidst sacraments and mysteries full of awe, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be. Life, believe me, is no simple thing, no mass of grey matter and congeries of veins and muscles to be laid naked by the surgeon's knife ; man is the secret which I am about to explore, and before I can discover him I must cross over weltering seas indeed, and oceans and the mists of many thousand years. You know the myth of the lost Atlantis ; what if it be true, and I am destined to be called the discoverer of that wonderful land ?"

I could see excitement boiling beneath his words, and in his face was the heat of the hunter ; before me stood a man who believed himself summoned to tourney with the unknown. A pang of joy possessed me when I reflected that I was to be in a way associated with him in the adventure, and I, too, burned with the lust of the chase, not pausing to consider that I knew not what we were to unshadow.

The next morning Professor Gregg took me into his inner study, where, ranged against the wall, stood a nest of pigeon-holes, every drawer neatly labelled, and the results of years of toil classified in a few feet of space.

"Here," he said, "is my life ; here are all the facts which I have gathered together with so much pains, and yet it is all nothing. No, nothing to what I am about to attempt. Look at this" ; and he took me to an old bureau, a piece fantastic and faded, which stood in a corner of the room. He unlocked the front and opened one of the drawers.

"A few scraps of paper," he went on, pointing to the drawer,



“and a lump of black stone, rudely annotated with queer marks and scratches—that is all that drawer holds. Here you see is an old envelope with the dark red stamp of twenty years ago, but I have pencilled a few lines at the back ; here is a sheet of manuscript, and here some cuttings from obscure local journals. And if you ask me the subject-matter of the collection, it will not seem extraordinary—a servant-girl at a farm-house, who disappeared from her place and has never been heard of, a child supposed to have slipped down some old working on the mountains, some queer scribbling on a limestone rock, a man murdered with a blow from a strange weapon ; such is the scent I have to go upon. Yes, as you say, there is a ready explanation for all this ; the girl may have run away to London, or Liverpool, or New York ; the child may be at the bottom of the disused shaft ; and the letters on the rock may be the idle whims of some vagrant. Yes, yes, I admit all that ; but I know I hold the true key. Look !” and he held out a slip of yellow paper.

*Characters found inscribed on a limestone rock on the Grey Hills*, I read, and then there was a word erased, presumably the name of a county, and a date some fifteen years back. Beneath was traced a number of uncouth characters, shaped somewhat like wedges or daggers, as strange and outlandish as the Hebrew alphabet.

“Now the seal,” said Professor Gregg, and he handed me the black stone, a thing about two inches long, and something like an old-fashioned tobacco-stopper, much enlarged.

I held it up to the light, and saw to my surprise the characters on the paper repeated on the seal.

“Yes,” said the professor, “they are the same. And the marks on the limestone rock were made fifteen years ago, with some red substance. And the characters on the seal are four thousand years old at least. Perhaps much more.”

“Is it a hoax ?” I said.

“No, I anticipated that. I was not to be led to give my life to a practical joke. I have tested the matter very carefully. Only one person besides myself knows of the mere existence of that black seal. Besides, there are other reasons which I cannot enter into now.”

“But what does it all mean ?” I said. “I cannot understand to what conclusion all this leads.”

“My dear Miss Lally, that is a question I would rather leave unanswered for some little time. Perhaps I shall never be able to say what secrets are held here in solution ; a few vague hints, the



outlines of village tragedies, a few marks done with red earth upon a rock, and an ancient seal. A queer set of data to go upon? Half a dozen pieces of evidence, and twenty years before even so much could be got together; and who knows what mirage or *terra incognita* may be beyond all this? I look across deep waters, Miss Lally, and the land beyond may be but a haze after all. But still I believe it is not so, and a few months will show whether I am right or wrong."

He left me, and alone I endeavoured to fathom the mystery, wondering to what goal such eccentric odds and ends of evidence could lead. I myself am not wholly devoid of imagination, and I had reason to respect the professor's solidity of intellect; yet I saw in the contents of the drawer but the materials of fantasy, and vainly tried to conceive what theory could be founded on the fragments that had been placed before me. Indeed, I could discover in what I had heard and seen but the first chapter of an extravagant romance; and yet deep in my heart I burned with curiosity, and day after day I looked eagerly in Professor Gregg's face for some hint of what was to happen.

It was one evening after dinner that the word came.

"I hope you can make your preparations without much trouble," he said suddenly to me. "We shall be leaving here in a week's time."

"Really!" I said in astonishment. "Where are we going?"

"I have taken a country house in the west of England, not far from Caermaen, a quiet little town, once a city, and the headquarters of a Roman legion. It is very dull there, but the country is pretty, and the air is wholesome."

I detected a glint in his eyes, and guessed that this sudden move had some relation to our conversation of a few days before.

"I shall just take a few books with me," said Professor Gregg, "that is all. Everything else will remain here for our return. I have got a holiday," he went on, smiling at me, "and I shan't be sorry to be quit for a time of my old bones and stones and rubbish. Do you know," he went on, "I have been grinding away at facts for thirty years; it is time for fancies."

The days passed quickly; I could see that the professor was all quivering with suppressed excitement, and I could scarce credit the eager appetence of his glance as we left the old manor-house behind us and began our journey. We set out at midday, and it was in the dusk of the evening that we arrived at a little country



station. I was tired and excited, and the drive through the lanes seems all a dream. First the deserted streets of a forgotten village, while I heard Professor Gregg's voice talking of the Augustan Legion and the clash of arms, and all the tremendous pomp that followed the eagles ; then the broad river swimming to full tide with the last afterglow glimmering duskily in the yellow water, the wide meadows, the cornfields whitening, and the deep lane winding on the slope between the hills and the water. At last we began to ascend, and the air grew rarer. I looked down and saw the pure white mist tracking the outline of the river like a shroud, and a vague and shadowy country ; imaginations and fantasy of swelling hills and hanging woods, and half-shaped outlines of hills beyond, and in the distance of the glare of the furnace fire on the mountain, growing by turns a pillar of shining flame and fading to a dull point of red. We were slowly mounting a carriage drive, and then there came to me the cool breath and the secret of the great wood that was above us ; I seemed to wander in its deepest depths, and there was the sound of trickling water, the scent of the green leaves, and the breath of the summer night. The carriage stopped at last, and I could scarcely distinguish the form of the house, as I waited a moment at the pillared porch. The rest of the evening seemed a dream of strange things bounded by the great silence of the wood and the valley and the river.

The next morning, when I awoke and looked out of the bow window of the big, old-fashioned bedroom, I saw under a grey sky a country that was still all mystery. The long, lovely valley, with the river winding in and out below, crossed in mid-vision by a mediæval bridge of vaulted and buttressed stone, the clear presence of the rising ground beyond, and the woods that I had only seen in shadow the night before, seemed tinged with enchantment, and the soft breath of air that sighed in at the opened pane was like no other wind. I looked across the valley, and beyond, hill followed on hill as wave on wave, and here a faint blue pillar of smoke rose still in the morning air from the chimney of an ancient grey farmhouse, there was a rugged height crowned with dark firs, and in the distance I saw the white streak of a road that climbed and vanished into some unimagined country. But the boundary of all was a great wall of mountain, vast in the west, and ending like a fortress with a steep ascent and a domed tumulus clear against the sky.

I saw Professor Gregg walking up and down the terrace path



below the windows, and it was evident that he was revelling in the sense of liberty, and the thought that he had for a while bidden good-bye to task-work. When I joined him there was exultation in his voice as he pointed out the sweep of valley and the river that wound beneath the lovely hills.

“ Yes,” he said, “ it is a strangely beautiful country ; and to me, at least, it seems full of mystery. You have not forgotten the drawer I showed you, Miss Lally ? No ; and you have guessed that I have come here not merely for the sake of the children and the fresh air ? ”

“ I think I have guessed as much as that,” I replied ; “ but you must remember I do not know the mere nature of your investigations ; and as for the connection between the search and this wonderful valley, it is past my guessing.”

He smiled queerly at me. “ You must not think I am making a mystery for the sake of mystery,” he said. “ I do not speak out because, so far, there is nothing to be spoken, nothing definite, I mean, nothing that can be set down in hard black and white, as dull and sure and irreproachable as any blue-book. And then I have another reason : Many years ago a chance paragraph in a newspaper caught my attention, and focussed in an instant the vagrant thoughts and half-formed fancies of many idle and speculative hours into a certain hypothesis. I saw at once that I was treading on a thin crust ; my theory was wild and fantastic in the extreme, and I would not for any consideration have written a hint of it for publication. But I thought that in the company of scientific men like myself, men who knew the course of discovery, and were aware that the gas that blazes and flares in the gin-palace was once a wild hypothesis—I thought that with such men as these I might hazard my dream—let us say Atlantis, or the philosopher’s stone, or what you like—without danger of ridicule. I found I was grossly mistaken ; my friends looked blankly at me and at one another, and I could see something of pity, and something also of insolent contempt, in the glances they exchanged. One of them called on me next day, and hinted that I must be suffering from overwork and brain exhaustion. ‘ In plain terms,’ I said, ‘ you think I am going mad. I think not ’ ; and I showed him out with some little appearance of heat. Since that day I vowed that I would never whisper the nature of my theory to any living soul ; to no one but yourself have I ever shown the contents of that drawer. After all, I may be following a rainbow ; I may have been misled by the play



of coincidence ; but as I stand here in this mystic hush and silence, amidst the woods and wild hills, I am more than ever sure that I am hot on the scent. Come, it is time we went in."

To me in all this there was something both of wonder and excitement ; I knew how in his ordinary work Professor Gregg moved step by step, testing every inch of the way, and never venturing on assertion without proof that was impregnable. Yet I divined, more from his glance and the vehemence of his tone than from the spoken word, that he had in his every thought the vision of the almost incredible continually with him ; and I, who was with some share of imagination no little of a sceptic, offended at a hint of the marvellous, could not help asking myself whether he were cherishing a monomania, and barring out from this one subject all the scientific method of his other life.

Yet, with this image of mystery haunting my thoughts, I surrendered wholly to the charm of the country. Above the faded house on the hillside began the great forest—a long, dark line seen from the opposing hills, stretching above the river for many a mile from north to south, and yielding in the north to even wilder country, barren and savage hills, and ragged common-land, a territory all strange and unvisited, and more unknown to Englishmen than the very heart of Africa. The space of a couple of steep fields alone separated the house from the wood, and the children were delighted to follow me up the long alleys of undergrowth, between smooth pleached walls of shining beech, to the highest point in the wood, whence one looked on one side across the river and the rise and fall of the country to the great western mountain wall, and on the other over the surge and dip of the myriad trees of the forest, over level meadows and the shining yellow sea to the faint coast beyond. I used to sit at this point on the warm sunlit turf which marked the track of the Roman Road, while the two children raced about hunting for the whinberries that grew here and there on the banks. Here, beneath the deep blue sky and the great clouds rolling, like olden galleons with sails full-bellied, from the sea to the hills, as I listened to the whispered charm of the great and ancient wood, I lived solely for delight, and only remembered strange things when we would return to the house and find Professor Gregg either shut up in the little room he had made his study, or else pacing the terrace with the look, patient and enthusiastic, of the determined seeker.

One morning, some eight or nine days after our arrival, I looked



out of my window and saw the whole landscape transmuted before me. The clouds had dipped low and hidden the mountain in the west ; a southern wind was driving the rain in shifting pillars up the valley, and the little brooklet that burst the hill below the house now raged, a red torrent, down the river. We were perforce obliged to keep snug within-doors ; and when I had attended to my pupils, I sat down in the morning-room, where the ruins of a library still encumbered an old-fashioned bookcase. I had inspected the shelves once or twice, but their contents had failed to attract me ; volumes of eighteenth-century sermons, an old book on farriery, a collection of *Poems* by " persons of quality," Prideaux's *Connection*, and an odd volume of Pope, were the boundaries of the library, and there seemed little doubt that everything of interest or value had been removed. Now, however, in desperation, I began to re-examine the musty sheepskin and calf bindings, and found, much to my delight, a fine old quarto printed by the Stephani, containing the three books of Pomponius Mela, *De Situ Orbis*, and other of the ancient geographers. I knew enough of Latin to steer my way through an ordinary sentence, and I soon became absorbed in the odd mixture of fact and fancy—light shining on a little of the space of the world, and beyond, mist and shadow and awful forms. Glancing over the clear-printed pages, my attention was caught by the heading of a chapter in Solinus, and I read the words :

" MIRA DE INTIMIS GENTIBUS LIBYAE, DE LAPIDE HEXECONTALITHO,"

—" The wonders of the people that inhabit the inner parts of Libya, and of the stone called Sixtystone."

The odd title attracted me, and I read on : " Gens ista avia et secreta habitat, in montibus horrendis foeda mysteria celebrat. De hominibus nihil aliud illi praeferunt quam figuram, ab humano ritu prorsus exulant, oderunt deum lucis. Stridunt potius quam loquuntur ; vox absona nec sine horrore auditur. Lapide quodam gloriantur, quem Hexecontalithon vocant ; dicunt enim hunc lapidem sexaginta notas ostendere. Cujus lapidis nomen secretum ineffabile colunt : quod Ixaxar."

" This folk," I translated to myself, " dwells in remote and secret places, and celebrates foul mysteries on savage hills. Nothing have they in common with men save the face, and the customs of humanity are wholly strange to them ; and they hate the



sun. They hiss rather than speak ; their voices are harsh, and not to be heard without fear. They boast of a certain stone, which they call Sixtystone ; for they say that it displays sixty characters. And this stone has a secret unspeakable name ; which is Ixaxar."

I laughed at the queer inconsequence of all this, and thought it fit for "Sinbad the Sailor," or other of the supplementary Nights. When I saw Professor Gregg in the course of the day, I told him of my find in the bookcase, and the fantastic rubbish I had been reading. To my surprise he looked up at me with an expression of great interest.

"That is really very curious," he said. "I have never thought it worth while to look into the old geographers, and I dare say I have missed a good deal. Ah, that is the passage, is it? It seems a shame to rob you of your entertainment, but I really think I must carry off the book."

The next day the professor called me to come to the study. I found him sitting at a table in the full light of the window, scrutinizing something very attentively with a magnifying glass.

"Ah, Miss Lally," he began, "I want to use your eyes. This glass is pretty good, but not like my old one that I left in town. Would you mind examining the thing yourself, and telling me how many characters are cut on it?"

He handed me the object in his hand. I saw that it was the black seal he had shown me in London, and my heart began to beat with the thought that I was presently to know something. I took the seal, and, holding it up to the light, checked off the grotesque dagger-shaped characters one by one.

"I make sixty-two," I said at last.

"Sixty-two? Nonsense ; it's impossible. Ah, I see what you have done, you have counted that and that," and he pointed to two marks which I had certainly taken as letters with the rest.

"Yes, yes," Professor Gregg went on, "but those are obvious scratches, done accidentally ; I saw that at once. Yes, then that's quite right. Thank you very much, Miss Lally."

I was going away, rather disappointed at my having been called in merely to count the number of marks on the black seal, when suddenly there flashed into my mind what I had read in the morning.

"But, Professor Gregg," I cried, breathless, "the seal, the seal. Why, it is the stone Hexecontalithos that Solinus writes of ; it is Ixaxar."



"Yes," he said, "I suppose it is. Or it may be a mere coincidence. It never does to be too sure, you know, in these matters. Coincidence killed the professor."

I went away puzzled by what I had heard, and as much as ever at a loss to find the ruling clue in this maze of strange evidence. For three days the bad weather lasted, changing from driving rain to a dense mist, fine and dripping, and we seemed to be shut up in a white cloud that veiled all the world away from us. All the while Professor Gregg was darkling in his room, unwilling, it appeared, to dispense confidences or talk of any kind, and I heard him walking to and fro with a quick, impatient step, as if he were in some way wearied of inaction. The fourth morning was fine, and at breakfast the professor said briskly :

"We want some extra help about the house ; a boy of fifteen or sixteen, you know. There are a lot of little odd jobs that take up the maids' time which a boy could do much better."

"The girls have not complained to me in any way," I replied. "Indeed, Anne said there was much less work than in London, owing to there being so little dust."

"Ah, yes, they are very good girls. But I think we shall do much better with a boy. In fact, that is what has been bothering me for the last two days."

"Bothering you ?" I said in astonishment, for as a matter of fact the professor never took the slightest interest in the affairs of the house.

"Yes," he said, "the weather, you know. I really couldn't go out in that Scotch mist ; I don't know the country very well, and I should have lost my way. But I am going to get the boy this morning."

"But how do you know there is such a boy as you want anywhere about ?"

"Oh, I have no doubt as to that. I may have to walk a mile or two at the most, but I am sure to find just the boy I require."

I thought the professor was joking, but, though his tone was airy enough, there was something grim and set about his features that puzzled me. He got his stick, and stood at the door looking meditatively before him, and as I passed through the hall he called to me.

"By the way, Miss Lally, there was one thing I wanted to say to you. I dare say you may have heard that some of these country lads are not over bright ; idiotic would be a harsh word to use, and



they are usually called 'naturals,' or something of the kind. I hope you won't mind if the boy I am after should turn out not too keen-witted; he will be perfectly harmless, of course, and blacking boots doesn't need much mental effort."

With that he was gone, striding up the road that led to the wood, and I remained stupefied; and then for the first time my astonishment was mingled with a sudden note of terror, arising I knew not whence, and all unexplained even to myself, and yet I felt about my heart for an instant something of the chill of death, and that shapeless, formless dread of the unknown that is worse than death itself. I tried to find courage in the sweet air that blew up from the sea, and in the sunlight after rain, but the mystic woods seemed to darken around me; and the vision of the river coiling between the reeds, and the silver grey of the ancient bridge, fashioned in my mind symbols of vague dread, as the mind of a child fashions terror from things harmless and familiar.

Two hours later Professor Gregg returned. I met him as he came down the road, and asked quietly if he had been able to find a boy.

"Oh, yes," he answered; "I found one easily enough. His name is Jervase Cradock, and I expect he will make himself very useful. His father has been dead for many years, and the mother, whom I saw, seemed very glad at the prospect of a few shillings extra coming in on Saturday nights. As I expected, he is not too sharp, has fits at times, the mother said; but as he will not be trusted with the china, that doesn't much matter, does it? And he is not in any way dangerous, you know, merely a little weak."

"When is he coming?"

"To-morrow morning at eight o'clock. Anne will show him what he has to do, and how to do it. At first he will go home every night, but perhaps it may ultimately turn out more convenient for him to sleep here, and only go home for Sundays."

I found nothing to say to all this; Professor Gregg spoke in a quiet tone of matter-of-fact, as indeed was warranted by the circumstance; and yet I could not quell my sensation of astonishment at the whole affair. I knew that in reality no assistance was wanted in the housework, and the professor's prediction that the boy he was to engage might prove a little "simple," followed by so exact a fulfilment, struck me as bizarre in the extreme. The next morning I heard from the housemaid that the boy Cradock had come at eight, and that she had been trying to make him useful. "He doesn't seem quite all there, I don't think, miss," was



her comment, and later in the day I saw him helping the old man who worked in the garden. He was a youth of about fourteen, with black hair and black eyes and an olive skin, and I saw at once from the curious vacancy of his expression that he was mentally weak. He touched his forehead awkwardly as I went by, and I heard him answering the gardener in a queer, harsh voice that caught my attention ; it gave me the impression of some one speaking deep below under the earth, and there was a strange sibilance, like the hissing of the phonograph as the pointer travels over the cylinder. I heard that he seemed anxious to do what he could, and was quite docile and obedient, and Morgan the gardener, who knew his mother, assured me he was perfectly harmless. "He's always been a bit queer," he said, "and no wonder, after what his mother went through before he was born. I did know his father, Thomas Cradock, well, and a very fine workman he was too, indeed. He got something wrong with his lungs owing to working in the wet woods, and never got over it, and went off quite sudden like. And they do say as how Mrs. Cradock was quite off her head ; anyhow, she was found by Mr. Hillyer, Ty Coch, all crouched up on the Grey Hills, over there, crying and weeping like a lost soul. And Jervase, he was born about eight months afterwards, and, as I was saying, he was a bit queer always ; and they do say when he could scarcely walk he would frighten the other children into fits with the noises he would make."

A word in the story had stirred up some remembrance within me, and, vaguely curious, I asked the old man where the Grey Hills were.

"Up there," he said, with the same gesture he had used before ; "you go past the 'Fox and Hounds,' and through the forest, by the old ruins. It's a good five mile from here, and a strange sort of a place. The poorest soil between this and Monmouth, they do say, though it's good feed for sheep. Yes, it was a sad thing for poor Mrs. Cradock."

The old man turned to his work, and I strolled on down the path between the espaliers, gnarled and gouty with age, thinking of the story I had heard, and groping for the point in it that had some key to my memory. In an instant it came before me ; I had seen the phrase "Grey Hills" on the slip of yellowed paper that Professor Gregg had taken from the drawer in his cabinet. Again I was seized with pangs of mingled curiosity and fear, I remembered the strange characters copied from the limestone rock, and



then again their identity with the inscription on the age-old seal, and the fantastic fables of the Latin geographer. I saw beyond doubt that, unless coincidence had set all the scene and disposed all these bizarre events with curious art, I was to be a spectator of things far removed from the usual and customary traffic and jostle of life. Professor Gregg I noted day by day ; he was hot on his trail, growing lean with eagerness ; and in the evenings, when the sun was swimming on the verge of the mountain, he would pace the terrace to and fro with his eyes on the ground, while the mist grew white in the valley, and the stillness of the evening brought far voices near, and the blue smoke rose a straight column from the diamond-shaped chimney of the grey farm-house, just as I had seen it on the first morning. I have told you I was of sceptical habit ; but though I understood little or nothing, I began to dread, vainly proposing to myself the iterated dogmas of science that all life is material, and that in the system of things there is no undiscovered land, even beyond the remotest stars, where the supernatural can find a footing. Yet there struck in on this the thought that matter is as really awful and unknown as spirit, that science itself but dallies on the threshold, scarcely gaining more than a glimpse of the wonders of the inner place.

There is one day that stands up from amidst the others as a grim red beacon, betokening evil to come. I was sitting on a bench in the garden, watching the boy Cradock weeding, when I was suddenly alarmed by a harsh and choking sound, like the cry of a wild beast in anguish, and I was unspeakably shocked to see the unfortunate lad standing in full view before me, his whole body quivering and shaking at short intervals as though shocks of electricity were passing through him, his teeth grinding, foam gathering on his lips, and his face all swollen and blackened to a hideous mask of humanity. I shrieked with terror, and Professor Gregg came running ; and as I pointed to Cradock, the boy with one convulsive shudder fell face forward, and lay on the wet earth, his body writhing like a wounded blind-worm, and an inconceivable babble of sounds bursting and rattling and hissing from his lips. He seemed to pour forth an infamous jargon, with words, or what seemed words, that might have belonged to a tongue dead since untold ages, and buried deep beneath Nilotic mud, or in the inmost recesses of the Mexican forest. For a moment the thought passed through my mind, as my ears were still revolted with that infernal clamour, " Surely this is the very speech of hell," and



then I cried out again and again, and ran away shuddering to my inmost soul. I had seen Professor Gregg's face as he stooped over the wretched boy and raised him, and I was appalled by the glow of exultation that shone on every lineament and feature. As I sat in my room with drawn blinds, and my eyes hidden in my hands, I heard heavy steps beneath, and I was told afterwards that Professor Gregg had carried Cradock to his study, and had locked the door. I heard voices murmur indistinctly, and I trembled to think of what might be passing within a few feet of where I sat ; I longed to escape to the woods and sunshine, and yet I dreaded the sights that might confront me on the way ; and at last, as I held the handle of the door nervously, I heard Professor Gregg's voice calling to me with a cheerful ring. " It's all right now, Miss Lally," he said. " The poor fellow has got over it, and I have been arranging for him to sleep here after to-morrow. Perhaps I may be able to do something for him."

" Yes," he said later, " it was a very painful sight, and I don't wonder you were alarmed. We may hope that good food will build him up a little, but I am afraid he will never be really cured," and he affected the dismal and conventional air with which one speaks of hopeless illness ; and yet beneath it I detected the delight that leapt up rampant within him, and fought and struggled to find utterance. It was as if one glanced down on the even surface of the sea, clear and immobile, and saw beneath raging depths and a storm of contending billows. It was indeed to me a torturing and offensive problem that this man, who had so bounteously rescued me from the sharpness of death, and showed himself in all the relations of life full of benevolence, and pity, and kindly forethought, should so manifestly be for once on the side of the demons, and take a ghastly pleasure in the torments of an afflicted fellow-creature. Apart, I struggled with the horned difficulty, and strove to find the solution ; but without the hint of a clue, beset by mystery and contradiction, I saw nothing that might help me, and began to wonder whether, after all, I had not escaped from the white mist of the suburb at too dear a rate. I hinted something of my thought to the professor ; I said enough to let him know that I was in the most acute perplexity, but the moment after regretted what I had done when I saw his face contort with a spasm of pain.

" My dear Miss Lally," he said, " you surely do not wish to leave us ? No, no, you would not do it. You do not know how I rely on you ; how confidently I go forward, assured that you are



here to watch over my children. You, Miss Lally, are my rear-guard ; for let me tell you the business in which I am engaged is not wholly devoid of peril. You have not forgotten what I said the first morning here ; my lips are shut by an old and firm resolve till they can open to utter no ingenious hypothesis or vague surmise, but irrefragable fact, as certain as a demonstration in mathematics. Think over it, Miss Lally ; not for a moment would I endeavour to keep you here against your own instincts, and yet I tell you frankly that I am persuaded it is here, here amidst the woods, that your duty lies."

I was touched by the eloquence of his tone, and by the remembrance that the man, after all, had been my salvation, and I gave him my hand on a promise to serve him loyally and without question. A few days later the rector of our church—a little church, grey and severe and quaint, that hovered on the very banks of the river and watched the tides swim and return—came to see us, and Professor Gregg easily persuaded him to stay and share our dinner. Mr. Meyrick was a member of an antique family of squires, whose old manor-house stood amongst the hills some seven miles away, and thus rooted in the soil, the rector was a living store of all the old fading customs and lore of the country. His manner, genial, with a deal of retired oddity, won on Professor Gregg ; and towards the cheese, when a curious Burgundy had begun its incantations, the two men glowed like the wine, and talked of philology with the enthusiasm of a burgess over the peerage. The parson was expounding the pronunciation of the Welsh *ll*, and producing sounds like the gurgle of his native brooks, when Professor Gregg struck in.

"By the way," he said, "that was a very odd word I met with the other day. You know my boy, poor Jervase Cradock ? Well, he has got the bad habit of talking to himself, and the day before yesterday I was walking in the garden here and heard him ; he was evidently quite unconscious of my presence. A lot of what he said I couldn't make out, but one word struck me distinctly. It was such an odd sound, half sibilant, half guttural, and as quaint as those double *l*'s you have been demonstrating. I do not know whether I can give you an idea of the sound ; 'Ishakshar' is perhaps as near as I can get. But the *k* ought to be a Greek *chi* or a Spanish *j*. Now what does it mean in Welsh ?"

"In Welsh ?" said the parson. "There is no such word in Welsh, nor any word remotely resembling it. I know the



book-Welsh, as they call it, and the colloquial dialects as well as any man, but there's no word like that from Anglesea to Usk. Besides, none of the Cradocks speak a word of Welsh ; it's dying out about here."

"Really. You interest me extremely, Mr. Meyrick. I confess the word didn't strike me as having the Welsh ring. But I thought it might be some local corruption."

"No, I never heard such a word, or anything like it. Indeed," he added, smiling whimsically, "if it belongs to any language, I should say it must be that of the fairies—the Tylwydd Têg, as we call them."

The talk went on to the discovery of a Roman villa in the neighbourhood ; and soon after I left the room, and sat down apart to wonder at the drawing together of such strange clues of evidence. As the professor had spoken of the curious word, I had caught the glint of his eye upon me ; and though the pronunciation he gave was grotesque in the extreme, I recognized the name of the stone of sixty characters mentioned by Solinus, the black seal shut up in some secret drawer of the study, stamped for ever by a vanished race with signs that no man could read, signs that might, for all I knew, be the veils of awful things done long ago, and forgotten before the hills were moulded into form.

When the next morning I came down, I found Professor Gregg pacing the terrace in his eternal walk.

"Look at that bridge," he said, when he saw me ; "observe the quaint and Gothic design, the angles between the arches, and the silvery grey of the stone in the awe of the morning light. I confess it seems to me symbolic ; it should illustrate a mystical allegory of the passage from one world to another."

"Professor Gregg," I said quietly, "it is time that I knew something of what has happened, and of what is to happen."

For the moment he put me off, but I returned again with the same question in the evening, and then Professor Gregg flamed with excitement. "Don't you understand yet ?" he cried. "But I have told you a good deal ; yes, and shown you a good deal ; you have heard pretty nearly all that I have heard, and seen what I have seen ; or at least," and his voice chilled as he spoke, "enough to make a good deal clear as noonday. The servants told you, I have no doubt, that the wretched boy Cradock had another seizure the night before last ; he awoke me with cries in that voice you heard in the garden, and I went to him, and God forbid you should



see what I saw that night. But all this is useless ; my time here is drawing to a close ; I must be back in town in three weeks, as I have a course of lectures to prepare, and need all my books about me. In a very few days it will be all over, and I shall no longer hint, and no longer be liable to ridicule as a madman and a quack. No, I shall speak plainly, and I shall be heard with such emotions as perhaps no other man has ever drawn from the breasts of his fellows."

He paused, and seemed to grow radiant with the joy of great and wonderful discovery.

"But all that is for the future, the near future certainly, but still the future," he went on at length. "There is something to be done yet ; you will remember my telling you that my researches were not altogether devoid of peril ? Yes, there is a certain amount of danger to be faced ; I did not know how much when I spoke on the subject before, and to a certain extent I am still in the dark. But it will be a strange adventure, the last of all, the last demonstration in the chain."

He was walking up and down the room as he spoke, and I could hear in his voice the contending tones of exultation and despondence, or perhaps I should say awe, the awe of a man who goes forth on unknown waters, and I thought of his allusion to Columbus on the night he had laid his book before me. The evening was a little chilly, and a fire of logs had been lighted in the study where we were ; the remittent flame and the glow on the walls reminded me of the old days. I was sitting silent in an arm-chair by the fire, wondering over all I had heard, and still vainly speculating as to the secret springs concealed from me under all the phantasmagoria I had witnessed, when I became suddenly aware of a sensation that change of some sort had been at work in the room, and that there was something unfamiliar in its aspect. For some time I looked about me, trying in vain to localize the alteration that I knew had been made ; the table by the window, the chairs, the faded settee were all as I had known them. Suddenly, as a sought-for recollection flashes into the mind, I knew what was amiss. I was facing the professor's desk, which stood on the other side of the fire, and above the desk was a grimy-looking bust of Pitt, that I had never seen there before. And then I remembered the true position of this work of art ; in the farthest corner by the door was an old cupboard, projecting into the room, and on the top of the cupboard, fifteen feet from the floor, the bust had been, and there,



no doubt, it had delayed, accumulating dirt, since the early days of the century.

I was utterly amazed, and sat silent, still in a confusion of thought. There was, so far as I knew, no such thing as a step-ladder in the house, for I had asked for one to make some alterations in the curtains of my room, and a tall man standing on a chair would have found it impossible to take down the bust. It had been placed, not on the edge of the cupboard, but far back against the wall; and Professor Gregg was, if anything, under the average height.

“How on earth did you manage to get down Pitt?” I said at last.

The professor looked curiously at me, and seemed to hesitate a little.

“They must have found you a step-ladder, or perhaps the gardener brought in a short ladder from outside?”

“No, I have had no ladder of any kind. Now, Miss Lally,” he went on with an awkward simulation of jest, “there is a little puzzle for you; a problem in the manner of the inimitable Holmes; there are the facts, plain and patent; summon your acuteness to the solution of the puzzle. For Heaven’s sake,” he cried with a breaking voice, “say no more about it! I tell you, I never touched the thing,” and he went out of the room with horror manifest on his face, and his hand shook and jarred the door behind him.

I looked round the room in vague surprise, not at all realizing what had happened, making vain and idle surmises by way of explanation, and wondering at the stirring of black waters by an idle word and the trivial change of an ornament. “This is some petty business, some whim on which I have jarred,” I reflected; “the professor is perhaps scrupulous and superstitious over trifles, and my question may have outraged unacknowledged fears, as though one killed a spider or spilled the salt before the very eyes of a practical Scotchwoman.” I was immersed in these fond suspicions, and began to plume myself a little on my immunity from such empty fears, when the truth fell heavily as lead upon my heart, and I recognized with cold terror that some awful influence had been at work. The bust was simply inaccessible; without a ladder no one could have touched it.

I went out to the kitchen and spoke as quietly as I could to the housemaid.

“Who moved that bust from the top of the cupboard, Anne?”



I said to her. "Professor Gregg says he has not touched it. Did you find an old step-ladder in one of the outhouses?"

The girl looked at me blankly.

"I never touched it," she said. "I found it where it is now the other morning when I dusted the room. I remember now, it was Wednesday morning, because it was the morning after Cradock was taken bad in the night. My room is next to his, you know, miss," the girl went on piteously, "and it was awful to hear how he cried and called out names that I couldn't understand. It made me feel all afraid; and then master came, and I heard him speak, and he took down Cradock to the study and gave him something."

"And you found that bust moved the next morning?"

"Yes, miss. There was a queer sort of smell in the study when I came down and opened the windows; a bad smell it was, and I wondered what it could be. Do you know, miss, I went a long time ago to the Zoo in London with my cousin Thomas Barker, one afternoon that I had off, when I was at Mrs. Prince's in Stanhope Gate, and we went into the snake-house to see the snakes, and it was just the same sort of smell; very sick it made me feel, I remember, and I got Barker to take me out. And it was just the same kind of smell in the study, as I was saying, and I was wondering what it could be from, when I see that bust with Pitt cut in it, standing on the master's desk, and I thought to myself, 'Now who has done that, and how have they done it?' And when I came to dust the things, I looked at the bust, and I saw a great mark on it where the dust was gone, for I don't think it can have been touched with a duster for years and years, and it wasn't like finger-marks, but a large patch like, broad and spread out. So I passed my hand over it, without thinking what I was doing, and where that patch was it was all sticky and slimy, as if a snail had crawled over it. Very strange, isn't it, miss? and I wonder who can have done it, and how that mess was made."

The well-meant gabble of the servant touched me to the quick; I lay down upon my bed, and bit my lip that I should not cry out loud in the sharp anguish of my terror and bewilderment. Indeed, I was almost mad with dread; I believe that if it had been daylight I should have fled hot foot, forgetting all courage and all the debt of gratitude that was due to Professor Gregg, not caring whether my fate were that I must starve slowly, so long as I might escape from the net of blind and panic fear that every day seemed to draw a little closer round me. If I knew, I thought, if I knew



what there were to dread, I could guard against it ; but here, in this lonely house, shut in on all sides by the olden woods and the vaulted hills, terror seems to spring inconsequent from every covert, and the flesh is aghast at the half-heard murmurs of horrible things. All in vain I strove to summon scepticism to my aid, and endeavoured by cool common sense to buttress my belief in a world of natural order, for the air that blew in at the open window was a mystic breath, and in the darkness I felt the silence go heavy and sorrowful as a mass of requiem, and I conjured images of strange shapes gathering fast amidst the reeds, beside the wash of the river.

In the morning, from the moment that I set foot in the breakfast-room, I felt that the unknown plot was drawing to a crisis ; the professor's face was firm and set, and he seemed hardly to hear our voices when we spoke.

"I am going out for a rather long walk," he said, when the meal was over. "You mustn't be expecting me, now, or thinking anything has happened if I don't turn up to dinner. I have been getting stupid lately, and I dare say a miniature walking tour will do me good. Perhaps I may even spend the night in some little inn, if I find any place that looks clean and comfortable."

I heard this, and knew by my experience of Professor Gregg's manner that it was no ordinary business or pleasure that impelled him. I knew not, nor even remotely guessed, where he was bound, nor had I the vaguest notion of his errand, but all the fear of the night before returned ; and as he stood, smiling, on the terrace, ready to set out, I implored him to stay, and to forget all his dreams of the undiscovered continent.

"No, no, Miss Lally," he replied, still smiling, "it's too late now. *Vestigia nulla retrorsum*, you know, is the device of all true explorers, though I hope it won't be literally true in my case. But, indeed, you are wrong to alarm yourself so ; I look upon my little expedition as quite commonplace ; no more exciting than a day with the geological hammers. There is a risk, of course, but so there is on the commonest excursion. I can afford to be jaunty ; I am doing nothing so hazardous as 'Arry does a hundred times over in the course of every Bank Holiday. Well, then, you must look more cheerfully ; and so good-bye till to-morrow at latest."

He walked briskly up the road, and I saw him open the gate that marks the entrance of the wood, and then he vanished in the gloom of the trees.



All the day passed heavily with a strange darkness in the air, and again I felt as if imprisoned amidst the ancient woods, shut in an olden land of mystery and dread, and as if all was long ago and forgotten by the living outside. I hoped and dreaded ; and when the dinner-hour came I waited, expecting to hear the professor's step in the hall, and his voice exulting at I knew not what triumph. I composed my face to welcome him gladly, but the night descended dark, and he did not come.

In the morning, when the maid knocked at my door, I called out to her, and asked if her master had returned ; and when she replied that his bedroom door stood open and empty, I felt the cold clasp of despair. Still, I fancied he might have discovered genial company, and would return for luncheon, or perhaps in the afternoon, and I took the children for a walk in the forest, and tried my best to play and laugh with them, and to shut out the thoughts of mystery and veiled terror. Hour after hour I waited, and my thoughts grew darker ; again the night came and found me watching, and at last, as I was making much ado to finish my dinner, I heard steps outside and the sound of a man's voice.

The maid came in and looked oddly at me. " Please, miss," she began, " Mr. Morgan, the gardener, wants to speak to you for a minute, if you didn't mind."

" Show him in, please," I answered, and I set my lips tight.

The old man came slowly into the room, and the servant shut the door behind him.

" Sit down, Mr. Morgan," I said ; " what is it that you want to say to me ? "

" Well, miss, Mr. Gregg he gave me something for you yesterday morning, just before he went off ; and he told me particular not to hand it up before eight o'clock this evening exactly, if so be as he wasn't back again home before, and if he should come home before I was just to return it to him in his own hands. So, you see, as Mr. Gregg isn't here, yet, I suppose I'd better give you the parcel directly."

He pulled out something from his pocket, and gave it to me, half rising. I took it silently, and seeing that Morgan seemed doubtful as to what he was to do next, I thanked him and bade him good night, and he went out. I was left alone in the room with the parcel in my hand—a paper parcel, neatly sealed and directed to me, with the instructions Morgan had quoted, all written in the professor's large, loose hand. I broke the seals with a choking at



my heart, and found an envelope inside, addressed also, but open, and I took the letter out.

“MY DEAR MISS LALLY,” it began,—“To quote the old logic manual, the case of your reading this note is a case of my having made a blunder of some sort, and, I am afraid, a blunder that turns these lines into a farewell. It is practically certain that neither you nor any one else will ever see me again. I have made my will with provision for this eventuality, and I hope you will consent to accept the small remembrance addressed to you, and my sincere thanks for the way in which you joined your fortunes to mine. The fate which has come upon me is desperate and terrible beyond the remotest dreams of man ; but this fate you have a right to know—if you please. If you look in the left-hand drawer of my dressing-table, you will find the key of the escritoire, properly labelled. In the well of the escritoire is a large envelope sealed and addressed to your name. I advise you to throw it forthwith into the fire ; you will sleep better of nights if you do so. But if you must know the history of what has happened, it is all written down for you to read.”

The signature was firmly written below, and again I turned the page and read out the words one by one, aghast and white to the lips, my hands cold as ice, and sickness choking me. The dead silence of the room, and the thought of the dark woods and hills closing me in on every side, oppressed me, helpless and without capacity, and not knowing where to turn for counsel. At last I resolved that though knowledge should haunt my whole life and all the days to come, I must know the meaning of the strange terrors that had so long tormented me, rising grey, dim, and awful, like the shadows in the wood at dusk. I carefully carried out Professor Gregg’s directions, and not without reluctance broke the seal of the envelope, and spread out his manuscript before me. That manuscript I always carry with me, and I see that I cannot deny your unspoken request to read it. This, then, was what I read that night, sitting at the desk, with a shaded lamp beside me.

The young lady who called herself Miss Lally then proceeded to recite :

THE STATEMENT OF WILLIAM GREGG, F.R.S., ETC.

It is many years since the first glimmer of the theory which is now almost, if not quite, reduced to fact dawned on my mind. A



somewhat extensive course of miscellaneous and obsolete reading had done a good deal to prepare the way, and, later, when I became somewhat of a specialist, and immersed myself in the studies known as ethnological, I was now and then startled by facts that would not square with orthodox scientific opinion, and by discoveries that seemed to hint at something still hidden for all our research. More particularly I became convinced that much of the folk-lore of the world is but an exaggerated account of events that really happened, and I was especially drawn to consider the stories of the fairies, the good folk of the Celtic races. Here I thought I could detect the fringe of embroidery and exaggeration, the fantastic guise, the little people dressed in green and gold sporting in the flowers, and I thought I saw a distinct analogy between the name given to this race (supposed to be imaginary) and the description of their appearance and manners. Just as our remote ancestors called the dreaded beings "fair" and "good" precisely because they dreaded them, so they had dressed them up in charming forms, knowing the truth to be the very reverse. Literature, too, had gone early to work, and had lent a powerful hand in the transformation, so that the playful elves of Shakespeare are already far removed from the true original, and the real horror is disguised in a form of prankish mischief. But in the older tales, the stories that used to make men cross themselves as they sat round the burning logs, we tread a different stage; I saw a widely opposed spirit in certain histories of children and of men and women who vanished strangely from the earth. They would be seen by a peasant in the fields walking towards some green and rounded hillock, and seen no more on earth; and there are stories of mothers who have left a child quietly sleeping, with the cottage door rudely barred with a piece of wood, and have returned, not to find the plump and rosy little Saxon, but a thin and wizened creature, with sallow skin and black, piercing eyes, the child of another race. Then, again, there were myths darker still; the dread of witch and wizard, the lurid evil of the Sabbath, and the hint of demons who mingled with the daughters of men. And just as we have turned the terrible "fair folk" into a company of benignant, if freakish elves, so we have hidden from us the black foulness of the witch and her companions under a popular *diablerie* of old women and broomsticks, and a comic cat with tail on end. So the Greeks called the hideous furies benevolent ladies, and thus the northern nations have followed their example. I pursued my investigations, stealing



odd hours from other and more imperative labours, and I asked myself the question : Supposing these traditions to be true, who were the demons who are reported to have attended the Sabbaths ? I need not say that I laid aside what I may call the supernatural hypothesis of the Middle Ages, and came to the conclusion that fairies and evils were of one and the same race and origin ; invention, no doubt, and the Gothic fancy of old days, had done much in the way of exaggeration and distortion ; yet I firmly believe that beneath all this imagery there was a black background of truth. As for some of the alleged wonders, I hesitated. While I should be very loath to receive any one specific instance of modern spiritualism as containing even a grain of the genuine, yet I was not wholly prepared to deny that human flesh may now and then, once perhaps in ten million cases, be the veil of powers which seem magical to us—powers which, so far from proceeding from the heights and leading men thither, are in reality survivals from the depths of being. The amœba and the snail have powers which we do not possess ; and I thought it possible that the theory of reversion might explain many things which seem wholly inexplicable. Thus stood my position ; I saw good reason to believe that much of the tradition, a vast deal of the earliest and uncorrupted tradition of the so-called fairies, represented solid fact, and I thought that the purely supernatural element in these traditions was to be accounted for on the hypothesis that a race which had fallen out of the grand march of evolution might have retained, as a survival, certain powers which would be to us wholly miraculous. Such was my theory as it stood conceived in my mind ; and working with this in view, I seemed to gather confirmation from every side, from the spoils of a tumulus or a barrow, from a local paper reporting an antiquarian meeting in the country, and from general literature of all kinds. Amongst other instances, I remember being struck by the phrase “ articulate-speaking men ” in Homer, as if the writer knew or had heard of men whose speech was so rude that it could hardly be termed articulate ; and on my hypothesis of a race who had lagged far behind the rest, I could easily conceive that such a folk would speak a jargon but little removed from the inarticulate noises of brute beasts.

Thus I stood, satisfied that my conjecture was at all events not far removed from fact, when a chance paragraph in a small country print one day arrested my attention. It was a short account of what was to all appearance the usual sordid tragedy of



the village—a young girl unaccountably missing, and evil rumour blatant and busy with her reputation. Yet I could read between the lines that all this scandal was purely hypothetical, and in all probability invented to account for what was in any other manner unaccountable. A flight to London or Liverpool, or an undiscovered body lying with a weight about its neck in the foul depths of a woodland pool, or perhaps murder—such were the theories of the wretched girl's neighbours. But as I idly scanned the paragraph, a flash of thought passed through me with the violence of an electric shock : what if the obscure and horrible race of the hills still survived, still remained haunting wild places and barren hills, and now and then repeating the evil of Gothic legend, unchanged and unchangeable as the Turanian Shelta, or the Basques of Spain? I have said that the thought came with violence ; and indeed I drew in my breath sharply, and clung with both hands to my elbow-chair, in a strange confusion of horror and elation. It was as if one of my *confrères* of physical science, roaming in a quite English wood, had been suddenly stricken aghast by the presence of the slimy and loathsome terror of the ichthyosaurus, the original of the stories of the awful worms killed by valorous knights, or had seen the sun darkened by the pterodactyl, the dragon of tradition. Yet as a resolute explorer of knowledge, the thought of such a discovery threw me into a passion of joy, and I cut out the slip from the paper and put it in a drawer in my old bureau, resolved that it should be but the first piece in a collection of the strangest significance. I sat long that evening dreaming of the conclusions I should establish, nor did cooler reflection at first dash my confidence. Yet as I began to put the case fairly, I saw that I might be building on an unstable foundation ; the facts might possibly be in accordance with local opinion, and I regarded the affair with a mood of some reserve. Yet I resolved to remain perched on the look-out, and I hugged to myself the thought that I alone was watching and wakeful, while the great crowd of thinkers and searchers stood heedless and indifferent, perhaps letting the most prerogative facts pass by unnoticed.

Several years elapsed before I was enabled to add to the contents of the drawer ; and the second find was in reality not a valuable one, for it was a mere repetition of the first, with only the variation of another and distant locality. Yet I gained something, for in the second case, as in the first, the tragedy took place in a desolate and lonely country, and so far my theory seemed justified.



But the third piece was to me far more decisive. Again, amongst outland hills, far even from a main road of traffic, an old man was found done to death, and the instrument of execution was left beside him. Here, indeed, there were rumour and conjecture, for the deadly tool was a primitive stone axe, bound by gut to the wooden handle, and surmises the most extravagant and improbable were indulged in. Yet, as I thought with a kind of glee, the wildest conjectures went far astray ; and I took the pains to enter into correspondence with the local doctor, who was called at the inquest. He, a man of some acuteness, was dumfounded. "It will not do to speak of these things in country places," he wrote to me, "but frankly, there is some hideous mystery here. I have obtained possession of the stone axe, and have been so curious as to test its powers. I took it into the back-garden of my house one Sunday afternoon when my family and the servants were all out, and there, sheltered by the poplar hedges, I made my experiments. I found the thing utterly unmanageable ; whether there is some peculiar balance, some nice adjustment of weights, which require incessant practice, or whether an effectual blow can be struck only by a certain trick of the muscles, I do not know ; but I assure you that I went into the house with but a sorry opinion of my athletic capacities. It was like an inexperienced man trying 'putting the hammer' ; the force exerted seemed to return on oneself, and I found myself hurled backwards with violence, while the axe fell harmless to the ground. On another occasion I tried the experiment with a clever woodman of the place ; but this man, who had handled his axe for forty years, could do nothing with the stone implement, and missed every stroke most ludicrously. In short, if it were not so supremely absurd, I should say that for four thousand years no one on earth could have struck an effective blow with the tool that undoubtedly was used to murder the old man." This, as may be imagined, was to me rare news ; and afterwards, when I heard the whole story, and learned that the unfortunate old man had babbled tales of what might be seen at night on a certain wild hillside, hinting at unheard-of wonders, and that he had been found cold one morning on the very hill in question, my exultation was extreme, for I felt I was leaving conjecture far behind me. But the next step was of still greater importance. I had possessed for many years an extraordinary stone seal—a piece of dull black stone, two inches long from the handle to the stamp, and the stamping end a rough hexagon an inch and a quarter in



diameter. Altogether, it presented the appearance of an enlarged tobacco stopper of an old-fashioned make. It had been sent to me by an agent in the East, who informed me that it had been found near the site of the ancient Babylon. But the characters engraved on the seal were to me an intolerable puzzle. Somewhat of the cuneiform pattern, there were yet striking differences, which I detected at the first glance, and all efforts to read the inscription on the hypothesis that the rules for deciphering the arrow-headed writing would apply proved futile. A riddle such as this stung my pride, and at odd moments I would take the Black Seal out of the cabinet, and scrutinize it with so much idle perseverance that every letter was familiar to my mind, and I could have drawn the inscription from memory without the slightest error. Judge, then, of my surprise when I one day received from a correspondent in the West of England a letter and an enclosure that positively left me thunderstruck. I saw carefully traced on a large piece of paper the very characters of the Black Seal, without alteration of any kind, and above the inscription my friend had written : *Inscription found on a limestone rock on the Grey Hills, Monmouthshire. Done in some red earth, and quite recent.* I turned to the letter. My friend wrote : " I send you the enclosed inscription with all due reserve. A shepherd who passed by the stone a week ago swears that there was then no mark of any kind. The characters, as I have noted, are formed by drawing some red earth over the stone, and are of an average height of one inch. They look to me like a kind of cuneiform character, a good deal altered, but this, of course, is impossible. It may be either a hoax, or more probably some scribble of the gipsies, who are plentiful enough in this wild country. They have, as you are aware, many hieroglyphics which they use in communicating with one another. I happened to visit the stone in question two days ago in connection with a rather painful incident which has occurred here."

As may be supposed, I wrote immediately to my friend, thanking him for the copy of the inscription, and asking him in a casual manner the history of the incident he mentioned. To be brief, I heard that a woman named Cradock, who had lost her husband a day before, had set out to communicate the sad news to a cousin who lived some five miles away. She took a short cut which led by the Grey Hills. Mrs. Cradock, who was then quite a young woman, never arrived at her relative's house. Late that night a farmer, who had lost a couple of sheep, supposed to have wandered



from the flock, was walking over the Grey Hills, with a lantern and his dog. His attention was attracted by a noise, which he described as a kind of wailing, mournful and pitiable to hear ; and, guided by the sound, he found the unfortunate Mrs. Cradock crouched on the ground by the limestone rock, swaying her body to and fro, and lamenting and crying in so heart-rending a manner that the farmer was, as he says, at first obliged to stop his ears, or he would have run away. The woman allowed herself to be taken home, and a neighbour came to see to her necessities. All the night she never ceased her crying, mixing her lament with words of some unintelligible jargon, and when the doctor arrived he pronounced her insane. She lay on her bed for a week, now wailing, as people said, like one lost and damned for eternity, and now sunk in a heavy coma ; it was thought that grief at the loss of her husband had unsettled her mind, and the medical man did not at one time expect her to live. I need not say that I was deeply interested in this story, and I made my friend write to me at intervals with all the particulars of the case. I heard then that in the course of six weeks the woman gradually recovered the use of her faculties, and some months later she gave birth to a son, christened Jervase, who unhappily proved to be of weak intellect. Such were the facts known to the village ; but to me, while I whitened at the suggested thought of the hideous enormities that had doubtless been committed, all this was nothing short of conviction, and I incautiously hazarded a hint of something like the truth to some scientific friends. The moment the words had left my lips I bitterly regretted having spoken, and thus given away the great secret of my life, but with a good deal of relief mixed with indignation I found my fears altogether misplaced, for my friends ridiculed me to my face, and I was regarded as a madman ; and beneath a natural anger I chuckled to myself, feeling as secure amidst these blockheads as if I had confided what I knew to the desert sands.

But now, knowing so much, I resolved I would know all, and I concentrated my efforts on the task of deciphering the inscription on the Black Seal. For many years I made this puzzle the sole object of my leisure moments, for the greater portion of my time was, of course, devoted to other duties, and it was only now and then that I could snatch a week of clear research. If I were to tell the full history of this curious investigation, this statement would be wearisome in the extreme, for it would contain simply the account of long and tedious failure. By what I knew already of



ancient scripts I was well equipped for the chase, as I always termed it to myself. I had correspondents amongst all the scientific men in Europe, and, indeed, in the world, and I could not believe that in these days any character, however ancient and however perplexed, could long resist the search-light I should bring to bear upon it. Yet, in point of fact, it was fully fourteen years before I succeeded. With every year my professional duties increased, and my leisure became smaller. This no doubt retarded me a good deal ; and yet, when I look back on those years, I am astonished at the vast scope of my investigation of the Black Seal. I made my bureau a centre, and from all the world and from all the ages I gathered transcripts of ancient writing. Nothing, I resolved, should pass me unawares, and the faintest hint should be welcomed and followed up. But as one covert after another was tried and proved empty of result, I began in the course of years to despair, and to wonder whether the Black Seal were the sole relic of some race that had vanished from the world, and left no other trace of its existence—had perished, in fine, as Atlantis is said to have done, in some great cataclysm, its secrets perhaps drowned beneath the ocean or moulded into the heart of the hills. The thought chilled my warmth a little, and though I still persevered, it was no longer with the same certainty of faith. A chance came to the rescue. I was staying in a considerable town in the North of England, and took the opportunity of going over the very creditable museum that had for some time been established in the place. The curator was one of my correspondents ; and, as we were looking through one of the mineral cases, my attention was struck by a specimen, a piece of black stone some four inches square, the appearance of which reminded me in a measure of the Black Seal. I took it up carelessly, and was turning it over in my hand, when I saw, to my astonishment, that the under side was inscribed. I said, quietly enough, to my friend the curator that the specimen interested me, and that I should be much obliged if he would allow me to take it with me to my hotel for a couple of days. He, of course, made no objection, and I hurried to my rooms and found that my first glance had not deceived me. There were two inscriptions ; one in the regular cuneiform character, another in the character of the Black Seal, and I realized that my task was accomplished. I made an exact copy of the two inscriptions ; and when I got to my London study, and had the Seal before me, I was able seriously to grapple with the great problem. The interpreting inscription on



the museum specimen, though in itself curious enough, did not bear on my quest, but the transliteration made me master of the secret of the Black Seal. Conjecture, of course, had to enter into my calculations ; there was here and there uncertainty about a particular ideograph, and one sign recurring again and again on the seal baffled me for many successive nights. But at last the secret stood open before me in plain English, and I read the key of the awful transmutation of the hills. The last word was hardly written, when with fingers all trembling and unsteady I tore the scrap of paper into the minutest fragments, and saw them flame and blacken in the red hollow of the fire, and then I crushed the grey films that remained into finest powder. Never since then have I written those words ; never will I write the phrases which tell how man can be reduced to the slime from which he came, and be forced to put on the flesh of the reptile and the snake. There was now but one thing remaining. I knew, but I desired to see, and I was after some time able to take a house in the neighbourhood of the Grey Hills, and not far from the cottage where Mrs. Cradock and her son Jervase resided. I need not go into a full and detailed account of the apparently inexplicable events which have occurred here, where I am writing this. I knew that I should find in Jervase Cradock something of the blood of the " Little People," and I found later that he had more than once encountered his kinsmen in lonely places in that lonely land. When I was summoned one day to the garden, and found him in a seizure speaking or hissing the ghastly jargon of the Black Seal, I am afraid that exultation prevailed over pity. I heard bursting from his lips the secrets of the underworld, and the word of dread, " Ishakshar," the signification of which I must be excused from giving.

But there is one incident I cannot pass over unnoticed. In the waste hollow of the night I awoke at the sound of those hissing syllables I knew so well ; and on going to the wretched boy's room, I found him convulsed and foaming at the mouth, struggling on the bed as if he strove to escape the grasp of writhing demons. I took him down to my room and lit the lamp, while he lay twisting on the floor, calling on the power within his flesh to leave him. I saw his body swell and become distended as a bladder, while the face blackened before my eyes ; and then at the crisis I did what was necessary according to the directions on the Seal, and putting all scruple on one side, I became a man of science, observant of what was passing. Yet the sight I had to witness was horrible,



almost beyond the power of human conception and the most fearful fantasy. Something pushed out from the body there on the floor, and stretched forth a slimy, wavering tentacle, across the room, grasped the bust upon the cupboard, and laid it down on my desk.

When it was over, and I was left to walk up and down all the rest of the night, white and shuddering, with sweat pouring from my flesh, I vainly tried to reason with myself : I said, truly enough, that I had seen nothing really supernatural, that a snail pushing out his horns and drawing them in was but an instance on a smaller scale of what I had witnessed ; and yet horror broke through all such reasonings and left me shattered and loathing myself for the share I had taken in the night's work.

There is little more to be said. I am going now to the final trial and encounter ; for I have determined that there shall be nothing wanting, and I shall meet the " Little People " face to face. I shall have the Black Seal and the knowledge of its secrets to help me, and if I unhappily do not return from my journey, there is no need to conjure up here a picture of the awfulness of my fate.

Pausing a little at the end of Professor Gregg's statement, Miss Lally continued her tale in the following words :

Such was the almost incredible story that the professor had left behind him. When I had finished reading it, it was late at night, but the next morning I took Morgan with me, and we proceeded to search the Grey Hills for some trace of the lost professor. I will not weary you with a description of the savage desolation of that tract of country, a tract of utterest loneliness, of bare green hills dotted over with grey limestone boulders, worn by the ravages of time into fantastic semblances of men and beasts. Finally, after many hours of weary searching, we found what I told you—the watch and chain, the purse, and the ring—wrapped in a piece of coarse parchment. When Morgan cut the gut that bound the parcel together, and I saw the professor's property, I burst into tears, but the sight of the dreaded characters of the Black Seal repeated on the parchment froze me to silent horror, and I think I understood for the first time the awful fate that had come upon my late employer.

I have only to add that Professor Gregg's lawyer treated my account of what had happened as a fairy tale, and refused even to glance at the documents I laid before him. It was he who was responsible for the statement that appeared in the public press,



to the effect that Professor Gregg had been drowned, and that his body must have been swept into the open sea.

Miss Lally stopped speaking, and looked at Mr. Phillipps, with a glance of some inquiry. He, for his part, was sunken in a deep reverie of thought ; and when he looked up and saw the bustle of the evening gathering in the square, men and women hurrying to partake of dinner, and crowds already besetting the music-halls, all the hum and press of actual life seemed unreal and visionary, a dream in the morning after an awakening.

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*Sax Rohmer*

## TCHÉRIAPIN

from TALES OF CHINATOWN

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### I

#### THE ROSE

“Examine it closely,” said the man in the unusual caped overcoat. “It will repay examination.”

I held the little object in the palm of my hand, bending forward over the marble-topped table and looking down at it with deep curiosity. The babel of tongues so characteristic of Malay Jack’s, and that mingled odour of stale spirits, greasy humanity, tobacco, cheap perfume, and opium, which distinguishes the establishment faded from my ken. A sense of loneliness came to me.

Perhaps I should say that it became complete. I had grown conscious of its approach at the very moment that the cadaverous white-haired man had addressed me. There was a quality in his steadfast gaze and in his oddly pitched deep voice which from the first had wrapped me about—as though he were cloaking me in his queer personality and withdrawing me from the common plane.

Having stared for some moments at the object in my palm, I touched it gingerly ; whereupon my acquaintance laughed—a short bass laugh.



"It looks fragile," he said. "But have no fear. It is nearly as hard as a diamond."

Thus encouraged, I took the thing up between finger and thumb, and held it before my eyes. For long enough I looked at it, and looking, my wonder grew. I thought that here was the most wonderful example of the lapidary's art which I had ever met with, East or West.

It was a tiny pink rose, no larger than the nail of my little finger. Stalk and leaves were there, and golden pollen lay in its delicate heart. Each fairy-petal blushed with June fire; the frail leaves were exquisitely green. Withal it was as hard and unbendable as a thing of steel.

"Allow me," said the masterful voice.

A powerful lens was passed by my acquaintance. I regarded the rose through the glass, and thereupon I knew, beyond doubt, that there was something phenomenal about the gem—if gem it were. I could plainly trace the veins and texture of every petal.

I suppose I looked somewhat startled. Although, baldly stated, the fact may not seem calculated to affrighten, in reality there was something so weird about this unnatural bloom that I dropped it on the table. As I did so I uttered an exclamation; for in spite of the stranger's assurances on the point, I had by no means overcome my idea of the thing's fragility.

"Don't be alarmed," he said, meeting my startled gaze. "It would need a steam-hammer to do any serious damage."

He replaced the jewel in his pocket, and when I returned the lens to him he acknowledged it with a grave inclination of the head. As I looked into his sunken eyes, in which I thought lay a sort of sardonic merriment, the fantastic idea flashed through my mind that I had fallen into the clutches of an expert hypnotist who was amusing himself at my expense; that the miniature rose was a mere hallucination produced by the same means as the notorious Indian rope trick.

Then, looking around me at the cosmopolitan groups surrounding the many tables, and catching snatches of conversations dealing with subjects so diverse as the quality of whisky in Singapore, the frail beauty of Chinese maidens, and the ways of "bloody greasers," common sense reasserted itself.

I looked into the grey face of my acquaintance.

"I cannot believe," I said slowly, "that human ingenuity could so closely duplicate the handiwork of nature. Surely the gem is



unique?—possibly one of those magical talismans of which we read in Eastern stories?”

My companion smiled.

“It is not a gem,” he replied, “and whilst in a sense it is a product of human ingenuity, it is also the handiwork of nature.”

I was badly puzzled, and doubtless revealed the fact, for the stranger laughed in his short fashion, and :

“I am not trying to mystify you,” he assured me. “But the truth is so hard to believe sometimes that in the present case I hesitate to divulge it. Did you ever meet Tchériapin?”

This abrupt change of topic somewhat startled me, but nevertheless :

“I once heard him play,” I replied. “Why do you ask the question?”

“For this reason : Tchériapin possessed the only other example of this art which so far as I am aware ever left the laboratory of the inventor. He occasionally wore it in his buttonhole.”

“It is then a manufactured product of some sort?”

“As I have said, in a sense it is ; but”—he drew the tiny exquisite ornament from his pocket again and held it up before me—“it is a natural bloom.”

“What !”

“It is a natural bloom,” replied my acquaintance, fixing his penetrating gaze upon me. “By a perfectly simple process invented by the cleverest chemist of his age it has been reduced to this gem-like state whilst retaining unimpaired every one of its natural beauties, every shade of its natural colour. You are incredulous?”

“On the contrary,” I replied, “having examined it through a magnifying glass I had already assured myself that no human hand had fashioned it. You arouse my curiosity intensely. Such a process, with its endless possibilities, should be worth a fortune to the inventor.”

The stranger nodded grimly and again concealed the rose in his pocket.

“You are right,” he said ; “and the secret died with the man who discovered it—in the great explosion at the Vortex Works in 1917. You recall it? The T.N.T. factory? It shook all London, and fragments were cast into three counties.”

“I recall it perfectly well.”

“You remember also the death of Dr. Kreener, the chief



chemist? He died in an endeavour to save some of the work-people."

"I remember."

"He was the inventor of the process, but it was never put upon the market. He was a singular man, sir; as was once said of him: 'A Don Juan of science.' Dame Nature gave him her heart unwooed. He trifled with science as some men trifle with love, tossing aside with a smile discoveries which would have made another famous. This"—tapping his breast pocket—"was one of them."

"You astound me. Do I understand you to mean that Dr. Kreener had invented a process for reducing any form of plant life to this condition?"

"Almost any form," was the guarded reply. "And some forms of animal life."

"What!"

"If you like"—the stranger leaned forward and grasped my arm—"I will tell you the story of Dr. Kreener's last experiment."

I was now intensely interested. I had not forgotten the heroic death of the man concerning whose work this chance acquaintance of mine seemed to know so much. And in the cadaverous face of the stranger as he sat there regarding me fixedly there was a promise and an allurements. I stood on the verge of strange things; so that, looking into the deep-set eyes, once again I felt the cloak being drawn about me, and I resigned myself willingly to the illusion.

From the moment when he began to speak again until that when I rose and followed him from Malay Jack's, as I shall presently relate, I became oblivious of my surroundings. I lived and moved through those last fevered hours in the lives of Dr. Kreener, Tchériapin, the violinist, and that other tragic figure around whom the story centred. I append:

#### THE STRANGER'S STORY

I asked you (said the man in the caped coat) if you had ever seen Tchériapin, and you replied that you had once heard him play. Having once heard him play you will not have forgotten him. At that time, although war still raged, all musical London was asking where he had come from, and to what nation he belonged. Then when he disappeared it was variously reported, you will recall, that he had been shot as a spy and that he had escaped from England and was serving with the Austrian army. As to his parentage



I can enlighten you in a measure. He was a Eurasian. His father was an aristocratic Chinaman, and his mother a Polish ballet-dancer—that was his parentage ; but I would scarcely hesitate to affirm that he came from Hell ; and I shall presently show you that he has certainly returned there.

You remember the strange stories current about him. The cunning ones said that he had a clever press agent. This was true enough. One of the most prominent agents in London discovered him playing in a Paris cabaret. Two months later he was playing at the Queen's Hall, and musical London lay at his feet.

He had something of the personality of Paganini, as you remember, except that he was a smaller man ; long, gaunt, yellowish hands and the face of a haggard Mephistopheles. The critics quarrelled about him, as critics only quarrel about real genius, and whilst one school proclaimed that Tchériapin had discovered an entirely new technique, a revolutionary system of violin playing, another school was equally positive in declaring that he could not play at all, that he was a mountebank, a trickster, whose proper place was in a variety theatre.

There were stories, too, that were never published—not only about Tchériapin, but concerning the Strad upon which he played. If all this atmosphere of mystery which surrounded the man had truly been the work of a press agent, then the agent must have been as great as genius as his client. But I can assure you that the stories concerning Tchériapin, true and absurd alike, were not inspired for business purposes ; they grew up around him like fungi.

I can see him now, a lean, almost emaciated figure, with slow, sinuous movements, and a trick of glancing sideways with those dark, unfathomable, slightly oblique eyes. He could take up his bow in such a way as to create an atmosphere of electrical suspense. He was loathsome, yet fascinating. One's mental attitude towards him was one of defence, of being tensely on guard. Then he would play.

You have heard him play, and it is therefore unnecessary for me to attempt to describe the effect of that music. The only composition which ever bore his name—I refer to "The Black Mass"—affected me on every occasion when I heard it, as no other composition has ever done.

Perhaps it was Tchériapin's playing rather than the music itself which reached down into hitherto unplumbed depths within me, and awakened dark things which, unsuspected, lay there sleeping.



I never heard "The Black Mass" played by anyone else; indeed, I am not aware that it was ever published. But had it been we should rarely hear it. Like Locke's music to *Macbeth* it bears an unpleasant reputation; to include it in any concert programme would be to court disaster. An idle superstition, perhaps, but there is much naïveté in the artistic temperament.

Men detested Tchériapin, yet when he chose he could win over his bitterest enemies. Women followed him as children followed the Pied Piper; he courted none, but was courted by all. He would glance aside with those black, slanting eyes, shrug in his insolent fashion, and turn away. And they would follow. God knows how many of them followed—whether through the dens of Limehouse or the more fashionable salons of vice in the West End—they followed—perhaps down to Hell. So much for Tchériapin.

At the time when the episode occurred to which I have referred, Dr. Kreener occupied a house in Regent's Park, to which, when his duties at the munition works allowed, he would sometimes retire at week-ends. He was a man of complex personality. I think no one ever knew him thoroughly; indeed, I doubt if he knew himself.

He was hail-fellow-well-met with the painters, sculptors, poets and social reformers who have made of Soho a new Mecca. No movement in art was so modern that Dr. Kreener was not conversant with it; no development in Bolshevism so violent or so secret that Dr. Kreener could not speak of it complacently and with inside knowledge.

These were his Bohemian friends, these dreamers and schemers. Of this side of his life his scientific colleagues knew little or nothing, but in his hours of leisure at Regent's Park it was with these dreamers that he loved to surround himself rather than with his brethren of the laboratory. I think if Dr. Kreener had not been a great chemist he would have been a great painter, or perhaps a politician, or even a poet. Triumph was his birthright, and the fruits for which lesser men reached out in vain fell ripe into his hands.

The favourite meeting-place for these oddly assorted boon companions was the doctor's laboratory, which was divided from the house by a moderately large garden. Here on a Sunday evening one might meet the very "latest" composer, the sculptor bringing a new "message," or the man destined to supplant with the ballet the time-worn operatic tradition.



But whilst some of these would come and go, so that one could never count with certainty upon meeting them, there was one who never failed to be present when such an informal reception was held. Of him I must speak at greater length, for a reason which will shortly appear.

Andrews was the name by which he was known to the circles in which he moved. No one, from Sir John Tennier, the fashionable portrait painter, to Kruski, of the Russian ballet, disputed Andrews's right to be counted one of the elect. Yet it was known, nor did he trouble to hide the fact, that Andrews was employed at a large printing works in South London, designing advertisements. He was a great, red-bearded, unkempt Scotsman, and only once can I remember to have seen him strictly sober ; but to hear him talk about painters and painting in his thick Caledonian accent was to look into the soul of an artist.

He was as sour as an unripe grape-fruit, cynical, embittered, a man savagely disappointed with life and the world ; and tragedy was written all over him. If anyone knew the secret of his wasted life it was Dr. Kreener, and Dr. Kreener was a reliquary of so many secrets that this one was safe as if the grave had swallowed it.

One Sunday Tchériapin joined the party. That he would gravitate there sooner or later was inevitable, for the laboratory in the garden was a *kaaba* to which all such spirits made at least one pilgrimage. He had just set musical London on fire with his barbaric playing, and already those stories to which I have referred were creeping into circulation.

Although Dr. Kreener never expected anything of his guests beyond an interchange of ideas, it was a fact that the laboratory contained an almost unique collection of pencil and charcoal studies by famous artists, done upon the spot ; of statuettes in wax, putty, soap, and other extemporized materials, by the newest sculptors. Whilst often enough from the drawing-room which opened upon the other end of the garden had issued the strains of masterly piano-playing, and it was no uncommon thing for little groups to gather in the neighbouring road to listen, gratis, to the voice of some great vocalist.

From the first moment of their meeting an intense antagonism sprang up between Tchériapin and Andrews. Neither troubled very much to veil it. In Tchériapin it found expression in covert sneers and sidelong glances, whilst the big, lion-maned Scotsman



snorted open contempt of the Eurasian violinist. However, what I was about to say was that Tchériapin on the occasion of his first visit brought his violin.

It was there, amid those incongruous surroundings, that I first had my spirit tortured by the strains of "The Black Mass."

There were five of us present, including Tchériapin, and not one of the four listeners was unaffected by the music. But the influence which it exercised upon Andrews was so extraordinary as almost to reach the phenomenal. He literally writhed in his chair, and finally interrupted the performance by staggering rather than walking out of the laboratory.

I remember that he upset a jar of acid in his stumbling exit. It flowed across the floor almost to the feet of Tchériapin, and the way in which the little black-haired man skipped, squealing, out of the path of the corroding fluid was curiously like that of a startled rabbit. Order was restored in due course, but we could not induce Tchériapin to play again, nor did Andrews return until the violinist had taken his departure. We found him in the dining-room, a nearly empty whisky-bottle beside him, and :

"I had to gang awa'," he explained thickly ; "he was temptin' me to murder him. I should ha' had to do it if I had stayed. Damn his hell-music."

Tchériapin revisited Dr. Kreener on many occasions afterwards, although for a long time he did not bring his violin again. The doctor had prevailed upon Andrews to tolerate the Eurasian's company, and I could not help noticing how Tchériapin skilfully and deliberately goaded the Scotsman, seeming to take a fiendish delight in disagreeing with his pet theories, and in discussing any topic which he had found to be distasteful to Andrews.

Chief among these was that sort of irreverent criticism of women in which male parties so often indulge. Bitter cynic though he was, women were sacred to Andrews. To speak disrespectfully of a woman in his presence was like uttering blasphemy in the study of a cardinal. Tchériapin very quickly detected the Scotsman's weakness, and one night he launched out into a series of amorous adventures which set Andrews writhing as he had writhed under the torture of "The Black Mass."

On this occasion the party was only a small one, comprising myself, Dr. Kreener, Andrews, and Tchériapin. I could feel the storm brewing, but was powerless to check it. How presently it



was to break in tragic violence I could not foresee. Fate had not meant that I should foresee it.

Allowing for the free play of an extravagant artistic mind, Tchériapin's career on his own showing had been that of a callous blackguard. I began by being disgusted and ended by being fascinated, not by the man's scandalous adventures, but by the scarcely human psychology of the narrator.

From Warsaw to Budapesth, Shanghai to Paris, and Cairo to London, he passed, leaving ruin behind him with a smile—airily flicking cigarette ash upon the floor to indicate the termination of each "episode."

Andrews watched him in a lowering way which I did not like at all. He had ceased to snort his scorn; indeed, for ten minutes or so he had uttered no word or sound; but there was something in the pose of his ungainly body which strangely suggested that of a great dog preparing to spring. Presently the violinist recalled what he termed a "charming idyll of Normandy."

"There is one poor fool in the world," he said, shrugging his slight shoulders, "who never knew how badly he should hate me. Ha! ha! of him I shall tell you. Do you remember, my friends, some few years ago, a picture that was published in Paris and London? Everybody bought it; everybody said: "He is a made man, this fellow who can paint so fine."

"To what picture do you refer?" asked Dr. Kreener.

"It was called 'A Dream at Dawn.'"

As he spoke the words I saw Andrews start forward, and Dr. Kreener exchanged a swift glance with him. But the Scotsman, unseen by the vainglorious half-caste, shook his head fiercely.

The picture to which Tchériapin referred will, of course, be perfectly familiar to you. It had phenomenal popularity some eight years ago. Nothing was known of the painter—whose name was Colquhoun—and nothing has been seen of his work since. The original painting was never sold, and after a time this promising new artist was, of course, forgotten.

Presently Tchériapin continued:

"It is the figure of a slender girl—ah! angels of grace!—what a girl!" He kissed his hand rapturously. "She is posed bending gracefully forward, and looking down at her own lovely reflection in the water. It is a seashore, you remember, and the little ripples play about her ankles. The first blush of the dawn robes her white body in a transparent mantle of light. Ah! God's mercy!"



it was as she stood so, in a little cove of Normandy, that I saw her !”

He paused, rolling his dark eyes ; and I could hear Andrews's heavy breathing ; then :

“ It was the ‘ new art ’—the posing of the model not in a lighted studio, but in the scene to be depicted. And the fellow who painted her !—the man with the barbarous name ! Bah ! he was big—as big as our Mr. Andrews—and ugly—pooh ! uglier than he ! A moon-face, with cropped skull like a prize-fighter and no soul. But, yes, he could paint. ‘ A Dream at Dawn ’ was genius—yes, some soul he must have had.

“ He could paint, dear friends, but he could not love. Him I counted as—puff !”

He blew imaginary down into space.

“ Her I sought out, and presently found. She told me, in those sweet stolen rambles along the shore, when the moonlight made her look like a Madonna, that she was his inspiration—his art—his life. And she wept ; she wept, and I kissed her tears away.

“ To please her I waited until ‘ A Dream at Dawn ’ was finished. With the finish of the picture, finished also *his* dream of dawn—the moon-faced one's.”

Tchériapin laughed, and lighted a fresh cigarette.

“ Can you believe that a man could be so stupid ? He never knew of my existence, this big, red booby. He never knew that I existed until—until ‘ his dream ’ had fled—with me ! In a week we were in Paris, that dream-girl and I—in a month we had quarrelled. I always end these matters with a quarrel ; it makes the complete finish. She struck me in the face—and I laughed. She turned and went away. We were tired of one another.

“ Ah !” Again he airily kissed his hand. “ There were others after I had gone. I heard for a time. But her memory is like a rose, fresh and fair and sweet. I am glad I can remember her so, and not as she afterwards became. That is the art of love. She killed herself with absinthe, my friends. She died in Marseilles in the first year of the great war.”

Thus far Tchériapin had proceeded, and was in the act of airily flicking ash upon the floor, when, uttering a sound which I can only describe as a roar, Andrews hurled himself upon the smiling violinist.

His great red hands clutching Tchériapin's throat, the insane Scotsman, for insane he was at that moment, forced the other back upon the settee from which he had half arisen. In vain I



sought to drag him away from the writhing body, but I doubt if any man could have relaxed that deadly grip. Tchériapin's eyes protruded hideously and his tongue lolled forth from his mouth. One could hear the breath whistling through his nostrils as Andrews silently, deliberately, squeezed the life out of him.

It all occupied only a few minutes, and then Andrews, slowly opening his rigidly crooked fingers, stood panting and looking down at the distorted face of the dead man.

For once in his life the Scotsman was sober, and turning to Dr. Kreener :

"I have waited seven long years for this," he said, "and I'll hang wi' contentment."

I can never forget the ensuing moments, in which, amid a horrible silence only broken by the ticking of a clock, and the heavy breathing of Colquhoun (so long known to us as Andrews) we stood watching the contorted body on the settee.

And as we watched, slowly the rigid limbs began to relax, and Tchériapin slid gently on to the floor, collapsing there with a soft thud, where he squatted like some hideous Buddha, resting back against the cushions, one spectral yellow hand upraised, the fingers still clutching a big gold tassel.

Andrews (for so I always think of him) was seized with a violent fit of trembling, and he dropped into the chair from which he had made that dreadful spring, muttering to himself and looking down wild-eyed at his twitching fingers. Then he began to laugh, high-pitched laughter, in little short peals.

"Here !" cried the doctor sharply. "Drop that !"

Crossing to Andrews he grasped him by the shoulders and shook him roughly.

The laughter ceased, and—

"Send for the police," said Andrews in a queer, shaky voice. "Dinna fear but I'm ready. I'm only sorry it happened here."

"You ought to be glad," said Dr. Kreener.

There was a covert meaning in the words—a fact which penetrated even to the dulled intelligence of the Scotsman, for he glanced up haggardly at his friend.

"You ought to be glad," repeated Dr. Kreener.

Turning, he walked to the laboratory door and locked it. He next lowered all the blinds.

"I pray that we have not been overlooked," he said, "but we must chance it."



He mixed a drink for Andrews and himself. His quiet decisive manner had had its effect, and Andrews was now more composed. Indeed, he seemed to be in a half-dazed condition ; but he persistently kept his back turned to the crouching figure propped up against the settee.

“ If you think you can follow me,” said Dr. Kreener abruptly, “ I will show you the result of a recent experiment.”

Unlocking a cupboard he took out a tiny figure some two inches long by one inch high, mounted upon a polished wooden pedestal. It was that of a guinea-pig. The flaky fur gleamed like the finest silk, and one felt that the coat of the minute creature would be as floss to the touch ; whereas in reality it possessed the rigidity of steel. Literally one could have done it little damage with a hammer. Its weight was extraordinary.

“ I am learning new things about this process every day,” continued Dr. Kreener, placing the little figure upon a table. “ For instance, whilst it seems to operate uniformly upon vegetable matter, there are curious modifications where one applies it to animal and mineral substances. I have now definitely decided that the result of this particular inquiry must never be published. You, Colquhoun, I believe, possess an example of the process, a tiger lily, I think ? I must ask you to return it to me. Our late friend, Tchériapin, wears a pink rose in his coat which I have treated in the same way. I am going to take the liberty of removing it.”

He spoke in the hard, incisive manner which I had heard him use in the lecture theatre, and it was evident enough that his design was to prepare Andrews for something which he contemplated. Facing the Scotsman where he sat hunched up in the big arm-chair, dully watching the speaker :

“ There is one experiment,” said Dr. Kreener, speaking very deliberately, “ which I have never before had a suitable opportunity of attempting. Of its result I am personally confident, but science always demands proof.”

His voice rang now with a note of repressed excitement. He paused for a moment, and then :

“ If you were to examine this little specimen very closely,” he said, and rested his finger upon the tiny figure of the guinea-pig, “ you would find that in one particular it is imperfect. Although a diamond drill would have to be employed to demonstrate the fact, the animal’s organs, despite their having undergone a chemical change quite new to science, are intact, perfect down to the



smallest detail. One part of the creature's structure alone defied my process. In short, *dental enamel* is impervious to it. This little animal, otherwise as complete as when it lived and breathed, has no teeth. I found it necessary to extract them before submitting the body to the reductionary process."

He paused.

"Shall I go on?" he asked.

Andrews, to whose mind, I think, no conception of the doctor's project had yet penetrated, shuddered, but slowly nodded his head.

Dr. Kreener glanced across the laboratory at the crouching figure of Tchériapin, then, resting his hands upon Andrews' shoulders, he pushed him back in the chair and stared into his dull eyes.

"Brace yourself, Colquhoun," he said tersely.

Turning, he crossed to a small mahogany cabinet at the farther end of the room. Pulling out a glass tray he judiciously selected a pair of dental forceps.

## II

### "THE BLACK MASS"

Thus far the stranger's appalling story had progressed when that singular cloak in which hypnotically he had enwrapped me seemed to drop, and I found myself clutching the edge of the table and staring into the grey face of the speaker.

I became suddenly aware of the babel of voices about me, of the noisome smell of Malay Jack's, and of the presence of Jack in person, who was inquiring if there were any further orders. I was conscious of nausea.

"Excuse me," I said, rising unsteadily, "but I fear the oppressive atmosphere is affecting me."

"If you prefer to go out," said my acquaintance, in that deep voice which throughout the dreadful story had rendered me oblivious of my surroundings, "I should be much favoured if you would accompany me to a spot not five hundred yards from here."

Seeing me hesitate :

"I have a particular reason for asking," he added.

"Very well," I replied, inclining my head, "if you wish it. But certainly I must seek the fresh air."

Going up the steps and out through the door above which the



blue lantern burned, we came to the street, turned to the left, to the left again, and soon were threading that maze of narrow ways which complicates the map of Pennyfields.

I felt somewhat recovered. Here, in the narrow but familiar highways the spell of my singular acquaintance lost much of its potency, and already I found myself doubting the story of Dr. Kreener and Tchériapin. Indeed, I began to laugh at myself, conceiving that I had fallen into the hands of some comedian who was making sport of me ; although why such a person should visit Malay Jack's was not apparent.

I was about to give expression to these new and saner ideas when my companion paused before a door half hidden in a little alley which divided the back of a Chinese restaurant from the tawdry-looking establishment of a cigar merchant. He apparently held the key, for although I did not actually hear the turning of the lock I saw that he had opened the door.

"May I request you to follow me?" came his deep voice out of the darkness. "I will show you something which will repay your trouble."

Again the cloak touched me, but it was without entirely resigning myself to the compelling influence that I followed my mysterious acquaintance up an uncarpeted and nearly dark stair. On the landing above a gas lamp was burning, and opening a door immediately facing the stair the stranger conducted me into a barely furnished and untidy room.

The atmosphere smelled like that of a pot-house, the odours of stale spirits and of tobacco mingling unpleasantly. As my guide removed his hat and stood there, a square, gaunt figure in his queer, caped overcoat, I secured for the first time a view of his face in profile ; and found it to be startlingly unfamiliar. Seen thus, my acquaintance was another man. I realized that there was something unnatural about the long, white hair, the grey face ; that the sharp outline of brow, nose and chin was that of a much younger man than I had supposed him to be.

All this came to me in a momentary flash of perception, for immediately my attention was riveted upon a figure hunched up on a dilapidated sofa on the opposite side of the room. It was that of a big man, bearded and very heavily built, but whose face was scarred as by years of suffering, and whose eyes confirmed the story indicated by the smell of stale spirits with which the air of the room was laden. A nearly empty bottle stood on a table at his



elbow, a glass beside it, and a pipe lay in a saucer full of ashes near the glass.

As we entered, the glazed eyes of the man opened widely and he clutched at the table with big red hands, leaning forward and staring horribly.

Saving this derelict figure and some few dirty utensils and scattered garments which indicated that the apartment was used both as a sleeping and living room, there was so little of interest in the place that automatically my wandering gaze strayed from the figure on the sofa to a large oil painting, unframed, which rested upon the mantelpiece above the dirty grate, in which the fire had become extinguished.

I uttered a stifled exclamation. It was "A Dream at Dawn"—evidently the original painting!

On the left of it, from a nail in the wall, hung a violin and bow, and on the right stood a sort of cylindrical glass case or closed jar upon a wooden base.

From the moment that I perceived the contents of this glass case a sense of fantasy claimed me, and I ceased to know where reality ended and mirage began.

It contained a tiny and perfect figure of a man. He was arrayed in a beautifully fitting dress-suit such as a doll might have worn, and he was posed as if in the act of playing a violin, although no violin was present. At the elfin black hair and Mephistophelian face of this horrible, wonderful image, I stared fascinatedly.

I looked and looked at the dwarfed figure of . . . *Tchériapin!*

All these impressions came to me in the space of a few hectic moments, when in upon my mental tumult intruded a husky whisper from the man on the sofa.

"*Kreener!*" he said. "*Kreener!*"

At the sound of that name, and because of the way in which it was pronounced, I felt my blood running cold. The speaker was staring straight at my companion.

I clutched at the open door. I felt that there was still some crowning horror to come. I wanted to escape from that reeking room, but my muscles refused to obey me, and there I stood whilst:

"*Kreener!*" repeated the husky voice, and I saw that the speaker was rising unsteadily to his feet. "You have brought him again. Why have you brought him again? He will play. He will play me a step nearer to Hell!"



“Brace yourself, Colquhoun,” said the voice of my companion. “Brace yourself.”

“Take him awa’!” came in a sudden frenzied shriek. “Take him awa’! He’s there at your elbow, Kreener, mockin’ me, and pointing to that damned violin.”

“Here!” said the stranger, a high note of command in his voice. “Drop that! Sit down at once.”

Even as the other obeyed him, the cloaked stranger, stepping to the mantelpiece, opened a small box which lay there beside the glass case. He turned to me; and I tried to shrink away from him. For I knew—I knew—yet I loathed to look upon—what was in the box. Muffled as though reaching me through fog, I heard the words:

“A perfect human body . . . in miniature . . . every organ intact by means of . . . process . . . rendered indestructible. Tchériapin as he was in life may be seen by the curious, ten thousand years hence. Incomplete . . . one respect . . . here in this box . . .”

The spell was broken by a horrifying shriek from the man whom my companion had addressed as Colquhoun, and whom I could only suppose to be the painter of the celebrated picture which rested upon the mantelshelf.

“Take him awa’, Kreener! He is reaching for the violin!”

Animation returned to me, and I fell rather than ran down the darkened stair. How I opened the street door I know not, but even as I stepped out into the squalid alleys of Pennyfields the cloaked figure was beside me. A hand was laid upon my shoulder.

“Listen!” commanded a deep voice.

Clearly, with an eerie sweetness, an evil, hellish beauty indescribable, the wailing of a Stradivarius violin crept to my ears from the room above. Slowly—slowly the music began, and my soul rose up in revolt.

“Listen!” repeated the voice. “Listen! It is ‘The Black Mass’!”

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W. W. Jacobs

## THE MONKEY'S PAW

*from* THE LADY OF THE BARGE

Harper, 1902

### I

Without, the night was cold and wet, but in the small parlour of Laburnum Villa the blinds were drawn and the fire burned brightly. Father and son were at chess ; the former, who possessed ideas about the game involving radical changes, putting his king into such sharp and unnecessary perils that it even provoked comment from the white-haired old lady knitting placidly by the fire.

"Hark at the wind," said Mr. White, who, having seen a fatal mistake after it was too late, was amiably desirous of preventing his son from seeing it.

"I'm listening," said the latter, grimly surveying the board as he stretched out his hand. "Check."

"I should hardly think that he'd come to-night," said his father, with his hand poised over the board.

"Mate," replied the son.

"That's the worst of living so far out," bawled Mr. White, with sudden and unlooked-for violence ; "of all the beastly, slushy, out-of-the-way places to live in, this is the worst. Path's a bog, and the road's a torrent. I don't know what people are thinking about. I suppose because only two houses in the road are let, they think it doesn't matter."

"Never mind, dear," said his wife soothingly ; "perhaps you'll win the next one."

Mr. White looked up sharply, just in time to intercept a knowing glance between mother and son. The words died away on his lips, and he hid a guilty grin in his thin grey beard.

"There he is," said Herbert White, as the gate banged to loudly and heavy footsteps came toward the door.

The old man rose with hospitable haste, and opening the door, was heard condoling with the new arrival. The new arrival also condoled with himself, so that Mrs. White said, "Tut, tut !" and coughed gently as her husband entered the room, followed by a tall, burly man, beady of eye and rubicund of visage.



"Sergeant-Major Morris," he said, introducing him.

The sergeant-major shook hands, and taking the proffered seat by the fire, watched contentedly while his host got out whisky and tumblers and stood a small copper kettle on the fire.

At the third glass his eyes got brighter, and he began to talk, the little family circle regarding with eager interest this visitor from distant parts, as he squared his broad shoulders in the chair, and spoke of wild scenes and doughty deeds; of wars and plagues, and strange peoples.

"Twenty-one years of it," said Mr. White, nodding at his wife and son. "When he went away he was a slip of a youth in the warehouse. Now look at him."

"He don't look to have taken much harm," said Mrs. White politely.

"I'd like to go to India myself," said the old man, "just to look round a bit, you know."

"Better where you are," said the sergeant-major, shaking his head. He put down the empty glass, and sighing softly, shook it again.

"I should like to see those old temples and fakirs and jugglers," said the old man. "What was that you started telling me the other day about a monkey's paw or something, Morris?"

"Nothing," said the soldier hastily. "Leastways nothing worth hearing."

"Monkey's paw?" said Mrs. White curiously.

"Well, it's just a bit of what you might call magic, perhaps," said the sergeant-major off-handedly.

His three listeners leaned forward eagerly. The visitor absent-mindedly put his empty glass to his lips and then set it down again. His host filled it for him.

"To look at," said the sergeant-major, fumbling in his pocket, "it's just an ordinary little paw, dried to a mummy."

He took something out of his pocket and proffered it. Mrs. White drew back with a grimace, but her son, taking it, examined it curiously.

"And what is there special about it?" inquired Mr. White as he took it from his son, and having examined it, placed it upon the table.

"It had a spell put on it by an old fakir," said the sergeant-major, "a very holy man. He wanted to show that fate ruled people's lives, and that those who interfered with it did so to their