

THE
JADE GOD
-
ALAN SULLIVAN



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THE JADE GOD

BY
ALAN SULLIVAN



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THE JADE GOD

The Jade God

CHAPTER I

THE OLD HOUSE

MR. JARRAD was a tall, lean man, with very quiet eyes, an observant air, and an impassive face. His clothing was unobtrusive and seemed to have arrived at that point of age at which clothing shows no further sign of wear. He was standing near the fireplace of an old-fashioned, oak-paneled room, and from his expression one might assume that he beheld its entire contents at a glance. Presently he fingered a bowl on the gray stone mantelpiece.

“One blue six-inch Delft, slightly chipped in two places on the upper edge,” he drawled.

Another man, rather younger, somewhat fatter, was seated at a table. He had something of Mr. Jarrad’s world-weary manner, but the process had not been carried quite so far, and he looked rather less diffident. He raised his eyes from a large book spread open before him and nodded.

“On the upper edge,” he repeated mechanically.

Mr. Jarrad put his ear to the clock. “One black marble timepiece, apparently in good order, lower left-hand corner damaged, complete with key. Keyhole slightly scratched.”

“Yes, we have that.”

The older man paused, took a swift inspection of his surroundings, pulled in his lower lip, and nodded thoughtfully. “Matter of fact, Mr. Dawkins, when I compare this room with several thousand others I’ve inspected, I rather like it. Wouldn’t mind having it myself, and in our profession that’s about as far as one can go.”

Dawkins put down his pen. “I had an idea that by this time you were past liking anything in the line of furnishings.”

“Two twelve-inch pewter candlesticks, all feet bent. You’re not right there. After thirty years of inventory work one sometimes becomes thankful in a sort of negative way for the things one does not see. This is one of those times. I generally look about, take the whole show in with one squint, and ask myself why people commit such crimes. Did you ever reflect how much humanity is run by things, just things?”

“No, I haven’t, and I don’t think they are. Things have no influence, no effect. They can’t run anything.”

Mr. Jarad grunted, “Matter of fact, they do. You think again. The getting together of things makes jobs for you and me in the first place. Therefore they run us. There was no inventory work in prehistoric days. And, apart from that, the collecting of them is the finish of at least half the entire number of what we call civilized women.”

Dawkins laughed. “It’ll never finish my woman. We haven’t got any to speak of.”

His companion nodded approvingly. “Keep on like that, if you can, and you’ll do; but it isn’t as easy as you think. It’s the bargain that you really don’t want here, and the job lot there—the gradual accumulation of things—that makes life drag and anchors their souls as well as their bodies. Stop and think a minute. First of all, when a girl is married she starts collecting. Children may come, but she goes on with the collecting in between. It takes her mind off the children. The collection grows and grows. As a general rule about half the articles are not ornamental, and about half are never used. That makes no difference; she goes on. At middle age, Dawkins, they’ve got her; she’s surrounded by them. Carved wood from Uncle John in Burma, Birmingham brass from Egypt, assagais from her brother in Africa, deer heads from Scotland, and perhaps an elephant’s foot from Ceylon, all as ugly as ugliness can be. Some of these things may have certain virtues, or”—here Mr. Jarrad hesitated a little—“or certain disadvantages, but she can’t appreciate that, because they are lost in the general ruck. After a while she dies; the new generation comes along, holds up its hands, says what a frightful collection, throws it all out, and begins the same process over again under new rules.”

Having delivered himself of these sentiments, Mr. Jarrad indulged in a smile that was a little quizzical. His face, though shrewd, had no touch of cynicism, and this in spite of the fact that he had spent thirty years in estimating other people’s property. This interminable procession produced in his mind rather a curious effect, and he had acquired the habit of estimating his fellow-men by the things the latter owned and apparently treasured. Experience enabled him to form an excellent appraisal of the individual by merely walking through his house. He could visualize the owner. And if sometimes the job bored Mr. Jarrad, he never disclosed it.

"I said just now," he went on with a wave of the hand, "that I rather liked this room. These things are good and not too numerous. They practically all fit. Of course they belong to Mr. Thursby, except the portrait, but, if they could, I've an idea they'd sooner still be owned by Mrs. Millicent. Mr. Thursby made his money very quickly during the war, and Mrs. Thursby isn't the kind to collect such as this." He touched a bit of lacquer with what almost amounted to a caress. "Ever hear the story? It's short, but not pretty. It rather got hold of me, because there's more in it than meets the eye."

Dawkins shook his head. "I've never been in this part before."

"Well, Mr. Millicent, who lived here for years with his wife and daughter, died very suddenly in this very room. He was a strange, remote sort of gentleman, so I'm told, and a great traveler. About middle age, he was. Had a habit of sitting up late, reading and writing, enjoyed perfect health, enough money to live on so far as people knew, and apparently without an enemy in the world. At ten o'clock one evening he was found lying across that desk with a wound in his throat big enough to put your hand into."

"Why?" said Dawkins, startled.

Mr. Jarrad shrugged his shoulders. "That's what the coroner and the local police and the London detective tried to find out, and failed. No proof against any one; no strange characters about, no clues, nothing found afterward, nothing whatever to go on; but it happened in this sleepy old place where there's nothing but roses and scenery. It's never been cleared up to this day, and probably never will be."

Dawkins glanced about rather uncomfortably. "Then the place was sold?"

"Mrs. Millicent couldn't get out quickly enough. The Thursbys came along in their car, offered half its value, and got it. They said they didn't mind a murder or so if the drains were good. When they moved in they intended to stay; but they moved out in less than six months, and I'm told that Mrs. Thursby said that nothing on earth would induce her to stay. Interesting, isn't it?"

"It's a queer old house anyway. Not haunted, is it?"

"I never heard a whisper of that, and it's the sort of thing you can't keep quiet if tongues start wagging."

"I wonder," murmured Dawkins reflectively, "if my client knows about this."

Mr. Jarrad's brows went up. "In our profession it does not concern us what our clients may or may not know. Our business is to establish the physical condition of a lot of infernally uninteresting things. But, believe me, every house has its secret. We can't report on that; we can't even read it, because we're not there long enough."

Dawkins nibbled the end of his pen. "I wonder!"

“Why not? Every room I go into seems to want to say something to me, something it’s tired of keeping to itself, but I hurry through because I don’t want to be burdened. When you’ve been an inventory clerk a few years longer, it will come to you. You can’t escape it.” He paused, his gaze traveling round the oaken walls, then peered under the clock, swung out a picture, and examined the surface behind it. He touched this with a moistened finger.

“Condition in general I should say is excellent.”

It struck the younger man that for some time he had been accepting Mr. Jarrad’s conclusions without comment; so he got up and made a businesslike inspection on his own account.

“Only fair, I should say.”

Mr. Jarrad made a little noise in his throat. “There’s not much to disagree about. Shall we arbitrate?”

“Of course!”

The older man felt in his pocket, produced a coin, and tossed it.

“Heads,” said Dawkins.

“It’s tails,” Mr. Jarrad smiled blandly. “Make a note of that, will you?”

Dawkins moved back to the table and began to scribble. The next moment he became aware that some one had entered the room and stopped short. Mr. Jarrad was regarding a woman who stood just inside the door and surveyed them with grim attention. Neither man had heard her come. Her face was well formed but sallow; the chin rather square, the nose long and thin. Her lips were immobile and slightly compressed. It was the eyes that held the two appraisers, being large and black and filled with a kind of slow, smoldering light. Her figure, tall, spare, and angular, carried with it an odd suggestion of menace. Her air was one of distinct animosity. Dawkins gave a slight start. A short silence followed, and he wondered how long she had been there, also how much she had seen and heard.

“Mr. Derrick is just coming up the drive,” she said crisply.

Mr. Jarrad rubbed his hands as though they were cold.

“Excellent,” he replied with obvious relief. “My colleague and I have just completed our work. I understand you are the housekeeper, Miss Perkins?”

“No, I am the housemaid; at least, I was.”

“Then it may interest you to know that we find the place in admirable condition.”

Perkins seemed unimpressed, took a slow glance round the room, and disappeared. Nor did Mr. Jarrad appear to expect any reply. Dawkins did not speak but whistled softly. Since the history of this room had been unfolded, it had become rather oppressive, and the sudden advent of this strange woman added mysteriously to his uncomfortable sensations. He experienced a swift longing for light and air. Mr. Jarrad had crossed to the fireplace and was

staring at an oil portrait over the hearth. Presently he stroked his long chin.

“That woman, I believe, came here soon after Mr. Millicent first came. She was here when he died, then stayed with the Thursbys during their occupancy, took charge of the house when they decided they had had enough; and, Dawkins, I don’t mind betting she’ll stay with your clients too, as long as they stay.”

Dawkins gave an involuntary shiver. “What holds her in such a lonely place?”

“Every house has its secret,” said Mr. Jarrad.

At this moment quick steps sounded in the hall, there was an echo of a young, strong voice, and the new tenant of Beech Lodge entered the room. Dawkins jumped up, while Mr. Jarrad assumed an air of professional dignity.

“Good afternoon, sir,” he said. “My colleague and I have just finished our work, and you will be glad to know that all is in excellent order. You may be assured that your interests have been well looked after.”

Derrick, a tall young man with restless eyes, nodded casually. He did not seem much impressed, being busy with a swift scrutiny of the study. The mellow paneling, big fireplace, wide oak-planked floor, the large, companionable desk, and the French window opening to the smooth lawn all gave it an atmosphere at once restful and intimate. He felt as though he could turn out good stuff here. Then he nodded contentedly.

“Thanks very much, but I think you’d better see Miss Derrick about these things.”

Mr. Jarrad and Dawkins made two stiff little bows which were absurdly alike and gathered up their papers. Derrick, left alone, moved automatically to the fireplace and stood staring at the oil portrait. He was in this attitude when his sister entered, short, alert, and businesslike. He glanced at her with a slow, provocative smile.

“Well, here we are. Am I forgiven for a snap decision?”

“Really I don’t know yet. I’ve hardly seen the place, but it seems very comfortable, and I know what took your eye. Isn’t getting settled an awful feeling? When will the Thursbys be here?”

He consulted his watch. “They should be here now; early in the afternoon, Thursby said. Did you inquire about servants?”

“Yes, and I wanted to speak to you about that maid. Did you notice her?”

“Rather; who wouldn’t? She mesmerized me when I came here the first time.” He laughed. “Do you want her?”

“My dear Jack, the question is the other way. If you insist on renting a house two miles from anywhere, the first thing to decide is whether your prospective servants want you. As to this one I don’t exactly know. She rather gives me the creeps.”

“What’s the matter, old thing?”

She sent him an odd smile in which there was no comfort. “I can’t say; probably nothing at all but the move, and this house, and all the rest of it. Jack, why were you so keen on it?”

He looked about, almost as though he saw something more than pictures and furniture. There was something more; he had been sure of that the first time he put foot in the room, but it was not the sort of thing one could explain or even justify.

“I really don’t know,” he said slowly, “but I was, and without any question. The rest of this house is what one might expect to find, but this room, well, I took a special fancy to it, and here we are. That’s about as much as you can expect from the ordinary man. I can do good work here from the feel of the place.”

She examined the study with curious interest. Comfortable? Yes. Workmanlike? Yes. A man’s room with nothing in it that was not completely livable. A few books in corner cases; a few good prints framed in harmony with the walls; the big, flat desk, leather-covered as to the center, with its dark mahogany edge showing long and careful usage; the leather chairs, men’s chairs, large and inviting; the great fireplace in its dull, oaken setting; all this dominated by the oil portrait, from which a pair of quiet brown eyes looked out with a gaze at once striking and contemplative.

“But did you find anything unusual about this room?”

“I’m not so sure now; but, yes, I did. You know my weakness for jumping to conclusions.”

Her brows wrinkled. “I’m glad you admit that at the very start. You were tired with a flat in town, passed this place, and saw the sign. You walked through it and fell a victim, as you often have before. The immediate result is that we’ve made an extra effort to gratify your whim, though I’m afraid it’s really more than we should have attempted. You’ll be much happier, Jack, if you admit this at once.”

“I do,” grinned Derrick, “but I’d never have fallen had I not a very competent sister who I knew would save the situation. You’re quite right, Edith; I really can’t afford it, but the place was dirt cheap.”

“Well, I’m afraid it’s going to be something of the same sort with that maid, who will want more than you can really afford to pay; just another luxury we’ll have to live up to. In a lonely spot like this a servant asks top wages; and we’ll need two.”

Derrick hardly heard this. There was an odd little singing in his ears, as though a myriad of tiny voices, long held silent, had suddenly found a myriad of minute tongues. Well, he could wait for the rest. He went back to his discovery of Beech Lodge, the inspection under the guidance of its silent

caretaker, the interview with the agent, and the growing conviction that he must take this house at once.

“How much does the maid ask?” he hazarded.

“I don’t know. I’m almost afraid to inquire.”

“She is a bit formidable,” he admitted; then, slowly, “I wonder whether we’ve taken the house, or the house has taken us.”

His sister glanced at him, puzzled. “I don’t quite follow; but isn’t the result the same in either case?”

He shook his head. “I’m not so sure about that.”

Edith Derrick was prone to confess that she had never quite understood her brother, but had so far maintained that she was better able to look after him than any other woman. He was the only man in her life, and she was not ready to surrender him; but of late the going had become more difficult. She did, however, understand well enough not to attempt to fathom his moods and with a certain placid good nature put them down to the vagaries of the creative mind.

For the past few months he had been caught up in the ambition to write the one great book of his career. This would demand solitude and concentration and, above all things, a garden of his own. So when he returned from a prospecting trip and announced that the abode of his dreams was discovered and secured, Edith packed their belongings and journeyed into Sussex, determined not to be disappointed, yet prepared for the worst. In Beech Lodge she found but little to criticize, so little that she wondered mutely why the terms were so low. The place was comfortable but to her in no way fascinating, and her chief thought was of her own responsibilities in keeping the domestic wheels turning smoothly. If there were anything else behind this, anything that exercised a peculiar fascination on her brother, it would doubtless be apparent later on. Meantime he was in one of his moods. She glanced at the placid features above the mantel, wondering whose they were.

“It’s quite obvious that Mr. John Derrick has one of his preoccupied sensations to-day.”

He nodded. “As a matter of fact I do feel a bit queer, but there’s no anxiety in it, just the preliminary quiver to settling down.” He paused and glanced at her oddly. “I had no alternative.”

“From what?”

“From coming here. I mean I was meant to come.”

She smiled indulgently. The thing about him was that he was different from all the men she knew. A good deal of the boy, a touch of the woman in his gentle persistence, whimsical, sensitive, calling her to aid him in a thousand ways he never saw, his mind open to winds of influence that she could only guess at; how much and how constantly he needed her! She

admired his work, which she could not fully appreciate, and believed him capable of anything. Something of this was in her look, and he put an arm caressingly on her shoulder, then perched on the corner of the big desk.

“I think we’re going to be jolly happy and comfortable here, and I’ll certainly get a lot of work done. That’s a man’s way of putting it, and if you only—”

He broke off suddenly, jerked up his hand, and stared at it strangely. “Well, I’ll be dashed!”

She bent forward quickly. “What’s the matter, Jack?”

He flexed his fingers, shook his head with some confusion, and, turning, leaned over and examined the big desk. “Don’t know,” he said awkwardly; “probably only writer’s cramp; but it never took me before. Perhaps I’d better get a typewriter, though I hate the things.”

Edith was about to speak when there came an almost inaudible knock at the door, and Perkins entered.

“If you please, madam, Mr. and Mrs. Thursby are walking up the drive.”

“Thank you; please bring them in here. And, Perkins—”

“Yes, madam?”

“It—it doesn’t matter now. I’ll see you afterward.”

The woman went out, and Derrick glanced at his sister with genuine curiosity. This was very unlike her.

“I say, Edith, what’s up?”

She blinked and pulled herself together. “Nothing at all, Jack.”

“Don’t think of keeping that person if you don’t fancy her. There must be others available.”

“What an extraordinary expression she has! It made me feel a little cold.”

The coming of the Thursbys reduced the atmosphere of Beech Lodge to an undoubted normal. Mr. Thursby was short, brisk, alert, and highly colored both as to clothes and complexion. He spoke in a sharp staccato voice that carried unflinching self-assurance. A manufacturer in a small way before the war, he had seized opportunity with both hands and made his fortune by sending in regular supplies of handgrenades, of which, though they were unloaded when they left his works, he seemed at first almost afraid. This uncertainty, however, soon left him, and after the Armistice he made an excellent settlement in respect of partially completed orders, winding up his business with a credit balance that surprised even himself.

And if her husband’s rotund person was eloquent of commercial success, his feminine counterpart reflected no less this satisfactory *dénouement*. She had a round, plump face; stubby and equally plump fingers, weighted with rings of varying value and brilliancy; full, red cheeks, and a penetrating, high-pitched voice. She wore all she could, and on top of this a mountain of glossy

furs. The Thursbys, man and wife, reeked of money; but were naturally good-hearted people whom money could not quite spoil. And from their present manner it would seem that they were genuinely interested in Derrick and his sister. Mrs. Thursby glanced round, nodded at the sight of familiar things, and settled herself comfortably.

"I'm very glad to meet you, Miss Derrick," she said cheerfully, "and isn't it odd to come into one's own house and find some one else sitting there?"

Miss Derrick smiled. "I suppose it is."

"I do hope you like the place, and if there's anything I can tell you about it you're very welcome."

"It's a good deal larger than I expected, but it seems very homelike, and my brother evidently fell in love with it at first sight. The things in it are charming."

"Glad they appeal to you, but as a matter of fact I chose hardly any of them."

Mr. Thursby nodded complacently. "That's so! I picked up the place just at it stood, with practically everything in it. We were motoring past, just like your brother, saw the sign, took a fancy, and bought it the very next day. I don't believe in haggling over prices when you see what you want."

"And, what's more, we took it over with the servants just as they stood, too," chimed in his wife. "The only trouble was that they stood too much; in fact, all of them except Perkins."

"Really," said Edith.

"Yes," replied Thursby genially, "she couldn't get a job on the strength of her looks, but I never knew a servant do so much work and make so little fuss over it. The thing is to forget her face, if one can. How do you like Beech Lodge, Mr. Derrick?"

"Very much; but I suppose that since I'm the guilty party in taking it, I couldn't say anything else. This room appeals to me, especially."

As he said this, he intercepted a glance that Mr. Thursby darted at his wife, and experienced a curious conviction that these two were trying hard to conceal their satisfaction at having unloaded the house on some one else. He saw the plump lady on the sofa shake her head ever so slightly. Mr. Thursby stiffened, got a shade redder in the face, and his eyes rested for a fraction of a second on the features over the mantel, as though asking their late owner whether he required any publicity. The features evidently telegraphed back that he did not. Whereupon Mr. Thursby looked more genial than ever.

"It's a good, comfortable room," he agreed, "but I generally used the little one off the dining-room. It's warmer."

Mrs. Thursby gave a slight shiver and regarded the Derricks with renewed and unaffected interest. "I dare say it will sound very queer to you, but neither

of us cared much for this room. For my part I like something brighter than old wood and old pictures. Never cared much for leather, either.”

Edith betrayed no surprise. She quite understood. But what did puzzle her was that people of the Thursby type should ever have bought this ancient mansion.

“You weren’t here very long, were you?” she ventured.

“Six months,” said Mr. Thursby; “six months, then we went off to France. I wanted to see some of the places where they used my grenades.”

“Did you make that stuff?” asked Derrick, amused.

“Tons of it. Ever use them?”

Derrick smiled. “Rather, but,” he put in hastily as his visitor brightened and prepared to talk shop, “one doesn’t say anything on that score now.”

“I’d be awfully obliged if Mrs. Thursby would show me something about the house up-stairs,” said Edith.

Thursby laughed. “Your sister is as practical as my wife, Mr. Derrick, so I’ll take the opportunity of showing you one or two things outside that may be useful.”

He seemed in an odd way glad to get out of the room, and Derrick listened to a disquisition on roses and mulch, Thursby being an authority on both. Beech Lodge had a reputation for its roses.

Meanwhile Mrs. Thursby, left alone with her hostess, glanced at the latter rather uncertainly.

“As to Perkins, Miss Derrick, I really don’t know that I can tell you very much. She isn’t the sort about whom one can say much.”

“I’d really be very grateful for anything you can tell me. Might I ask how long you had her?”

“Only six months or so. We weren’t in the house any longer than that.”

“Then did you ascertain anything about her before that? I mean, had she satisfactory references?”

Mrs. Thursby shook her head with what seemed unnecessary decision. “No, we found her here, just as you found her, or your brother. She was practically part of the house, and, looking back at it, I can’t imagine the house without her. Of course she had been with Mrs. Millicent, whom I have never seen, though she lives near here.”

Edith experienced a sudden curiosity about the Millicents, but something in Mrs. Thursby’s expression suggested that information on this subject would be forthcoming before long.

“And you found Perkins quite satisfactory? It would help me a good deal to know, because, frankly, I don’t see what keeps a woman in such a lonely spot.”

“She is absolutely clean and superior, very superior. As for being lonely, I

saw no sign of it. She never once left the place, even to go to the village.”

Miss Derrick smiled. “That’s very good news, but I was just wondering if she isn’t too superior for us. We’re going to live very quietly. My brother can’t stand interruptions when he’s writing.”

The other woman sent her a look of candid scrutiny, then shook her head. “Miss Derrick, I’m going to tell you something that will sound queer, but it’s perfectly true. Perkins will like you a good deal better than she liked us. She made no pretense of that, though she was always most respectful. But I felt it just the same. I got the idea, and still have it, that she looked on us as intruders. I can’t for the life of me say why such a thing should be, but there you are, and I know it seems ridiculous. But Beech Lodge is too far from anywhere for its occupants to be over particular about trifles, and I put the thing out of my head—or tried to, anyway.”

“That’s curious,” said Edith reflectively; “she seems very respectful.”

“She’s the soul of respect, but I’m not sure what it’s for. Also she was too reserved for me. And she appeared to be afraid she’d say too much and let something slip she didn’t mean to. You asked about her references, but as a matter of fact I hadn’t the cheek to inquire for any, and took it for granted that she went with the house, whoever took it. I didn’t even write to Mrs. Millicent.”

“Who is Mrs. Millicent?”

Edith put the question impulsively, and Mrs. Thursby’s eyes sought the portrait that hung just above her head. She did not answer at once but seemed to be debating how much she might say. When finally she did speak, it was with a reluctance that was gradually overcome by the interest of her subject.

“We bought the place from her but only saw the agent. Mrs. Millicent herself was ill at the time and on the south coast with her daughter. Mr. Millicent had just died here, very suddenly, and she did not want to come back. She’s never been back since.”

“I didn’t know that,” said Edith slowly.

“Yes, and it happened in this very room.” Mrs. Thursby spoke more confidently now, warming a little, as though it was good to remember that it was now some one else’s room. “Mr. Millicent was found at that very desk and, I’m told, found by Perkins, who was devoted to him. Then his wife put the house on the market at once.”

Edith took a long breath. “I wish I’d known that,” she said thoughtfully, “but I’m glad somehow that I’ve heard it at once.”

“Would it have made any difference? I thought every one hereabouts knew it. Didn’t Perkins say anything about it to your brother?”

“Nothing whatever, and, Mrs. Thursby, please, I don’t want him to know just yet. I hope your husband won’t say anything. Jack is so sensitive and

imaginative that it would divert him completely from his work, which at the present is very important."

The stout woman laughed. "My husband is probably talking hard about roses and garden-mold. He's got that on the brain now instead of grenades, and it's much healthier. And if I were you I wouldn't worry about Mr. Millicent. So now you know how we found Perkins, and I must say she kept the house spotless. But she was so quiet that it did get a bit on my nerves. She went about as though expecting something or some one, till I used to feel like asking her to shout out who or what it was. And, as I said, she never liked me."

"How very strange!"

"I'm afraid I've rather let myself go on the subject, but I've told you all I know. It may be that Perkins likes things old and subdued like this, while I confess that I like them more new and shiny. Perhaps that's why she wants to stay, if she does want to. I know how you can find out without asking."

"How?" said Edith curiously.

"If she smiles at you, it will be all right. She never smiled at me."

"I'm afraid I should need rather more than that."

Mrs. Thursby shook her head impulsively. "I don't believe you will. It's a queer sort of house, if I do say it."

"Did you ever imagine it was haunted?" Miss Derrick knew the question sounded childish, but it came out involuntarily. Much to her surprise Mrs. Thursby took it quite seriously.

"I did at first, but soon got over that. No, we've never been bothered. There's a bit of creaking now and then, but not more than in any house of this sort, and certainly we never saw anything." She paused, then went on quite frankly. "The real reason I came here to-day was to see whether it was likely that you and Perkins would hit it off, and if not I would have advised you to get rid of her, if you could; but whether the queerness is in the house or in her I really don't know. It's somewhere, not the sort of thing that can hurt, but that one just feels without knowing why." She paused a moment.

"As to your brother, I'd advise you to say nothing at all if he's the kind of man you describe. He's bound to find out for himself. And if you're wondering, Miss Derrick, why we should have let you take the house and then talk about it like this, the reason is that I may be misjudging Perkins altogether, and the whole affair may just be the result of my own imagination. Don't take any notice of her, and everything should be all right. Now tell me: does it seem to you that I've said a lot of foolish things?"

"Not at all. I think you've been extremely kind, and, if I may say so, very honest, and it should all help very much, especially with Perkins. My brother had to have a quiet place to work in, and this should do admirably. I really don't believe in ghosts; neither does he."

“He’ll find it quiet enough here,” replied Mrs. Thursby significantly.

Voices sounded in the hall, and Derrick entered with his landlord. He looked pleased, as though Beech Lodge had revealed unexpected attractions.

“We’re going to have lots of roses next summer, Edith. Never saw a better lot of trees. Mr. Thursby has shown me everything. Place out there I can work in, too, when the decent weather comes.”

Edith nodded. “How very nice!” She turned to Mrs. Thursby. “One of my principal duties is to keep out of the way of a toiling author, yet to be on hand when wanted. Jack has always pictured himself working in a garden. Now we’ll have some tea.”

“That’s true, but who’s going to look after the roses? What about your late gardener, Mr. Thursby? Is he available for a man of moderate means?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know where he is. There should be somebody in the village who’d like the job.”

“And I’m sorry we can’t stay for tea,” put in his wife; “we have rather a long way to go.” She stole a glance at the portrait, her expression suggesting to Edith that there were already too many in the room.

“So thanks just the same,” said Thursby, “but as a matter of fact we have to be back in town within the hour, and that means hustling. We’re off to France for a while next week, but not the battle-fields this time. If you’re ready, Helen, we’ll make a start now. Good-by, Miss Derrick, and I hope you’ll be comfortable. My agent will look after any repairs, if you let him know. It may be we’ll pass here again, and if so I’ll drop in. And I want to read that book when it comes out.”

He spoke so abruptly that Miss Derrick was a little startled and felt now that while Mrs. Thursby had told her a good deal it was probably not all. Her first impulse was to betray nothing to her brother.

“Can’t you really stay for a few minutes? Tea is ready.” She rang the bell.

“We’d love to,” Mrs. Thursby assured her hastily. “But it’s quite impossible. I hope we’ll have better luck next time.” She put out a plump hand.

Derrick indulged in a puzzled glance. The manner of their departure was unmistakably hasty. He intercepted another wordless signal and felt suddenly amused.

“Would you like tea in the other room?” he hazarded.

The little man shook his head with decision. “It isn’t that at all, I assure you.” Then the door opened, and Perkins stood motionless on the threshold, her eyes fixed on Miss Derrick. She seemed unaware there were others present. Mrs. Thursby busied herself with her gloves and did not look up.

“You rang, madam?”

“Yes, Mr. and Mrs. Thursby are not staying for tea.”

Derrick had a strange conviction that Perkins knew this without being told,

but the severe face of the maid changed not at all. She disappeared into the hall, followed shortly by the young man and his visitors. There were a few words of good-by and a final assurance that Beech Lodge would be found homelike and comfortable. Edith looked after them in silent wonder. Why were they so anxious to leave? The excuse had sounded something more than hollow. The whole affair had been queer and unnatural. Then she too stared at the portrait, as though asking what it all meant. Presently sounded the horn of a car and the dwindling note of an engine.

Derrick came back, and she regarded him expectantly. How much of it had he caught? It was the dream of his life to write his biggest book in a place like Beech Lodge. But he was sensitive, imaginative, and subjective, and she dreaded the impression this strange and mysterious atmosphere might produce. The uncertainty made her feel a little cold.

“Well, that’s done!” he said, rubbing his hands. “And I’ve nothing more to learn about the grounds. Thursby must have spent a good deal of money on the place. It’s odd that he left it, because in a way he seems still keen on it. Funny chap, that. He was almost apologetic about what he had done in the way of improvements. Anyway, here we are in full possession.”

“That’s just what I feel, and, Jack, I do hope it will be just what you want.”

“It is absolutely. I know that already, if you don’t find it too slow and remote. I’m a bit guilty on that score. I suppose there are some of the right sort in the neighborhood, and the Millicents are not far off. Did you learn anything satisfactory about that maid?”

“Yes,” she said slowly. “Mrs. Thursby’s report is that she’s very competent and trustworthy and possibly willing to do the whole thing herself. So I think I’ll keep her if she’ll stay.”

“Good. I thought you would. A bit out of the common, that woman.”

The door opened as he spoke, and Perkins came in with the tray. The two glanced at each other, and watched her silently. The long, deft fingers moved with a sort of definite precision, lingering over the silver as though the touch of it conveyed an actual pleasure. This deliberate procedure was marked by a noiseless precision. One could not imagine a woman like this making a mistake. Her face, absolutely impassive, betrayed nothing. While she was in the room she seemed part of it, and from her there spread something that almost suggested ownership. Then she went out, as silent as themselves. Derrick sat up.

“By George!” he said softly.

“What is it, Jack?”

He laughed. “Hanged if I know yet; something in the air. Probably it’s only the new and rather ideal surroundings that set one’s fancy going. You don’t feel anything, do you?”

“Only that I want my tea dreadfully. I had quite a talk with Mrs. Thursby.”

“What sort is she? Like her husband?”

“I should think so. Limited, you know, but doesn’t put on airs and is very honest apparently. She actually said that Perkins made her feel like an intruder but that it would be different with us. She says we suit Beech Lodge better than they did. It was rather pathetic.”

He put down his cup. “I can easily imagine that. The people who modernized Beech Lodge are our own sort and have a good deal in common with us. For instance, when the Thursbys picked up the place I don’t believe they were meant to, or expected. It’s different now. We were. I knew that as soon as I stepped into the hall.”

“Don’t be absurd, Jack! Expected by whom?”

“Perkins, for one, and no doubt by other people, or things; it doesn’t matter which, but I’m sure of it.”

“Jack,” she protested. “You’re rambling!”

“Well,” he answered slowly, “you just remember this talk, and see. We blend with the place, we’re suitable and acceptable, while the Thursbys were not. That’s obvious at a glance, and they certainly felt it themselves.”

“But how could we be expected by any one who didn’t know us? You can’t explain that.”

He looked at her with sudden gravity. “Did you never have a curious sensation that you were doing things for the second time?”

“Now you’re joking. Have some more tea?”

“No,” he said, “I’m not, and there’s no explanation for it. In fact I’ve an idea that they’re not meant to be explained; at least not yet. But I felt it the minute I got here.”

“But, Jack,” she protested, “you saw the house; you liked it, especially as you couldn’t quite afford it; and of course you were impulsive and took it. What has that to do with a servant, or any one else?”

“Perhaps nothing whatever. It’s a wonderful place to work in.”

“I think that’s the best way to look at it. What did Mr. Thursby talk about?”

“Mostly roses and mulch.” He broke off suddenly, regarding his sister with an intense and puzzled expression. “I’ve an extraordinary impression that some one died in this room not long ago; some one who didn’t want to die and wasn’t ready for it.”

“What do you mean?” she stammered. “Please, Jack, don’t go off on that tack the very day we reach here. You’ll never get anything done.”

“I mean just that; I’m perfectly sure some one did. Perkins will know, and, I say, perhaps that’s what—”

“Jack,” she interrupted hastily, “please leave Perkins to me. When Mrs. Thursby was here she said that there was a sudden death in this room about

two years ago, and—”

“Millicent?” he shot out.

“Yes,” she said helplessly.

“Murdered?”

“I assumed that. He was found at his desk. Mrs. Thursby seemed to want to say more, and yet not want to.” Miss Derrick paused, aware of her brother’s penetrating gaze. He would soon know it all in any case, and perhaps it was wisest to clear the air as much as possible at the outset.

“Now I understand why the rental asked was so low,” she continued. “The Thursbys simply got frightened. But I’m astonished you asked no questions on your account.”

He shook his head and stared at the portrait. “The questions will come later on. I haven’t got them ready yet. By the way, Edith, that’s Millicent over the fireplace. He’s been trying to tell me something ever since we came into the house; what you call a speaking likeness. Now I’ve got it, and he’s trying to smile.”

“I wish you wouldn’t go on like that, Jack. Please don’t.”

“It’s nothing in the world to be nervous about. This sort of thing is going on all the time around all of us. Some see it, and others don’t.”

“But how did you know?” she asked nervously.

“Can’t tell you that; it’s not a matter of reason or information. Some people call it the influence of the inanimate, which is rather a bald way of putting it. I’ve got the idea that it’s the permanence of things that are universally put down as lost, or at any rate as only transient. Just imagine, for instance, that nothing is really lost, but that everything, every act and motion, and even word, is registered in some kind of extraordinarily delicate vibration, so delicate that it is quite imperceptible to the average person. But the record is there nevertheless; in fact the entire universe is throbbing and quivering with such records that he who can may read, or at least perceive. Go a little further and admit that the more tense the act or word the more keen the pitch of the ethereal record, and one begins to appreciate what is really implied by what we call coincidence, and how it is that often, after many years, mysteries are solved that long baffled any approach to solution. It really means that some one was sensitive enough to decipher the record that was always there. I’ve an idea it may turn out like that in the case of Millicent. And when you ask me how I knew some one died suddenly in this room, I can’t answer in any other way than this. I just knew; that’s all.”

Edith felt utterly confused. She was a practical girl, with a healthy dislike of anything that might upset the normal progress of every-day affairs, and for years had stood between her brother and the drab realities of life, in order that his fancy might have untrammelled swing. Imagination, either on her own part

or that of others, had never heretofore caused her any discomfort. She admitted its value, but the process by which it worked was beyond her. Now, however, she experienced a sudden distaste for her new surroundings. Derrick's eyes had taken on an intense, far-pitched stare as though he were probing things beyond her own ken. He seemed to be moving away from her.

"I wonder if I'm going to like this house," she hazarded.

He pulled himself together and laughed. "Buck up, old thing, and you mustn't mind if I wander a bit. It's too late to take exceptions after signing a year's lease."

She glanced at him seriously and a little anxiously. "It's only that you've been in a sort of half-world ever since we got here. Now I must settle this matter of Perkins."

"Right! And I've got to find a gardener. And look here, Edith; speaking of half-worlds, isn't it possible that that's about all we get in any case—the obvious half?"

"Don't be so introspective, and see if you can't find something cheerful outside. And, Jack, will you ask Perkins to see me here?"

He kissed her and strolled to the door. "If I may make a foolish manlike suggestion it would be that when you're talking to Perkins you try to imagine this place without her. I've tried and failed. I'll send her in."

She sat for a moment, deep in thought, till very soon it seemed there was nothing to be anxious about after all. Her brother's fanciful mind had merely unearthed something which he must inevitably have discovered before long. The mystery might hold him for a few days, till his restless imagination moved on elsewhere. It had always been like that in the past. The fact that Millicent died here two years ago could mean nothing to new tenants. All houses were built to live and die in. Beech Lodge was charming and well arranged, and they had leased it on nominal terms. It was true that the terms were, perhaps, suspiciously nominal, but she pushed this thought aside to make room for others more helpful and constructive. She confessed to being piqued with herself for giving any evidence of discomfort, and would in future take less notice of her brother's whimsical ideas. Then she looked up and saw Perkins.

"You sent for me, madam?"

Miss Derrick regarded her with absorbed interest. How old was this woman? At first appearance she seemed never to have been young, but her smooth skin and straight figure suggested that she could not be much past forty. It was the grave, inscrutable face that baffled. It carried no trace of expression and revealed no play of the mind. In the dark eyes moved a kind of secret light, quickening at times into a fleeting gleam that was instantly extinguished. In these moments Perkins appeared to receive communications from a source privy to herself, messages that illumined a nature of which the

outer world knew but little; and, save for these occasional and passing glimpses, her face was like a mask. Miss Derrick, held for an instant voiceless by something she could not understand, wondered what sort of private life had been led by a woman who looked like this. The pause lengthened, but Perkins stood, passive and undisturbed.

“I’ve had a talk with Mrs. Thursby,” said Edith rather stiffly, “and she mentioned you. It was quite satisfactory.”

“Yes, madam.”

The flatness of her tone announced that it was immaterial what Mrs. Thursby might have said. Obviously the latter meant nothing to Perkins. There was no superiority in her manner; just a total lack of interest.

“So if you would like to stay now, I would be very glad to have you.”

Perkins’s thin lips moved ever so slightly, and the faintest trace of a smile flitted over the blank features. She made a little gesture that put her late employer definitely out of the reckoning.

“I always stay, madam,” she said quietly.

Edith stared at her. “Why always? I don’t quite understand.”

“I came here to Mrs. Millicent, and”—here there was again the ghost of a smile—“I even stayed with Mrs. Thursby, and I’m quite willing to stay with you. People come and go, but nothing has really changed.”

This announcement was made with such calmness that Miss Derrick found herself for a moment robbed of speech. Whoever came or went, this woman would always be at Beech Lodge, no more detachable than the roof which covered it. Jack had suggested that his sister try to imagine the place without Perkins, and now she saw what he meant. She began to recognize herself as part of a procession which passed before the sphinx-like eyes of this house-parlor-maid, a procession to which the woman ministered in order that she might live, but to which she revealed no fraction of her inner self. It was strange to be thus classified. But what was the alternative?

“I am glad you are so fond of the house,” she said uncertainly; “and now it comes to a matter of wages.”

Perkins’s eyes wandered to the portrait over the mantel. Wages, it seemed, were the last thing in her mind. “There will be no difficulty about that, madam.”

Miss Derrick leaned forward involuntarily. “I don’t quite understand. They are very important, to me.”

“I mean, madam, that I don’t ask for high wages.”

Miss Derrick, though greatly puzzled, breathed a sigh of relief. “The most I can pay is forty pounds a year. And of course there’s a cook to be found. Can you help me there?”

Perkins’s face softened a shade. “Forty pounds will be quite sufficient, and

you will not need a cook.”

“But are you sure you can do it all?” Miss Derrick felt distinctly bewildered.

“Yes, madam.” The woman said this with so complete a finality that the subject closed forthwith. It was something more than mere competency. There was no spark of animation in her expression. Her attitude suggested that while household duties were unavoidable they were also of a secondary character, and the conversation was becoming pointless. Edith wondered whether some personal tragedy were not hidden behind this immutable barrier and experienced a throb of sympathy at the narrowness of such a life.

“You see, Perkins, I realize that you are taking on a good deal of work. You must not overtax yourself.”

“It is only work of the hands, madam.”

The new mistress of Beech Lodge shifted her ground hastily. “Is this house very old?”

“This room is the oldest part; about two hundred years, I think.”

“You must have got very fond of the place.”

The woman looked slowly about. Her lips were slightly parted, and her eyes were full of shadows, like the eyes of those who know exactly what they are about to see. Something might have been passing from her to those mellow panels in exchange for some other communication she was drawing from them.

“I have been here for eight years, madam; and it may be that the place has got fond of me.” She said this with a subtle change in her tone, as though for an instant she had lifted a corner of a curtain in order to test the other woman’s perception of what lay beyond.

“I can’t quite follow you there, Perkins.”

“No, madam? It doesn’t matter.”

Miss Derrick remembered what Mrs. Thursby had said about wanting to tell the woman to shout out whatever was in the back of her head and have done with it. It was understandable now, and she felt the same desire. The difficulty was going to be to regard Perkins simply as a maid and not a creature of mystery. Again she tried to think of Beech Lodge without her, and again she failed.

“I’m afraid you must have been very lonely here, especially after Mr. Thursby left.”

“I was never alone, madam. That is—” She broke off in strange confusion. “I never feel lonely.”

Miss Derrick shivered in spite of herself. She perceived something now; but it was only a curtain, with no suggestion of what was behind. A thought darted through her brain. She recalled the strange manner of Mrs. Thursby, her

restlessness, her obvious desire to get away, especially from this room. Mrs. Thursby had felt like an intruder, that round-faced, good-natured, unimaginative woman. Perhaps all were intruders here except Perkins, even Millicent himself. At the recollection of Millicent her pulse faltered. Perhaps that was why Millicent had been—She forced herself to speak evenly.

“Perkins, will you please be quite candid with me and say whether you have ever seen anything in this house which—which should not be here?”

The black eyes rounded. “I do not understand.”

“Have you ever seen what you thought was a ghost? I know there are no such things, but some people think they see them.”

“There are no ghosts here, madam.” She shook her head slowly. “I would know if there were.”

“Then will you explain what you meant when you said you were never alone?”

Perkins made the same slight indefinite gesture. “I’m sorry I said that, madam, and it was foolish of me. It’s only my fancy and doesn’t mean anything. Perhaps it’s my way of filling up empty hours, and sometimes I say things without thinking. You surprised me, because Mrs. Thursby never asked me any questions like that.”

Miss Derrick pulled herself together. “Well, Perkins, perhaps you’re quite right, and it really doesn’t matter. I suppose it’s the strange house and the feeling of not being settled that makes one curious about all kinds of things. When you’ve had your tea please come up-stairs, and I’ll show you about the linen. Also I hope you’ll help me all you can to make matters go smoothly in the house, on account of Mr. Derrick’s writing. It’s important he should be disturbed as little as possible. And,” she added genially, “please don’t fill your head with fancies about never having been alone.”

CHAPTER II

PERKINS

MISS DERRICK left the room, and Perkins stood motionless as though she welcomed its silence. Her eyes took on a strange expression as she scanned this apartment, with every least detail of which she was utterly familiar. The paneling ran nearly to the ceiling, and was topped by a narrow shelf. The west wall was dominated by the fireplace, and in the corner, placed at a slight angle from the wall itself, was the big desk. Sitting there, one looked not out through the French window, but almost directly at the door from the main hall. The desk was already littered with Derrick's manuscript, and toward it Perkins moved as in a dream.

She put one thin hand on the smooth leather surface, then bent over the massive frame, searching, it seemed, in the manner of one who hopes she may not find. Her attitude suggested that she had done this many times before, and always with the same result; but it did not affect the swift and silent touch with which she fingered the heavy mahogany corners and deep, carved molding of its intricate design. Presently she shook her head with a sort of patient resolution and turned on the portrait a look of extraordinary inquiry, as though Millicent's eyes, peering from the pigment, could have directed her—if they only would. The picture might have been alive, so keen was her regard, so expectant of an answer.

Evening had drawn on, and the study became peopled with soft mysterious shadows in which she stood like a priestess before some half-veiled shrine. She made no movement toward the lamp but in the gloom progressed without a sound from point to point, with here and there a lingering touch to furniture and woodwork. These intimate caresses blended her the more completely with all that surrounded her till she was merged and absorbed into the bodily human presentment of wood and stone. Finally she came directly under the portrait, bent her head in an attitude of profound thought, and remained quite motionless. She was standing thus when the front hall door opened and Derrick's whistle sounded cheerily outside.

At that the maid smiled to herself with sudden pleasure, crossed the room swiftly, and became occupied with the tea-tray. Derrick entered. He did not see her at first and started at a slight rattle of china.

“Jove, Perkins, you made me jump! I thought you were part of the room.”

She did not answer. He sent her a quick searching glance, stood by the

mantel, and, taking out his pipe, watched her silently. How amazingly she fitted into everything! No, he could not imagine Beech Lodge without this woman.

“You will want to work now, sir?”

He nodded. “Yes, I think I will”; then, suddenly, “I say, how did you know I wanted to work?”

She gave a queer, twisted smile, the first he had seen on that ageless face—a strange and almost grotesquely communicable look, with which she stepped at once from the rôle of servant and became a sort of administrator of something yet to be explained. But there was no lack of respect in her manner.

“I thought perhaps you might, sir.”

She took out the tray and, returning in a moment, adjusted the heavy curtains over the French window. He watched her light the desk-lamp and turn it low, feeling rested and soothed by every deft and noiseless movement. His senses were comforted by the indescribable certainty of her touch, which gave him an extraordinary feeling of confidence—in something. And Perkins must know what this was. Presently he went to the desk and fingered his manuscript. It struck him that what he had already written was a little unreal and undirected. It didn’t go deep enough.

“Shall I make up the fire, sir?”

“No, thank you. It’s not worth while till after dinner. But I’d like the lamp higher.”

She came slowly toward him. “Have you really seen this room by firelight, sir?”

He looked at her curiously and instantly pictured this ancient chamber with warm shadows flickering over its mellow casements. Depth and warmth; that’s what it would be, had always been. He knew this much.

“Perhaps you might make up the fire after all. Good suggestion!”

She obeyed, and he watched the effect—more fascinating than he had imagined. The study took on a new and ghostly beauty. Its dancing shadows were populous with fantasy that died and was born while he stared. There were tenants of the past here that no change of ownership could ever displace; reminders of spoken things that had drifted from vanished lips; echoes of songs whose lilt had never become silent. It had ceased to be a room. It was a palace of dream and vision. And in the background stood Perkins.

“By George!” he said under his breath.

“I thought you’d like it, sir.”

She was half invisible, and he started violently. “It’s wonderful, but I expected that.”

“Yes, it’s strange how one can tell.”

He glanced at her, as though he had known her all his life. “There is

something about this room, and I felt it the first time I came in. How old is it?"

"It has no age, sir."

Derrick did not seem surprised. "I thought you'd say that." He paused; then as though resuming some previous talk, "Who else has felt it?"

"Only Mr. Millicent since I came here, and his daughter. It was different with Mrs. Millicent, and she was frightened."

"I think I understand that, too. Was this his favorite room?"

"Yes, that is his desk. I think that at the end he was frightened as well."

"And you found him. How was that?"

She made an indefinite gesture. "They sent for me."

Again he felt nothing of surprise. "Yes, because they had seen and knew. But why did you stay here after it happened?"

Perkins took one long, uncertain breath. "I did go away for a week, but I couldn't stay. It was all silent in London where I went. Then I knew that it—that they would not let me remain away, so I had to come back." She gazed round this well-remembered room and seemed to signal that she acknowledged its potency.

Derrick looked at the littered desk and into the mask-like face. Her eyes were alight now, and not those of a lonely woman. She was, as it were, surrounded by friends. He wondered if they would ever be his friends.

"Do you mind talking like this? I think I understand, but most people wouldn't."

"It makes me happier. For two years there have been no living words about it. I could never find any one who understood at all since it happened, and Miss Millicent would not speak." She hesitated, and sent him the faintest smile. "For the last two days the house has been amused."

"How?" he demanded. Beech Lodge seemed to be stirring about him, and with slow palpitations of a monstrous life, throbbing in one vast pulse on which Perkins kept a cool, knowledgeable finger. It moved and breathed.

"It was at the men who came to take the inventory. They were such children; though one of them, and he was quite old, guessed at something in a general way. The other could never hear or see anything."

He nodded and, turning, caught a yellow flicker that touched the portrait into a strange similitude of life. Millicent's eyes were speaking now, strange things to which he had no key. But only for a little while. The key was not far away. There came over Derrick the profound conviction that this was all arranged. It belonged to the cycle of appointed things. The stage was all set. If he could but keep his ears tuned to the elusive vibrations that permeated this solitary dwelling, he might decipher its mystery. And Perkins was part of it.

"Is that like Mr. Millicent?"

She nodded, with no surprise that he should know whose portrait it was.

“Yes, and there was something about him very like you, sir. Not in appearance, but the other thing. He once told me that he began to hear and understand a little while he was a child. They commenced to talk before he left his first school. I’m glad, sir, that Miss Derrick does not understand.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because she told me not to be lonely, as if one could. She thinks I’m a little mad, and that’s why I’m willing to stay here and not ask high wages.”

He did not answer, beginning now to perceive why he had been led to this isolated spot. Millicent stared down at him, and he was persuaded that from the picture proceeded a thin appeal for help—or was it for revenge?—Millicent whose life had been so suddenly snuffed out—Millicent who had been afraid before he died. Afraid of what?

“You’re not afraid too, sir, are you? It’s no use if you are.”

He shook his head, scanning thoughtfully the books, the prints, the dull paneling, and heavy oaken floor.

“You believe,” he said slowly, “that all this has sucked in year after year something from mortality, something that is never quite lost, till, in time, wood and stone and paper become something much more than this, and radiate back to us, if we can only catch it, the wisdom and courage and love and evil they have so long absorbed. You believe all this, Perkins?”

Her eyes opened wide, filling with a strange light. She was no longer an impassive, middle-aged woman, the servant of the house, but a creature vibrant with feeling, as one who has unleashed her soul. Her lips moved inaudibly, as at some mystic shrine.

“Wisdom and courage and love and evil,” she repeated in an awed whisper. “Yes, yes, that’s it, all of it. Last time it was evil in Beech Lodge. The evil had been here for months and years, growing stronger and stronger. It began when Mr. Millicent got back from the East, and it never stopped. I tried to silence it but failed, and then it silenced him. The evil was too strong.”

“But it’s over now,” said Derrick steadily.

“No, it’s here yet, in this room,” she pointed to the portrait. “He knows. He’s been trying to tell me but cannot.”

“From whom does it come?”

“Wait, sir; you’re not ready yet. Nothing is quite ready, but it will be soon. That’s why you came. The others will come, too.”

He experienced a remarkable sensation of having lost all physical weight, and seemed to catch a low singing note as of a myriad of tiny voices, the far murmur of those who approached from the unknown. He could see Perkins, still motionless, and feel his own body, but this had no significance. As the wireless operator tunes his set till it abstracts from the invisible only that which is carried by its own individual wave-length and remains unaffected by all

others, so Derrick began to pick up a series of vibrations that in a queer and remote fashion he recognized, but could not as yet interpret. Then he caught his own tones.

“So this air is full of that which can never die or disappear, and may save or destroy as it is written. It destroyed Millicent and may be the undoing of others unless it is brought to naught.”

“How else could it be?” Perkins covered her pale face, bent her head, and disappeared.

Derrick stared at the portrait, his features transfigured with something that was not altogether wonder. It was all unreal yet enormously real. What surprised him most was that he should be admitted so readily to this “no man’s land” where mystery, like a cloaked figure, moved among the shadows of tragedy. How much was here? How much of it was his own fancy? Who was the real Millicent, the man within the man who had been afraid before he died? How and why did Millicent die? Did evil take on an embodiment and, emerging like an apparition from the unknown, butcher him where he sat? Derrick pictured him, shrinking back into his chair with starting eyes while something moved closer, closer. And then—

A knock sounded at the door.

“If you please, sir, the inventory men would like to come in for a moment.” The impassive mask had fallen over her face again.

“Eh! I thought they had finished.” He spoke jerkily, aware that the study had suddenly become void and silent. “All right, they may come.”

A shuffle of footsteps in the hall, and Mr. Jarrad entered deferentially, hat in hand. He was followed by Dawkins. The younger man looked amused, and a trifle superior.

“I beg pardon for disturbing you like this, sir, but on looking over our notes I find that my colleague has omitted to make an entry concerning this desk.”

“Anything the matter with the desk?” asked Derrick curiously.

“No, sir, it’s merely the point of its physical condition, which would naturally affect any possible question of dilapidations. When I examined it I noticed a large stain on the leather, quite faint and dull. It’s the sort of thing one generally finds on desks of this character, especially when there happen to be young people in the family. I did not detect it till for some reason I made a second inspection. Now it seems that either I did not mention this for record or, if I did, my colleague failed to make the entry. So with your permission I’ll show it to him.”

Derrick felt no surprise. “Certainly,” he said mechanically. “Do you need more light?”

Mr. Jarrad shook his head, advanced to the desk, reverentially moved a sheaf of manuscript, put on his glasses, and bent low over the glossy surface.

Dawkins stood at his elbow looking openly incredulous.

“I can’t see anything, just the same,” said the latter, “and a stain is a stain.”

Mr. Jarrad shifted the lamp and peered hard. “Curious,” he murmured to himself. “How very curious! I could have sworn that—ah—there, my friend,” he nodded with satisfaction, “you can see it now. It seems a little more difficult to place than the last time, but there it is, and quite large.” He ran a thin finger over an irregular outline. “In a certain light it might be almost invisible. Very faint, I admit, but surely your young eyes are as sharp as my glasses?”

Dawkins scrutinized, nodded, mumbled an apology, and made an entry in the large book. Mr. Jarrad turned to Derrick.

“That’s what I referred to, sir, and it’s not my habit to overlook small things. The foundation of a sound inventory business is system plus what might be called perception.”

“Perception?”

“Yes, sir. It involves a certain amount of sensitiveness, strange as that may sound, and the ability to perceive and record what is usually, in fact one might almost say always, missed by the casual observer. It’s not altogether a matter of training, either, but of instinct. Possibly there’s not one man in a hundred who would have spotted that; and if I were fanciful, sir, I would hazard the opinion that the desk was trying to hide it, which is of course absurd. In fact, though I see that you yourself have been sitting here, I am sure you did not observe it. Thank you, sir, and good night! We’ll be of no further trouble now.”

This oration being delivered in his very best manner, and the dignity of his profession thus established, Mr. Jarrad retired. When the steps died out, Derrick looked for himself. Close under the lamp he discerned a shadowy blotch of irregular shape, a rough pool with a tone a shade darker than the leather. It had apparently been subjected to hard rubbing. It was a discoloration of no particular hue, but as he gazed he knew without doubt that it had been made two years previously by the life-blood of Henry Millicent.

CHAPTER III

THE MAN FROM THE EAST

A WEEK passed at Beech Lodge, while Derrick endeavored to get down to work; but in spite of every effort, progress seemed impossible. Ideas, when they came, were illusory; his characters imbued themselves with strange aspirations and qualities, and plot after plot was displaced by the secret but constantly strengthening conviction that this novel was not, for the present at any rate, the most important thing in life. More than ever he was fascinated by Millicent's study and the nameless advances seemingly made by the portrait of its late owner, and sat at the big desk for hours, fingering his pen, grasping at thoughts that continually eluded him. By the end of the second week he was assured there was something the dead man wanted him to do.

Of all this he said nothing to Edith, and it was a relief to know that she was of too practical a nature to harbor imaginings similar to his own. Her days were spent in settling down, and he agreed thankfully with all she proposed, stipulating only that the study itself should remain absolutely undisturbed. That room, he announced with an air of great contentment, had been designed and equipped to suit his particular fancy. When he said this it seemed that the portrait of Millicent signaled its silent approval.

It was one evening when he was at the desk, trying as usual to classify his own thoughts, that Edith looked up from the book in her lap.

"Jack," she said suddenly.

He put down his pen with relief. There were whispering shadows in the corner, and one could not work to-night.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Will you tell me something, quite honestly?"

He smiled and nodded. "It's no particular effort to be honest with you. What am I suspected of now?"

She glanced into the leaping fire, and turned with a quick, familiar motion. "How's the book going? I do so want to know."

"It isn't making what one would call absolutely triumphant progress. It's generally that way at first. Then later on you realize that you've done far more than you thought, and the happy issue is in sight."

"Do you know yet whether Beech Lodge is as good a place to work in as you expected?"

"I think it is, quite," he said slowly. "It's a new atmosphere, and one

doesn't get it at once, but whatever I write here will be different and"—he hesitated an instant—"I think stronger than anything I've done yet. I can see that already."

"I'm glad you haven't any second thoughts about the place."

"But I have, quite a lot. They're not sorted out yet. What about you? Too busy to think at all?"

She glanced at him oddly. "I've been trying to be too busy but haven't quite succeeded." She said this with a touch of reluctance, as though confessing to some feminine weakness.

"I hope they're pleasant thoughts."

"Not altogether, Jack. Sometimes they're queer and sometimes a bit disconcerting. Foolish for a woman like me to talk like this, isn't it?"

He laughed easily. "I know no person less foolish."

She did not answer but continued to gaze into the fire, her eyes a little disturbed. Her brother wanted time to think, being convinced that it was most important that for the present at any rate Edith should remain unaware of certain things. Perkins, for instance. However competent Perkins might be, she could not in any sense be called a normal woman. Perhaps he was not at this time normal himself. Something assured him that no revelation would be made from the unknown to his sister. Her wireless set might be affected, but it was not tuned to the right wave-length. After all, there was no reason why matters should not proceed smoothly enough.

"Why are your reflections disconcerting?" he hazarded.

"I don't know. It's stupid of me, and I call myself an idiot for being affected at all. The funny thing, Jack, is that I'm gradually beginning to consider myself absolutely superficial to something or other—I don't know what. The house is running well, and Perkins is a treasure; a little chilling at times, but the best servant I've ever had. Things seem to do themselves at her desire. Why should I feel superficial?"

He shook his head. "You're anything but that. What else is the matter?"

"Nothing whatever, and yet—" She got up restlessly and balanced herself on the corner of the desk close to the dull stain. But it had no message for her. "If you say definitely that we made no mistake in taking Beech Lodge, I'll feel a lot better. Isn't it silly of me? There's everything here one wants, and all a housekeeper could desire, but—"

He felt a touch of apprehension and laughed it off. "You're only a bit lonely, and probably I've been selfish in planting you in such a lonely spot for the sake of that confounded novel. I admit to being a bit spoiled. But we have neighbors. What about the Millicents?"

"They're about three miles from here in a cottage. Perkins tells me the daughter is twenty-two and very pretty but has never got over her father's

death. They were devoted to each other.”

“You’ll see them soon,” he said involuntarily.

“I hardly think so. They would not call under all the circumstances; at least it would be strange if they did.”

“Perhaps not, but—” He broke off. “Tell me more of what’s in your mind. You know what you are to me, and I can’t help feeling rather responsible.”

“It’s hard to tell you without seeming an utter fool. It vexes and amuses me all at once,” she said simply. “It’s things I’ve never been conscious of before. I’m not actually conscious of them now, but it’s as if something had suggested their existence. At the same time I know I’ll never quite understand. I’m not built that way. Perhaps I get something through what I feel for you because you feel it, even though it’s past me. Does this all sound like gibberish? Then again it is as though both of us were being threatened. I wonder if you understand that all this is so different from anything I’ve felt before that I don’t quite know what to do.”

Derrick listened seriously. His first impulse was to laugh her mood away, but instantly there came to him from the surrounding shadows a warning that on no account must he be false to that which he himself believed. Pondering this, he knew that he could not deny these mysterious powers that now proclaimed themselves. He might desert their kingdom, but to disown it was impossible.

“If the place does not agree with you, we’ll chuck it,” he said slowly.

She sent him a whimsical smile. “You know that’s out of the question, dear old boy. We simply can’t; we’re in too deep for the next year. And forgive me if I talk to you as though you were my sister, for that’s one of my selfish habits, and it’s really your own fault for standing it. Here we stick till that novel is finished and sold. I’m sorry it doesn’t go as fast as you would like.”

“It will when I get shaken down,” he answered doggedly. “Trouble is that one is apt to think of too many things at once. Then follows the discarding and selecting process, and I suppose I’m going through that now. The point is to be sure of retaining what is really worth while; and, when I begin to feel that, it means confidence and progress. In that last novel I didn’t quite know what to discard, and it jumps at me from every page. But now,” he concluded with a little lift in his voice, “I’ve an idea that I’m just on the edge of something big.”

“While your sister,” she murmured absently, “has a perfectly ridiculous sensation that she’s just on the edge of something deep, and hasn’t the slightest intention of falling over.”

She sent him a companionable smile and was soon lost in her book. Derrick struggled on with his opening chapters, thankful that she had made no searching inquiry into his own inward sensations. There was no sound save the methodical turning of a page and the scratch of a pen. The fire pattered its

ruddy comfort, and Beech Lodge was dipped in an abyss of silence.

Presently the inner edge of one of the heavy curtains that hung over the French window stirred ever so slightly and at one point drew very slowly aside, leaving a narrow oval gap on the border of which a man's fingers, short, broad, and strong, were visible. This gap widened inch by inch, till, framed in the dull fabric, there appeared a face. A mass of tumbled hair surmounted a low forehead, beneath which moved eyes that were dark, shining, and restless. The man might have been forty, with tanned skin, large and rather uncouth features, a broad mouth, heavy lips—blue-black and unshaven—and a strange, furtive expression. No part of his body was visible below the chin, and the face hung as though suspended like a threatening mask in mid-air. The roving eyes searched the room, darting from place to place with extraordinary quickness, and reflecting little pin-points of light from the leaping flames. Finally they rested on Derrick and his sister with a look in which surprise mingled with a certain unconquerable composure. There was no fear in the look but rather the suggestion that this formidable stranger from the dark had been here before and was now making up his mind on some vital matter. Then the lips widened into a grin rendered repulsive by discolored teeth; the gap narrowed as silently as a leaf falls; face and fingers diminished and disappeared; the curtain trembled and hung straight; and there drifted into the room the faintest possible sound from without. It was over, like a baleful dream.

Derrick looked up sharply. "Who was that?"

Edith, perceiving nothing, stared at him. His face was tense, his eyes very wide open. She struggled against a foolish sense of alarm.

"Where, Jack?"

"In this room. Did any one come in just now?" He peered about, searching the dancing shadows, keyed suddenly to a strange pitch.

"No one," she said. "Who could there be? I heard nothing."

"That's odd," he murmured.

She got up, stood beside him, and put a hand on his arm. "What's odd, Jack? I wish you wouldn't go on like this—and don't be so mysterious, unless you want it to get on my nerves."

"I had an extraordinary feeling that for a moment we were not alone." He laughed, but it sounded a shade forced. "Dreaming as usual, I suppose. Sorry, Edith; I won't do it again."

But Miss Derrick, in spite of herself, had turned a little pale. For the past hour she had been trying to put out of her head a succession of strange thoughts about strange things, and she had nearly succeeded. Now she felt dizzy. Perhaps they had not been alone. But who could it have been? Mystery, breathless, confusing, and baffling, stole in on her like a secret assailant, attacking all senses save that of fear. Her pulse slowed—and beat

tumultuously. She stepped to the bell and rang hard. Derrick looked at her with wonder.

“What’s the matter? There’s nothing to be frightened about!”

“How do you know?” she stammered. “I feel queer because I don’t know. I want to see some one who isn’t just ourselves,” she went on chaotically, “and I’m the more vexed because it has to—to be Perkins.” She covered her eyes unconsciously, like a child. “Jack, Jack, what is the matter with me? I’m acting like a fool.”

He put his arm round her. “I’m awfully sorry, dear, but, really, it’s nothing. I hardly knew I spoke. Of course it is nothing. I’ll search the house if you like.”

“But would you find it?” she whispered. “Would you find it?”

Came a tap at the door, and Perkins entered, her face as blank as ever. Edith controlled herself with an effort and looked straight into the basilisk eyes.

“Perkins, has any one come to the house just now?”

The maid glanced at her, impassive and inscrutable. “No, madam. Was any one expected?”

Edith could but answer with another question. “You—you have heard nothing within the last few minutes?”

“Nothing whatever, madam.” The voice carried no suggestion of surprise, but Perkins’s eyes met those of Derrick for a passing instant.

“Thank you. Please go to my room, and—and bring me a handkerchief. Are all the windows and doors fastened?”

“Yes, madam, except this one. Mr. Derrick told me to leave that to him.”

She disappeared. Derrick laughed and lit his pipe.

“You’re answered now, Edith! The house closed tight as a drum, and the only access from outside through this room.”

“Perhaps you’re right! Yes, of course you are; but, when she comes back, say something that will keep her for a minute; say anything at all. Please do that. I can’t explain, but I must hear some other voice, even Perkins’s comfortless accents. Jack, I am a fool.”

“You’re not very complimentary to my powers of entertainment,” he chuckled. “I won’t write any more to-night. We’ll get out the cards if you like.”

She shook her head and sent him a strange glance, as though wondering if he would understand. “It isn’t entertainment I want to-night.”

“Then what? I’m not in a position to offer much more.”

“I don’t know. It’s something like protection, but not quite that, either. I know it sounds absurd, but it’s the kind of thing that could only come from one who does not believe what you do about all this.” She made a gesture at the

surrounding room. "I suppose it's a sort of companion in my incredulity. You're beginning to make things rather too much alive for my comfort, though I don't believe in them at all."

"There's nothing here," he protested quickly, "nothing but ourselves. Forget what I said. I was only dreaming aloud. It's what the Scotch call haversing."

Even as he spoke there came to him the refutation of his own words. Millicent signaled his disapproval from the canvas overhead, and stinging whispers from the silence around proclaimed him false to his real belief. The protest died on his lips, and Edith looked at him keenly.

"I don't want you to say what you don't believe in the hope of stiffening me, but I'd be glad if you'd help to prevent my believing it, too. I don't want to, and I don't intend to. I'm tremendously in earnest about all this. The reason is that I know I haven't got the right kind of mental machinery. It would break me all up, while on the contrary it is perfectly natural for you. All I want to do is to carry on here in the ordinary way and make it as easy as possible for you to work. That's a woman's job, Jack, and I'm satisfied with it and don't want to go beyond it. If there's anything that you're forced to tell me, well, tell me, but don't do any more. All this may sound rather hysterical, but it isn't; and it's because I know myself better than I begin to think I know you, even after all these years. So don't try me more than you can avoid."

While she was speaking, Perkins entered as silently as before. Edith steadied herself, wondering how much the woman had heard. She took the handkerchief and made an indefinite gesture to her brother.

"I say, Perkins," he put in, "this garden is running wild, and I've got to get some one at once or there'll be nothing worth while in the summer. Do you know of any good man in the neighborhood?"

"I'm sorry; I don't, sir."

"What about the village? Any chance there?"

"I can't say, sir. I haven't been to the village for more than a year."

"Mr. Thursby's man seems to have been very capable. Think you could find him?"

"I don't know where he is, sir. He came once a week for the past year, but left the village about a month ago. There's been no one since."

"Did Mr. Thursby take over Mr. Millicent's man?"

"No, sir." Perkins's expression changed ever so slightly. "He could not."

"Why was that?"

"Because Martin, Mr. Millicent's man, had already left."

"When?" said Derrick curiously.

"Three days after Mr. Millicent died."

Edith gave an involuntary shiver. "Why should he do that so soon?"

Perkins glanced at the portrait with a kind of mute unconsciousness. "I cannot say, madam. Martin did not tell me."

"It's more or less understandable," hazarded Derrick; "probably Mrs. Millicent let him go. She wasn't keeping on the place anyway. Do you happen to know where he went, Perkins?"

Edith looked up. "Does that matter, Jack?"

"Yes, I think so. The man's reputation for roses spread all over the county, and I'd like to get him back if we could afford it. And it's better to have some one who knows the ground, if possible. What about him, Perkins?"

"No one has heard of him from that day, as yet, sir."

Edith got up with unmistakable decision. She was evidently feeling herself again.

"Good night, Jack. Perkins, please bring my hot water now."

Derrick followed her with his eyes but said nothing. When he was alone, he seated himself again at his desk and looked musingly at his manuscript. How thin and unprofitable was all he had written, these doings of characters so obviously fictitious, so utterly divorced from the stinging realities of life. They saw little and felt less, being framed in paper and not flesh and blood. His long hand stole to the edge of the desk, avoiding that discolored patch, and clasped the solid frame as though to draw from it something like real inspiration. He now touched the shadow of Millicent's life-blood. His glance traveled then automatically to the portrait. Blood and paint! Between them they held the key of mystery. He scanned the composed features, feeling that the essence of what had once been Millicent was close by. Then it came to him that this essence of the murdered man had its own part to play and was no doubt playing it at this very moment, moving in mysterious channels and in league with mysterious powers. Recurrent and voiceless questions crowded upon him. What could Millicent mean to Perkins, that lank woman with the forbidding eyes? It seemed after a few moments that the painted lips quivered and tried to speak, and the quiet gaze took on something more than the mere flicker of firelight. What was it that Millicent was trying to convey?

"What have you absorbed?" murmured Derrick, half aloud. "What is it you would tell me? You suffered here death and the fear that was perhaps worse than death, but why did you pay the price?" He began to write unconsciously, capturing the words as they came; strange words, unlinked with anything that had gone before, but pregnant with clouded suggestion. "You believed as I do that we are not the masters of things, but that each of us builds up around him invisible towers of influence, by which in time we are dominated. We store the air with records that the air cannot discard or obliterate, eloquent—yet having no voice; strong—yet casting no shadow. And behind it all are Things. We cry for them as children, and when the end comes it is hard to let them go."

He was staring, puzzled, at what he had written, when Perkins came in, her face grave.

“If you please, sir, the gardener is here.” Her voice was a little breathless.

“What gardener? I thought you told me just a moment ago that you knew of no one.”

“It’s Mr. Millicent’s gardener,” she replied steadily.

“The man who has not been heard of for two years?”

“Yes, sir. He has just returned.”

Derrick took a long breath. “What brings him back now?”

He regretted the question as soon as it was asked, for Perkins was regarding him as though wondering why he should be surprised. It was all part of something else, something bigger. Surely he must realize that.

“I do not know, sir. He only reached the village this evening and came straight here.”

“Does he expect me to engage him?”

“He would like to come back to his old place, sir.”

“How extraordinary!”

Again Derrick spoke too hastily, and again he regretted it. Perkins did not answer. She stood passively, an austere expression on her sallow features; and, scrutinize as he might, there was no penetrating the veil that enshrouded her. She was an embodiment of something that defied his keenest analysis.

“Where has this man been for the past two years?”

“He did not say, sir.”

“You can tell me whether he was satisfactory in every way to Mr. Millicent?”

She nodded. “Mr. Millicent used to say that he was the best gardener in the county.”

Derrick paused. “Perkins, I’m going to ask you another question, but you need not answer unless you like to.”

“I will tell you anything I know, sir.” She spoke steadily and without a trace of surprise.

“Then from all you know, and I refer to more than his ability as a gardener, do you think it would be a good thing to take him on?”

“Why do you put it that way, sir?”

“I leave that to you. The matter may be more important than one can realize—as yet.” He lingered a little over the last words.

“Then, yes, sir, if you want a garden like Mr. Millicent’s.”

The shrewdness of the answer took him aback. “Send him in,” he said shortly.

The man entered, the man whose dark features had peered through the parted curtains a short hour before. He was powerfully built, very broad, and dressed in loose and much worn tweeds of a foreign cut. He came forward with the lurching walk of a seafaring trade, a colored handkerchief twisted round the column of his brown neck. His swinging hands were wide and knotted, and every motion spoke of great physical strength. No mere Sussex gardener this, who had spent his placid years among his roses and dahlias, but one who carried with him nameless suggestions of the jungle and the faint pounding of distant surf. Dangling his cap, he gave a sort of salute, making at the same time a swift survey of the room. From this furtive and searching glance it seemed to Derrick that the man missed something he knew of old in Millicent's time, but no flicker of change of expression could be discerned on the weather-beaten face. The face itself was neither cruel nor merciless but conveyed a grim, implacable resolution. Here, reflected Derrick, was the man who disappeared three days after Millicent's death. What brought him back now?

"What is your name?"

"Martin, sir, John Martin." The voice was deep and husky.

"Perkins tells me you were in Mr. Millicent's service."

"Yes, sir, for some years after his last trip to the East."

"Did you come from the East with him?"

"No, sir, I—I was engaged here at Beech Lodge."

"Several years service, yet you left three days after your employer died?"

Martin jerked up his head. "Yes, sir; that's it."

"How did you happen to go so quickly? Were you discharged by Mrs. Millicent?"

A dull flush rose in the tanned face. "You might as well ask how my master happened to die three days before I left, sir. Mrs. Millicent was giving up Beech Lodge and didn't want a gardener. There was no other job in sight about here, and I couldn't afford to hang on in the village."

Derrick nodded with seeming carelessness. "Perhaps that's fair enough, and as it happens I do want a gardener, but you'll have to satisfy me completely on all points before I consider you. The circumstances are a bit out of the ordinary."

"I'm ready to tell you anything I can, sir."

"Then where do you come from now?"

"Upper Burma, by way of Canada. I have a sister in Alberta." He fumbled in his pocket. "Would you be wanting to see my passport?"

"Not now, at any rate. I don't understand why you should clear out of Sussex for Burma just because there was no job close at hand."

"Well, sir, to tell the truth, I was that upset I wanted to get away as far as possible. I couldn't put the master out of my head. He'd always been good to

me from the first day I came, and we liked the same things, sir.”

“What was that?”

“Roses.”

He shot this out with rumbling assurance, and, strange as it sounded, Derrick believed him. It was difficult to picture this great hulk among the roses, these thick fingers training the delicate buds, but Martin’s reputation had already been established far beyond Beech Lodge. There had been, too, an assuring little break in the voice, suggesting a depth of feeling in strange contrast to this forbidding exterior. If this was acting, it was good acting. He scanned the man’s face, but as for promising any future revelations it was no more expressive than that of Perkins herself. Anything might lie hidden here. There were hints of passion in the eyes, but over him rested the touch of a complete control. If one could only get underneath that! It was obvious to Derrick that he must act deliberately—and delicately. It would be a matter of weeks, or perhaps months. The strangeness of the situation came over him with redoubled force. It was all part of a plan. Whose plan?

“How is it, Martin, if you can tell me, that after two years on the other side of the world you turn up here within a week or so of my coming? There has been no job going for all that time, but you arrive as soon as the job, your old one, is open.”

Martin scratched his head and seemed genuinely puzzled.

“Dunno, sir. It’s queer to me, too, but here I am. I didn’t know there was a job open till a few minutes ago.”

“I take it, then, you had no particular reason for getting back here to-day?”

The man glanced at him with a sort of awkward interest. He hesitated a little, as though about to put forward something hardly credible even to himself, and finally jerked out an answer.

“I can’t say much more than that things kind of hinted at it, sir, and kept on hinting till they made me uncomfortable. There wasn’t any special reason I know of. I was doing well enough, trading up the Irawadi, when something began to get at me to come back, and it kept on till I started for Rangoon. It stayed with me, hustling me along, and I felt I didn’t even want to go and look up my sister; but I did, and the same feeling lifted me out of their farm in Alberta. Up till about two months ago I believed I wasn’t wanted here; then I knew I was wanted for something.” He frowned to himself at this, as though he hardly expected to be either understood or taken seriously. “Maybe I was a fool to come,” he added, “but in a way it wasn’t left to me to decide. It’s the first time I ever struck anything like that. It was like jungle-fever without the fever.”

“You simply had to come,” said Derrick quickly.

“I’m not given to such feelings, but, since you say it, yes, I reckon I had to

come.”

Derrick had a faint thrill of triumph. Here again the mysterious factor was at work, the thing to which he himself was yielding so completely. It had spread its potent and invisible filaments half round the world, penetrated the Burmese jungle, and haled this shifty-eyed man back to the tiny Sussex village from which he had fled under the shadow of a great crime as yet undetected. How could these filaments have been set in motion if not at the demand of the dead Millicent whose quiet features now surveyed this recaptured wanderer? What would the thing that had been Millicent arrange next? At the thought of this Derrick’s pulse gave a throb of excitement. Then he looked Martin full in the face.

“Who found your master?”

The man dropped his cap, and all the blood in his body seemed to climb to his temples.

“Miss Perkins found him,” he said jerkily.

“Where did she find him?” If Martin had lied the fact would come out now.

Martin pointed to the desk. “Where you are sitting, Mr. Derrick. He was leaning forward, his head on one side.”

“Dead?”

“Yes, sir, but not long.”

“What had happened?”

“Stabbed in the neck.”

“By what?”

“I do not know, sir.”

“And no trace of what killed him has ever been found?”

“Nothing that I ever heard of.” Martin moved a little impatiently, but Derrick’s voice was very even.

“Of course you were at the inquest? These are some of the things you need not answer, unless you’re determined to get that job.”

“Yes, I was there”—this with a defiant glance—“and they examined me, and when it was over not a man had a word to say against me.”

Derrick sharpened his tone. “Your master is just behind you.”

The man started violently and made a harsh noise in his throat. He turned slowly and unwillingly, forcing himself inch by inch, till, following Derrick’s gaze he saw the portrait. At that his color changed, his face becoming overcast with anger.

“By God, but you frightened me,” he said thickly. “I didn’t know what you meant—thought it was a ghost.”

“Is that a good likeness?”

Martin breathed deeply and pulled himself together stretching his fingers with a slow gesture of relief.

“Yes, that’s him all right, but he looked older, a good deal older toward the end. Something like you, sir, isn’t he?”

“Where were you at the time it happened? Can you tell me exactly, and what you were doing?”

The dark face grew threatening. “Is this another inquest, Mr. Derrick? I came here to try and get my old job.”

“You can drop it if you like, Martin, or else answer my questions.”

“Well,” said the man truculently, “I was smoking in that little garden beside the cottage—I lived there then—when I heard Perkins. She was running like a deer down from the house and calling at the top of her voice. She was only half dressed, and I thought she was mad, screaming about the master being killed. I ran back with her, and found him as I told you—where you’re sitting now. Then I ran to the village for the doctor. When we got him here he said that Mr. Millicent must have been dead for over an hour. He had been struck with great force in the neck with a dagger of some kind. And that’s all I know.”

Derrick nodded, apparently satisfied. “It’s practically what I’ve heard elsewhere.” He sat for a moment, plunged in thought. “Wait where you are for a moment, Martin. I want to have a word with Miss Derrick before deciding.”

He went out. Martin balanced himself on the edge of his chair, listened keenly to the retreating footsteps, heard a creak on the stair, and glanced cautiously about. Then he got up, stole on tiptoe to the door, and put his ear to the keyhole. Satisfied that he was secure, he crept noiselessly across the floor, darting a look at the portrait as he went, and halted stiffly beside the big desk. Here his hands became intensely busy, his thick fingers passing swiftly over the carved frame, like those of a blind man. One particular spot he explored with strained attention, turning his massive head every few seconds toward the door, his whole body keyed to the utmost nervous pitch. He had his back to the French window, and the lamp cast his gigantic shadow on the ceiling, where its distorted shadow quivered like that of a brooding giant.

But from the window another pair of eyes surveyed this silent drama. Once again the curtains had parted slightly some five feet above the floor, and, from the gap so lately tenanted by Martin’s threatening mask, Derrick now watched every move. This was what he sought, this opportunity, but what had guided him to his vantage-point he could not tell. He had remembered that the window was unfastened. He believed that the curtain would keep him safe from discovery, because he was assured that his strange visitor had come to stay and not to steal. To observe Martin when Martin thought himself unobserved, in that direction might lie knowledge. But what was it Martin sought now?

The scrutiny lasted but a few seconds. The gardener was back in his seat

when Derrick entered unconcernedly, resumed his seat at the desk, and lit his pipe with extreme deliberation. Martin's face was utterly blank, and he got up automatically when the new master of Beech Lodge came in.

"If you want that job, I'm inclined to give it to you."

The big chest expanded slowly, and the broad figure lost something of its rigidity.

"Thank you, sir, and I'll do my very best," said Martin eagerly. "I know the place like a book, and I know roses, and you won't have reason to regret it."

Derrick smiled. "We haven't discussed the matter of wages yet." He was wondering whether the rate of pay meant as little to this man as it had to Perkins. "What I'm going to offer won't seem much to one who has knocked about the world as much as yourself. It's not a case of American wages."

"I'm not worrying about wages, sir. It doesn't take much to keep me going, and I've never had a drink in my life. It's the old job I'm after."

"Then what do you say to thirty shillings a week and the cottage?"

"That's fair enough," said Martin eagerly.

"By the way, I take it you're not married?"

"I haven't any wife now," he stammered after a poignant pause.

"Sorry, Martin, I didn't mean to hurt you. Any children?"

"No, sir." The tanned face was calm again.

"Then I suppose you can begin to-morrow?"

"I'm ready for that." Martin fingered his cap. "Might I sleep in the cottage to-night, sir? I've got my bundle outside."

He said this without any seeming thought of the inference Derrick must draw, an inference that the latter jumped at. Why bring a bundle before one was sure of a job? But perhaps, and here a message drifted in from the paneled walls, perhaps it was already arranged that Martin should get the job, and the man in some queer way was aware of that. And, after all, why should he part from his bundle? He would have slept with it under a hedge.

Derrick felt in his pocket. "Perhaps you'd better stop in the village to-night, and clean up the cottage to-morrow. It must be cold and damp. Got enough money?"

Martin gave a twisted smile. "Yes, sir, I have money, but if you don't mind I'll risk the damp. It's nothing to me."

"No, let it stand till to-morrow; then you can move in. I'll see you about ten o'clock."

He rang the bell, Martin standing motionless, a baffling expression on his face. He had secured what he came for but still seemed ill at ease and discontent. Then Perkins entered like a sallow ghost, and Derrick, regarding these two, experienced a novel sensation at seeing them stand side by side, the

staff of Beech Lodge, the depositories of the secret of the house. Between them lay the thing he pursued, or that pursued him. They did not look at each other, but waited, silent, impassive, and remote. He wondered what it would be that first broke through the surface of this extraordinary calm, so profound as to be already ominous. But that would come in its appointed cycle.

“Perkins, I have engaged Martin as gardener. He will commence work in the morning, occupy the cottage, and do for himself entirely. Did you do anything in the house before, Martin?”

“Boots and coals, sir.”

“I don’t need any help now, sir,” put in Perkins swiftly.

Martin’s lids flickered, but he did not stir.

“Then for the meantime, Martin, stick to outside work. All right, you may go now.”

The man mumbled good night, made his former awkward salute, and marched into the hall. He did not glance at the woman, nor she at him. Derrick’s eyes narrowed a little.

“Please come here, Perkins, when you’ve locked up.”

The door closed, and he looked instinctively at the portrait as though to ask whether in all this he had done the right thing. But Millicent was uncommunicative to-night. Quite deliberately Derrick was rebuilding the personnel of Beech Lodge as it existed two years before, peopling it with the same faces, making it echo with the same voices. Its one-time master was no doubt still here, and now there remained only the other Millicents. If the circle could but be closed, and old contacts reestablished, then perhaps the way would become clear. He was deliberating this when Perkins’s return ended the reverie.

“I’d like, if possible, to feel sure, Perkins, that from all you know of Martin I’ve done the right thing in engaging him. This unexpected return is bound to affect you in some way under the circumstances, and—”

He stopped abruptly. She was staring at him with so searching an expression that he knew that to-night he had drawn nearer the essential mystery of Beech Lodge. Yet it was not his action but his words that produced this remarkable effect. He was aware that it was not in the garden, where Millicent had lovingly tended his roses, or anywhere but in this room that the spirit of the murdered man seemed to cry aloud for vengeance—and for peace.

“It was meant that Martin should come back and you should engage him,” said Perkins dully. “I do not know more than that. You could not help it. You were called, and Martin, too.”

He perceived that there was nothing absurd in this. She spoke simply, as though reciting facts established beyond all question. Her look told him that at this moment she could go no further. Suddenly something reached him out of

space. The room was alive again.

“How long had Mr. Millicent been dead when you found him?”

“I told you that they sent for me,” she answered gravely, “but I do not know how soon they sent. When the doctor came he thought that it had happened more than an hour before.”

“And you found him at this desk?”

“Did Martin say that?” she asked breathlessly.

“Does it matter who said it?”

Her thin hands clasped over her breast. There was a look in her face he had never seen there before.

“But it matters a great deal if it was Martin. Were you and he long in this room together?”

“No,” she said tremulously, “only a moment, but he stayed there after the doctor came.”

Derrick’s voice, which in spite of himself had risen a little, now dropped to a more level pitch.

“And in spite of all this nothing of any importance seems to have disappeared. Even his papers were undisturbed, so it was not burglary. He had no enemies?”

“He was not that kind. All liked him who knew him.”

“And you have nothing to say or suggest as to any possible motive.”

She did not answer but seemed to withdraw lest he unearth more than she was prepared to reveal. This suggested that it was now for him to follow the trail alone—if he could.

“Was it hard to get that stain reduced?” He flung the question at her like a missile.

Perkins winced visibly, glancing first at him, then at the desk as though its massive surface had found accusing speech. Her breath came faster, and Derrick knew that he had moved a step nearer the truth.

“Are there no secrets from you?” she whispered.

“Perhaps it was not always there,” he continued meaningly, “but returned after I came here. My fingers found it first, and it spoke. Soon after that I began to understand. The inventory man saw it before I did but got nothing from it. Perhaps Martin found it, too, when I was out of the room. I hoped he would.”

She nodded uncertainly, as one blinded by a sudden vision, then moved unsteadily to the desk and stood looking down at the faint, irregular patch. She put out a hand, lean and claw-like, forcing herself to touch the discolored leather. Leaning over it, her eyes dark with unfathomable things, she relived something in that moment; but it was hidden too deep for discovery. Finally she spoke, as though to some one far distant.

“Is it always this way? Is the whole world full of stains like this, stains that go deeper and deeper, however we try to rub them out, till by and by we cannot reach them?”

“Some stains are never effaced,” said Derrick grimly. “We only rub them deeper in.”

“And Martin is here to-night!” The words came from her very soul.

“Martin is probably in the cottage at this moment.”

“But he said he was going to the village.”

Derrick reached for his pipe. “Yes, that’s what I told him, but now I think he’s in the cottage. He does not want to go further from the house than that. I don’t know why, but I know.”

She sent him a look like that of an animal in a trap and left the room. Derrick sucked at his pipe, pitching his mind back over the last half-hour, piecing together fragment after fragment of evidence, but groping in vain for some underlying fact. Incident and strange coincident, shuffle them as he might, they made no decipherable pattern. Then, as happened so often, his eyes wandered to the portrait of Millicent.

“Is it all right,” he said, half aloud, “you whom I have never seen? You know why I am trying, but I do not. It’s all clear on your side, but misty on mine. Is it only for a little longer, till you find rest and sleep—for till then will there be no peace for me?”

“Jack,” sounded a voice at the door, “who on earth are you talking to?”

He started and laughed awkwardly. “Come in, Edith; I thought you were asleep long ago.”

“I couldn’t get to sleep, so thought I would come and see you. Why this oration to an empty room?”

He hooked his arm into hers, led her across, and halted under the portrait.

“I want you to help me do something for that chap.”

She looked at him regretfully. “There’s no reason in you at all, and just when I had persuaded myself that everything was all right.”

“I admit it sounds ridiculous, but really it’s not. I was never more serious in my life.”

“But how can you do anything for a dead man you never knew?” She glanced keenly about the room. “Do you remember our last talk, the one we had just after we got here?”

“Yes, every word of it. And I’m not going to try you now.”

She put a hand on his arm. “It isn’t myself, Jack; it’s you. I’m all right, except that I blame myself for having been rather silly. But I know perfectly well that nothing has been natural since we came here, especially yourself. Things seem to be settled in the ordinary way; then you make me feel they’re not settled, and you, my dear brother, are drifting about as you never have

before. What is it? If I knew, perhaps I might help. Really I don't understand, and in a queer way we don't seem to be living for ourselves any longer."

"Well," he countered, "I'm not altogether unpractical. For instance, I think I've got hold of a first-rate gardener."

"To-night?"

"Yes, he has just gone. I took him on, and he starts to-morrow."

She brightened at that and went off after begging him not to sit up too late. Derrick went back to his desk, feeling suddenly a little weary. The singing silence reasserted itself, and the fire was low. He endeavored to work.

Presently he looked up sharply and caught his breath. There was a distinct tapping at the French window. He had a novel sensation of fear. The sound continued with a sort of regular and tiny beat. He got up slowly, and drew aside the curtain. The window was not locked. Through the glass he saw the peaked cap, red face, and brass buttons of a gigantic policeman. The man made a reassuring salute, and Derrick opened the window.

"Come in," he said.

"Beg pardon, sir, for not going to the front door, but I saw you were alone and didn't want to wake the whole house. There's no other light anywhere."

"All right, officer, but you gave me a bit of a start. What is it?"

"I'm on patrol, sir, passing here twice every night. I usually take a stroll round the house and cottage to see that all is as it should be, and just now, when I was at the back of the cottage, I noticed a light inside. That surprised me, as I knew it had not been occupied since Mr. Thursby left."

"That's quite right."

"Well, sir, there's a man there now. Is that with your permission?"

Derrick's pulse beat a little faster. "What sort of a man?"

"Middle-aged, sir, queer face, queer clothes, sitting on a chair and staring."

"At what?"

"At nothing, sir, so far as I could make out. A thick-set party, his skin burned and brown as though he'd come off the sea. Black hair, he has, and big hands and odd eyes that never stirred. It was the eyes that took me. He's an ugly-looking customer all round, sir, but I thought I'd better see you before I pulled him in, just in case. What puzzled me was the lamp being lit and the blind up, if he'd no right to be there. There, was a bundle on the floor beside him."

"I'm glad you came in first. How long have you been on duty in the village?"

"Matter of a year and a half now, sir. I was transferred here just about the time Mr. Thursby left Beech Lodge."

"Well, I've been here a little more than a week. You knew, of course, that this was Mr. Millicent's house?"

“Yes, sir, we all know that. There wasn’t much chance of forgetting it.”

“But I don’t suppose you personally know anything about his death—or murder, if you like?”

The constable shook his head. “I know what the rest of the force knows, and I’ve read the evidence at the inquest. But there wasn’t anything dug up then that was of any real use.”

Derrick nodded. “I had heard nothing of it up to a week ago, not even a whisper when I leased this house last month. Now I’m beginning to feel as though I’d known it all my life. What does the sergeant think about it?”

“I’m not supposed to say anything about what’s not my duty, sir,” replied the man a trifle stiffly.

“You’re probably right there; is this the first time you’ve been in this room?”

The constable looked ponderously about, his eyes glinting at sight of the desk. He knew what had happened there. Then at the portrait, with a hard stare.

“Yes, sir, first time.”

“Ever been in the house at all?”

“No, sir, never crossed the door-step.”

“I suppose you know that Mr. Millicent was found dead at this desk with a stab in his neck? That’s him above the mantel. They say it’s very like him and, oddly, something like me.”

“I was told about that, sir. A harmless-looking gentleman, I should say.”

“And you’ll probably remember that the only person on whom suspicion really fell was Mr. Millicent’s gardener. I think that’s common knowledge, too.”

“Yes, sir, it is, but he cleared himself somehow, got out of the country, and hasn’t been seen since.”

“Well,” said Derrick slowly, “that’s the man you found in the cottage, the late gardener of Beech Lodge, and I’ve engaged him to work for me. Can you guess why, constable?”

The policeman’s mouth opened wide. “But he’s the one who the sergeant thinks—” He broke off confusedly, while over his face spread a look of dawning astonishment and admiration. “By George, sir, but you’ve done a bold thing, and there’s not many would have done it. Perhaps you’re on the right track. But what brought the fellow here again into the middle of it?”

Derrick smiled grimly. “Now you’re asking too much. We haven’t come to that yet, and there’s no immediate hurry. Main thing is, he’s here and settled for the present. That gives one time to think. As for my end of it, I may be on the right track, and I may not. At any rate, I’m going to make a push for it. So far, I’m trying to piece some of the bits together, and Martin’s arrival is one of them. There’s bound to be a good deal more. So don’t disturb our friend in the

cottage, for I fancy he'll be rather badly needed. And, look here, do you think the sergeant will be willing to have a talk about this matter?"

"If you're on the track of the man who killed Mr. Millicent, the sergeant would walk twenty miles to see you. I think he dreams about that case every night. It's a sort of reflection on the police force of Bamberley. It hurts him. That's the way he feels still."

"Good! But perhaps it would be better if I went to see him. I'll do that within the next few weeks. Meantime do you have to report this visit?"

"Only that the cottage is occupied with your authority. That takes it off our special list of empty buildings."

"I'd be glad if it went no further than that, and the sergeant will agree with me there. Good night, officer. I shall sleep peacefully now, thanks to you. You can't take a drink, I suppose?"

The big man smiled ruefully. "No, sir; thanks just the same. I think you'll be a welcome visitor at the station. Good night, and I'll slip past the cottage without disturbing our friend."

He saluted, the French window closed behind him without a sound, and his great bulk melted into the darkness.

CHAPTER IV

JEAN

SOME TWO weeks after the staff of Beech Lodge had been completed by the engagement of the gardener, Mrs. Millicent and her daughter were walking along a quiet lane at a little distance from their old home. The house itself they had not seen since the time of the tragedy, and over them still hung the weight of a great grief. It had touched Mrs. Millicent's hair with gray and given her a strangely wistful expression. Her sorrow was increased by the belief that her husband had had an enemy, the husband who had worshiped her with love and devotion for twenty years of married companionship. What enemy could such a man make in all the world?

For Jean, her daughter, the blow had been no less severe. And it had a deeper significance. Dazed and stupefied, she was nevertheless aware of the power behind the blow, the power that dealt it. Where her mother was inclined to give way with a hopeless wonder at the cruelty of fate, Jean perceived that the hand that thus struck the helpless might not have been stayed by her father's blood. If her father were in the way of something—she knew not what—might there not be others similarly threatened? The resiliency of her youth refused merely to accept the situation.

They came to a fork in the lane, one turn of which led past Beech Lodge and then on to their own small house. Mrs. Millicent took the other turn instinctively, but Jean, for some reason she could never explain, felt a sudden impulse to pass this time by the road they had both hitherto avoided. She stopped, and her mother glanced back with surprise.

“What is it, dear?”

“I don't know, mother, but”—she hesitated—“I rather want to go this way.”

“But why?”

“I can't tell you, really. It's rather an odd feeling. Would you much sooner not?”

It flashed into Mrs. Millicent's mind that perhaps she had been unwise in allowing her own shrinking timidity to influence the girl. The only reason she had to put forward sounded a little too personal to carry much weight, and if time was healing the wound in Jean's heart, should she not be thankful—and show it?

“Very well, dear,” she said slowly. “Perhaps it is better to begin this way. I

think I'd like your arm."

They went on thus, with unvoiced recognition of remembered things. Came the bend in the lane beyond which lay Beech Lodge, and the older woman seemed to feel the knife in her own throat. So many times had she walked here, and so happily. The dip in the hedge, the glimpse of rolling fields patched with woodland, the belt of timber that marked the grounds of Beech Lodge, the cluster of old trees with their pale gray trunks close by the roadside; then the white gates and tiny red-roofed cottage. Her fingers tightened on the girl's strong arm.

"My dear, my dear," she whispered. "Just two years ago!"

Jean nodded sympathetically but did not speak. She was staring up the drive at the house with its shining windows, its clustering ivy, and the wide door, in every timber of which seemed to be a welcome.

"Isn't it strange?" she whispered. "So different, and yet so unchanged." She paused, then went on uncertainly. "I sometimes wonder, mother, whether houses have some kind of consciousness and are aware of us who live in them. Isn't it queer, but I feel now as though Beech Lodge was somehow glad to see us, and was wondering why we had never come before."

Mrs. Millicent shook her head. "It's a pretty fancy, child, but—"

Jean stopped, nearly opposite the white gates. "Who's that at the window—your old room? Mother, it looks like Perkins!"

"It is Perkins. You knew she stayed on when the Thursbys left."

"Yes, but I did not know she was still here. And yet I'm not surprised. She's part of the house. I wonder if the Derricks like her."

"She always had a very peculiar manner, but she was an excellent servant."

Mrs. Millicent's voice faltered. This inspection was becoming too poignant, and she moved on. It seemed that any moment there might emerge that well-remembered figure, with the straight, familiar form and those clear, thoughtful eyes. She had turned away, her lips trembling, when Jean spoke quickly and sharply.

"Mother, who is that?"

From the climbing rose-bushes that bordered the wide drive, a figure had emerged, shears in hand, a figure that halted and stared. The broad shoulders, the uncouth head, the powerful and deliberate movements of the man were unmistakable.

"Martin!" she said under her breath. "It's Martin!"

Mrs. Millicent stopped, turned, and came unsteadily back. Then she too looked, and became weak and agitated.

"It *is* Martin—"

"But where can he have come from, and why come back here?"

For a moment her mother could not answer, being too shaken by this

quivering recognition of one who she felt held the key to her husband's tragic death. It was Martin who had moved with threatening domination through the nightmare of her dreams for the last two years. Now the threat was alive again. It had returned with him. Then she heard Jean. The color had fled from the girl's cheeks, but her eyes were alight with some thrilling instinct.

"What does it mean, mother?"

"I do not know, child. Come away now, please; I must get home."

Jean held back. Something more was stirring in her soul than Martin's return. He had come back to strangers who probably knew nothing of him. If they did, he could not be at Beech Lodge. And Perkins was there, too, and Perkins knew all. It followed, then, that the woman had not spoken. Was it all in preparation for another tragedy? At this thought she felt frightened and choked. Some one must speak—before speech was too late. She glanced again at the motionless figure. Martin was staring, too, and he also had recognized. He touched his cap, and at the curve of that arm she nearly cried out.

"Mother," she whispered again, "we must tell them."

"Tell them what, Jean? Come along. I can't stand this."

The girl held her ground. "We must tell the Derricks about Martin. Don't you see it would be utterly unfair, and perhaps cowardly, if we didn't? They've taken the place and, being strangers, can have known very little about it. They have probably heard about father's death through Perkins, but perhaps not. The agent would naturally say nothing about it, and I don't suppose the Thursbys would advertise the truth. Perkins has evidently said nothing about Martin, or the Derricks would not have engaged him. We know all, and the suspicions as to Martin, and we simply cannot be silent. Oh, we must tell them, and now!"

"If you feel so strongly I'll write to-night," protested her mother faintly, "but, Jean, I cannot go in now. I could not walk past that man."

The girl was unmoved. "That won't do, mother. There are too many things one can't put on paper. One of us must speak."

"I cannot make myself speak now, and you can't go in there alone."

"Why not?"

"There's Martin looking at you. He knows what we are talking about."

"Perhaps he does, and if so he's more afraid of me than I am of him. At any rate I must go. You keep on toward the village, and I'll catch you up. If I have to wait I'll have some one walk home with me. And please, please understand that I'm not afraid, because there's nothing to fear. I know now why we came this way to-day for the first time."

Mrs. Millicent sighed despairingly and turned away. There was a look on the girl's face she could not meet, and Martin had not moved.

Jean rallied her courage, passed between the white gates, and walked firmly up the drive. Martin saw her coming and stepped back till he was half

screened among his roses. His face was working. When she drew level he touched his cap the second time, and for an instant their eyes met. In hers there was a cold recognition; in his a sort of mute and restless petition. Yes, he knew why she had come and what she was about to impart to his new employer. A surge of impotent anger shot through him, and he turned silently lest he should betray it. He had not reckoned on this when in the Burmese jungle there reached him the first of those discomfiting promptings that finally brought him half-way round the world, he knew not why. Jean did not look back. Her eyes were fixed on the too familiar door. It opened almost at once, and she met the changeless look of Perkins. Now she could speak, but the sight of the hall, its rugs and pictures, all as though she had never left them, was nearly too much. They were as unchanged as Perkins herself. Suddenly she felt like an intruder or a thief and wanted to leave. At that she remembered Martin.

“Good afternoon, Perkins. Is Mrs. Derrick in?”

“There is no Mrs. Derrick, miss. It’s Mr. Derrick’s sister who is here.”

“Oh, is she in, then?”

“No, miss, but Mr. Derrick is here.”

“Then I’d like to see him for a moment.”

“Will you wait in the living-room, miss? Mr. Derrick is working in the study.”

“Thanks, I’ll wait here.”

Perkins tapped at the study door.

“Miss Millicent, sir.”

Derrick put down his pen. “Miss Millicent,” he repeated puzzled.

“She is waiting in the hall and would like to see you. She asked for Miss Derrick first, but Miss Derrick is out.”

He got up, his pulse beating hard, and came quickly into the hall. They glanced at each other, these two, drawn thus together by the shadow of a crime. Instinctively she held out her hand, feeling for a strange moment almost as though no introduction was necessary.

“How do you do, Miss Millicent? My sister will be very sorry to miss you. Will you come into the living-room or”—he hesitated an instant—“the study?”

“I won’t keep you a moment,” she said a little nervously. “Are you working in the study?”

He nodded, smiling. “I think it’s a wonderful room. Please come in.”

He followed her in, while Perkins, after a lingering glance, closed the door. Jean took a big chair by the fireplace, and for a moment neither spoke. Then she saw the manuscript littering the desk.

“I’m so afraid I’ve interrupted you.”

He shook his head ruefully. “What I was writing, or trying to write, is all the better for being interrupted. And,” he added, “we have been hoping to meet

you and your mother.”

Again their eyes met. Derrick noted the smooth oval of her face and the sensitive curve of her lips. Her expression suggested imagination, a mind at once alert and subjective. She was looking now at her father’s portrait, and he saw the resemblance between these two. And, try as he might, he could not guess her thoughts or what brought her there. But something whispered that a Millicent was again in Beech Lodge.

“I did not know I was coming here to-day,” she said gravely, “not till mother and I came past the gates. Then I knew.”

It was all so strange, and yet so utterly real, that Derrick did not answer at once. Here was Millicent’s daughter in Millicent’s study. That to begin with. And there was about the girl a nameless aura she had brought with her that made the ordinary preliminaries of acquaintance seem pointless and out of place. He did not feel that he had always known her, but that somewhere and somehow they possessed something in common.

“Please tell me,” he said quietly.

“Yes, if I may begin by asking questions.”

“It will be very kind of you.”

“Then, did you know about Beech Lodge when you took it?”

“No; that is, if I understand what you mean. I was looking for a quiet place to work in, found this, and fell in love with it. I went straight to the agent in London and made an offer. He telephoned to Mr. Thursby, and the offer was accepted so quickly that it surprised me—and here we are.”

“It was Perkins who showed you over the house?”

“Yes, she was alone here, and in charge.”

“And the rest?” She glanced at him as though counting on his intuition.

“I discovered that after we moved in.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said involuntarily.

“But why, Miss Millicent?”

“Because I’m sure you would not—”

She stopped abruptly. A whisper came to her that she was saying things of which she was not quite sure. What if Beech Lodge had imparted the edge of its secret, the secret of which she had long been conscious, to its new tenant? His face was that of one who might be able to receive such things.

“You were going to tell me that if I had known what happened here two years ago I would not have taken the house.”

She nodded thankfully. Yes, he did understand.

“Then may I say that I think I realize what it must have meant to you to come in here for that purpose? And, Miss Millicent, while I did not know at the time, I do know now, and regret nothing.”

“Nothing?” she murmured.

He shook his head. "Nothing. Shall I go on?"

She nodded again and, lifting her eyes, took a long straight look at her father's portrait. Perhaps he was here now, and knew, and was in a way glad she had come. She noted, too, with a sort of thankfulness that Derrick did not sit at the desk.

"When I came first," he continued, "I saw Perkins. She gave me a strange impression, but it was not altogether discomfoting. I took the house without consulting my sister, being attracted to it in a way that I only began to understand by degrees. I actually felt what had happened here before being told about it. That isn't the sort of thing one can explain, but—"

"It doesn't need explanation," she put in.

He sent her a quick, searching glance. "It helps to have you say that. Well, after we moved in, the thing, or perhaps it was the influence, grew stronger—I can't express it in any other way—till presently I was sure we were meant to come. I got some details from Perkins, but they were incomplete; I was convinced that I must wait for more—which would certainly be furnished from some source." He paused, reflected for a moment, and went on rapidly. "Does it seem impertinent for me, an utter stranger, to be so interested and allow myself to be drawn into something which is not my affair? If it does, I can only assure you that it is not curiosity, or," he added thoughtfully, "the result of anything I have done or said."

"It is impossible to think that."

"I'm glad you see it that way, because it brings me to Martin. Is it on account of Martin you were kind enough to come in?"

"Yes."

"Then, some day, if you or Mrs. Millicent will tell me, I'd like to hear more about him; but meantime please be assured that Martin's being here is all part of the rest of it. I knew what was said and thought about him when I took him on. He told me why he happened to come back at this particular time."

"Why was it?" asked Jean swiftly.

"He *had* to come. Telling you that seems to explain a good many other things one can't very well put into words. I know now that Perkins had to stay, that I had to take this house, that you had to pass this way for the first time in many months; and I know, too, that the gathering is not yet quite complete. It is all utterly intangible; there is no one point on which one can put a finger and say the reason lies there; and one of the most remarkable things is that we can meet for the first time and talk like this. It is something more than fate; it is purpose."

She looked at him wonderingly. The room, with its poignant memories, was speaking to her now, its ancient walls vibrant with mystical messages. Here was the sounding-box of the unknown, where in times past she had

thrilled to mysterious whispers. Here her father had sat—himself even, with all his love, something of a mystery—and here at the end his life had been snatched from him. What reason was there to assume that evil and danger had passed away? And till it did pass the tale could not be complete.

“I am not going to try and thank you,” she said slowly, “for having made my coming here so much easier than it promised to be, but when I saw Martin I knew what I had to do. Mother was with me, but she could not face it and has gone on to the village. Martin looked at me as I came in and knows why I came. He must know that.”

“Would you and your mother feel more comfortable if I sent Martin away?”

“No, you must not do that. We are in no danger from him. I mean you must not do it on our account. But there’s your sister and yourself to think of.”

He shook his head. “I am convinced that this need not trouble you. The police know of the new arrangement, and Martin knows that they know. No danger of the sort you mean lies there. I want to leave Martin to his roses and Perkins to her house-work till something I cannot describe is reestablished. Beech Lodge seems to be waiting for that. Perkins and Martin are also waiting, though unconsciously. I am certainly waiting. And, Miss Millicent, I think that without knowing it you have been waiting, too.”

“Yes,” she whispered, “it’s the only thing.”

“Then, may I ask something that’s rather difficult to ask? I wouldn’t unless I believed that you too felt something that’s very difficult to express.”

“Please—what is it?”

“You hold with me that we are all surrounded by influences we do not understand, and in so far as we are able to interpret them the difficult things become less threatening?”

“One cannot escape that,” she said slowly.

“I thought as much. But there are some who fight against such powers, and, believing them to be all for evil, are frightened, they know not why. If they are not frightened, they scout them. But since these powers are both for good and evil, and I believe those for good must be the strongest, it is only right to admit that the beneficent and invisible influences are always fighting for readjustments of some kind and will conquer in the end. If this were not the case, what advantage could there be in life? You believe all this?”

“I must believe it.”

“Well, my sister does not; she says she’s too practical, and I do not argue the point. Unless one can accept it, there’s no room for anything but restlessness and probably fear. So what I’d like to suggest, if I may, is that you do not say anything of all this to—to any one who does—not see this as we do.”

“You mean my mother?” she said quickly.

He nodded. “You told me she could not face coming in here, but you came, and that explained much.”

“Mother would not understand,” she admitted, “and I think you’re very wise. But is there nothing else I can do?”

“Yes, if you will, a little later on, tell me some of the things I would like to know. May I bring my sister to see you?”

“Please do; we should be very glad.”

She said good-by. The ordeal she had dreaded was over and concluded in a fashion she never anticipated. It was all strange—and yet not strange. She was persuaded that this interview had been dominated by something her father had left behind, in order that it might fight for what Derrick called readjustment. And in that she was ready to aid to the utmost. There was no room for fear now. She declined Derrick’s offer to walk home with her and went thoughtfully back with a new sense of being fortified in things that for years past had stirred secretly in her soul.

Derrick sat in the study late that night, with no pretense at work. Beech Lodge had dipped into utter silence, and the fire was low. His mind was full of the visitor of the afternoon, whose coming had lent a new significance to his surroundings. Now he perceived more clearly what it must have cost her to come. He was conscious of her communicable courage, the charm of her youth, and above all of the fact that to her also something had whispered from the infinite. How vivid she was, how understanding!

He wondered, too, what impression she carried away. Had he said too much, or too little? In talking, as he had done, to the daughter of a murdered man while she sat in her father’s study beneath her father’s portrait, in taking on himself the office of avenger—had he not already gone too far and too fast? Could Jean Millicent have done otherwise than approve while she must have been still struggling with profound and reawakened emotions? Had he been stilted and self-assured and pedantic? Had he assumed too much? These questions harassed him.

Against it he put the girl’s coming. She had not known what manner of person she would find but, braving the revival of her own loss, had determined to do what she could to save others from any tragic experience. This thought grew in his mind till, in turn, he recognized a new element in this strange affair. He had desired to answer if he could the voiceless petitions of the dead man, but now, in addition, he felt a wave of protection for those whom Millicent had left behind. It was this, he realized, that had animated him during his talk with Jean Millicent. And she had promised to help. He got up

restlessly, lowered the lamp, and, moving to the French window, stared out at the moon-smitten lawn. How often must Millicent, who was so close to-night, have stared like this? Perhaps it was on such a night that the evil thing came, strong and merciless. But whence and how?

It was in the midst of a space of profound silence that he heard the faintest click at the door. He started at that, for his sister had been long in bed, and Perkins's room was in the far corner of the house. What moved in Beech Lodge now? The door was opening, so slowly that it was almost imperceptible. His hair began to prickle. Was this the evil thing, and what did it seek?

He stood, breathless and motionless, his pulse hammering, till through the widening crack projected a hand, followed by a long arm and white-clad shoulder. The fingers were empty and extended as though feeling blindly. Then a face, pallid as of the dead. It was Perkins!

She glided forward without sound or speech, a wraith, a spirit of the night, so unreal, so remote as to be divested of human attributes, the thin hand still held out, exploring and testing the half-light that filtered through the silent chamber. It was the hand rather than the body that had life, with consciousness in its quivering finger-tips. She was only partly dressed and wore a loose white wrapper that accentuated the tall straightness of her figure. Her black hair hung in two thick ropes over her shoulders; her feet were bare; and her face was that of one who sees unspeakable things. The eyes were wide open, and in their glassy stare was a strange hunger and a great question.

She came on like an uncaptured spirit, feeling delicately along the paneled wall, a creature of body and flesh, but directed by some mysterious influence beyond human ken. She did not look toward the window but paused for a moment to survey the portrait with an unearthly and profound recognition. From this she turned to the desk, leaning over it, her dangling ropes of hair rendered semi-luminous against the lamp, peering, peering, till at length the long, questing fingers found what they sought, and poised, quivering above the stain.

Now she swayed, leaning ever a little more forward, till at last her head drooped, her arms stretched out, and her lips touched that darkened patch where they rested in a mute and desperate caress.

"Master," she pleaded, "master, where are you now? Why did you go; why are you not here where you used to be? The evil waits still, and all is empty and cold and dead without you, all dead, all dead!"

The voice ceased like a wail in the night, drowned in silence. Her lips pressed close to the stain till they seemed to infuse into it the message of her own blood, while the blind fingers groped and groped for that they could not find. Then with a sigh that hung tremulous in the throbbing air she moved to the portrait, made a slow, despairing gesture of farewell, and glided back to the

door and out of sight.

Derrick, rooted where he stood, thrilled to a new light that began to flicker in his brain. The fabric of his imagination was becoming more substantial. He had seen the soul of a woman stripped of all disguise, and heard a voice that was robbed of all powers of concealment. The essential meaning of this danced before his mind's eye.

CHAPTER V

THE PAPER-KNIFE

THE VILLAGE of Bamberley lay about two miles from Beech Lodge, a homelike nest of buildings gathered in a wrinkle of the Sussex hills. It was well removed from any main road, and its thatched roofs and crooked cobbled streets had fortunately escaped the demoralizing finger of progress. It was, in fact, just as it had always been in the memory of its oldest inhabitant. A village green, with the pens of the cattle market just across the road, a rambling public house, whose swinging sign creaked cheerily when the wind was high, a few diminutive shops, the contents of which were huddled in the meadows, perhaps a hundred cottages, a dozen more pretentious buildings dominated by the village institute—and then the encircling hills, velvet and brown and wide, patched with irregular coverts and dotted as far as the eye could reach with farm-house and barn.

Bamberley happened to be the most important of four adjoining villages; so here were the police headquarters of that utterly rural district. It was a neat brick building with the local jail immediately behind, standing where the cross-roads provided the main interest in life.

The road from Beech Lodge climbs the crown of a low hill ere it dips into the village; and Derrick, as he strolled toward the station and looked down on all this, thought he had never seen anything so peaceful.

The sergeant, a large, ruddy-faced, cylindrical man, greeted him with undisguised interest, and Derrick lost no time in getting to the point. They talked in the tiny office, which seemed filled by the other man's bulk. Derrick knew what he wanted, for this visit had occasioned him much thought. He was aware, too, that minor officials in isolated places were apt to regard with a jealous eye anything that might infringe on their position and privilege. It was at once obvious that the sergeant felt an added sense of responsibility when the visitor asked if he might read the official documents in the Millicent case.

Burke had been prepared by the constable for Derrick's coming, and during the past few weeks had chafed at his delay. He wanted to talk about the Millicent case more than anything else in the world. It was the biggest and most baffling puzzle in his career, and for a day or so the eyes of England had turned curiously toward Bamberley. After the inquest they turned away to the next sensation, leaving the police force of that tiny community with the stinging sensation of having fallen grievously short. Since then, Burke, feeling

his position more than he would ever admit, had explored every avenue that presented itself to his methodical mind. And always with the same result. Now, after nearly two years of silence, the thing was up again, brought up by a complete stranger who had actually taken into his employ the man suspected of the crime, against whom no definite charge could be laid. Burke secretly wondered whether by any chance Derrick and his gardener knew each other a good deal better than appeared on the surface of things. This was undoubtedly a matter for caution.

“The point is, sir,” he said slowly, “that I have no authority to tell you anything whatever, unless it is clear that the law may be aided thereby, and you have supplementary evidence with a direct bearing on the case.”

Derrick nodded. “I quite understand, sergeant, and that’s entirely reasonable. Would you sooner I looked up the counsel acting for the crown at the inquest? I’m quite willing, if you’d rather not talk about it.”

Burke reflected. He did not want to lose anything that might help himself, nor did he want to go beyond his boundaries. There was probably nothing here, but he could not get the reappearance of Martin out of his head. He had walked past the cottage at Beech Lodge only the week before and had a look at the man. Martin had nodded coolly and gone on with his work. A hard man, any way one took him.

“Please yourself, sir, about that; but if you’ll tell me what’s in your mind perhaps it won’t be necessary to go any further.”

“It may take a little time, sergeant.”

Burke glanced out of the window and along the cross-roads. “We’re not likely to be disturbed this morning.”

“Then I’ll begin with a question. Do you believe in the theory that when a serious crime has been committed, I mean one of passion or revenge, that the criminal, wherever he may be, is constantly reminded of it by the process of his own brain—that in spite of all he can do he builds up picture after picture, and lives it all over and over again?”

“There are too many proved instances of that to doubt it.”

“And do you also believe that something constantly suggests to such a man that he should go back and revisit the scene of the crime?”

“There was the Hardwick case, like that,” said Burke reminiscently. “You remember the Gloucester Square doctor who was killed by the man who afterwards took rooms immediately opposite the doctor’s house; and the murderer never could tell why, except that it seemed the only thing to do.”

“Then I take it that in your profession the likelihood is really weighed and considered.”

“Yes, sir, it is. Some of the London men who came down here two years ago were talking about it.”

“Another point is the matter of coincidence. How do you feel about that?”

“It’s something that has played a big part in our work. One can’t put it aside. Coincidence and the other things you’ve mentioned often seem to run together.”

“And you know, of course, that Mr. Millicent’s gardener turned up very soon after I took Beech Lodge?”

“Yes, Mr. Derrick; Constable Peters reported that you had authorized him to occupy the cottage.”

“Then can you guess what brought him here all the way from Burma?”

“Did he go that far?”

Derrick nodded. “And came back by way of Canada—”

“There might be several reasons,” said the big man thoughtfully.

“Well, as a matter of fact there is but one.”

“How do you know, sir?”

“Martin told me himself.”

“What was it?” Burke’s tone had changed a little.

“He *had* to come. He had no bones about saying so.” Derrick paused a moment. “Sergeant, could an innocent man have felt like that?”

The sergeant stared at his own massive boots, glittering mountains of leather that shone with official luster.

“Anything else, Mr. Derrick?”

“Of course you remember Perkins?”

“Perfectly; the sort of woman one can’t forget.”

“Yes; a strange character, showing nothing on the surface, and so much a part of Beech Lodge that we took her on with the house.”

Burke grinned. “I can see that she hasn’t changed much.”

“No, she can’t change. But did you know that she walked in her sleep?”

The sergeant looked at him sharply. “For a newcomer, sir, you’ve unearthed a good deal. I never heard that before.”

“And would you think it of interest if I told you that the desk at which Mr. Millicent was found is of particular attraction to both Martin and Perkins?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I’ve seen them both examining it closely when they thought they were unobserved. They were looking for something, sergeant.”

Burke got up, stood at the diminutive window, and with his hands folded behind his back stared at the verdant expanse of Bamberley Green. Obviously he was thinking very hard. Derrick lit his pipe and contemplated the big frame, the thick neck, and round, neatly clipped skull. There was no promise of great ability here, no quick perception, no imaginative brain. Burke found his inspiration in his official regulations. Law, order, and discipline, was it not all in a book? He was the type for whom it was hard to let go, and impossible to

forget. And the biggest thing in his life was still the Millicent murder. It hurt, just as Constable Peters had intimated. Presently he turned.

“Mr. Derrick, in most cases of crime, and especially that of murder, the force is pestered with amateur detectives who believe they have the one and only clue. It’s very often a reporter for some paper. They make all kinds of trouble, and always mix things up if you give them any rope. But you’ve said enough to justify me in talking about what took place at the inquest on Mr. Millicent; though, mind you, it’s entirely unofficial.”

“That’s all I ask, sergeant; and if this thing can be solved I have no desire to appear in it at all. I’d much sooner not. If we get any results, they’re yours, not mine. I don’t pose as an amateur detective; but, from what I have already seen and know, I believe this thing can be run to earth.”

Burke reached to a shelf above his head and took down a large leather-bound volume. On the well-thumbed pages of this were pasted envelopes, from one of which he extracted a docket bearing the name of Millicent, with a date. The manner in which he turned to it suggested that this procedure had often taken place before. He cleared his throat and began rather stiffly.

“At ten thirty on the night of October fourteenth—that’s two years ago less three days—I was just leaving this office when Paling, the groom of Dr. Henry, drove up in great haste and said that I was wanted at once at Beech Lodge by the doctor, who was himself at that time at the Lodge. He had been summoned there by Martin, Mr. Millicent’s gardener, who told him that a murder had been committed. We galloped all the way to the Lodge, arriving there at ten thirty-seven by my watch. I left instructions here that Constable Franklin should follow me without delay. I was admitted by the maid Perkins, who took me to the study, where I found Mrs. Millicent, her daughter, and the doctor. A lamp was burning on the desk, and beside it was Mr. Millicent, lying forward so that his head rested on the desk. He was quite dead. There was a large wound in his neck that had bled profusely and formed a puddle among his papers. The doctor very wisely had left things undisturbed, because his first examination proved that life was extinct.”

“Were Perkins and Martin in the room at this time?” asked Derrick evenly.

“No, only Mrs. and Miss Millicent and the doctor. Perkins and Martin waited in the hall with the doctor’s groom.”

“And then?”

Burke turned a page. “It was, of course, most important not to destroy the slightest clue that might have been left, so a very careful examination of the room was made, with exact measurement of the position in which the body was found. I searched the room, examined the door leading to the lawn, and found that it was fastened. By this time Constable Franklin had arrived, and he helped. We went over the entire ground floor, made sure that all windows were

closed, then locked the study door, and took Mr. Millicent up-stairs to his own room. I left the constable on guard outside with instructions that no person should be allowed to enter or leave the grounds.”

“What sort of a night was it?”

“Dull, mild, and rather cloudy, with no rain.”

“And the outside of the house?”

“Nothing could be done till next morning except make sure that any tracks should remain undisturbed; but after a most careful examination we found nothing of the kind. My own conclusion, and it has not been changed since, was that the blow must have been struck by some member of the household—or”—here Burke paused significantly—“at any rate some one in the family service. Mind you, Mr. Derrick, this is absolutely unofficial.”

“I quite understand that. Now what can you tell me about the inquest?”

“I was just coming to that. The witnesses were narrowed to five: Mrs. Millicent and her daughter, Dr. Henry, Perkins, and Martin. I’ll take them in their order, so Mrs. Millicent comes first. She told a very simple story. Her husband was forty-five, and the latter part of their married life had been spent at Beech Lodge. He had at one time a very comfortable income, which latterly had been reduced by speculations. They were not, however, in difficult circumstances, although she seemed to know very little of his financial affairs. He was always much interested in anything that had to do with the Orient. So far as she was aware he had no enemies. He spent a good deal of his time in the garden and often went for long walks, always alone. Since his last trip to the East, from which he returned five years before his death, he seemed to have some kind of worry, of which he would never speak, or explain. Letters had arrived for him from Singapore, at which his worry seemed to increase; but he always destroyed these and never referred to their contents. From what I make of it, he was up to his eyes in something he found it necessary to conceal from those he cared for most. There had been no hard words with any of the staff, and no stranger had been at the house that day so far as we could learn.”

“I understand that Mrs. Millicent engaged Perkins, while later on her husband employed Martin. How much later?”

“About a year.”

“So that any collusion between them before this is improbable?”

“I should say so; and it seems that they took very little notice of each other at any time.”

“Then, as far as we have gone, the period between the actual moment of the murder and the time when Perkins notified Mrs. Millicent is unaccounted for.”

Burke nodded. “Exactly!”

“Before we go on to the other evidence, can you tell me whether anything

was missed after the murder?"

The sergeant opened another envelope, extracting a sheet of brown paper some eighteen inches long.

"This is a drawing made by Mrs. Millicent of a thing that her husband used as a paper-knife. It's not been found since that night."

Derrick took it eagerly and scrutinized the outline of a murderous-looking weapon. Its curving blade must have measured a foot, being chopped off at the point in a curious and characteristic fashion. The handle was heavy and carried a short guard. Its deadly curve was unmistakable.

"By George!" he said. "That's a Malay creese!"

"Yes, Mr. Millicent got it in the East and seemed to attach some kind of sentimental value to it. He always kept it on his desk. Of course, it may be that it was there for protection, though the average man would have preferred a revolver. On the other hand, you can see what chance any one would have against a thing like that."

"Then there are two assumptions," answered Derrick thoughtfully, "one that the person who committed the crime knew that this thing was on the desk available for his purpose; the other, that he came without any evil intent, but a dispute developed and in a burst of anger he picked up the creese, and struck."

"And there's just one person to whom both of those cases might apply, at ten o'clock at night," said Burke grimly, "the person against whom we have no evidence."

"I agree with that. Did anything else disappear at the same time?"

"So far as we know only one thing, and that apparently not of any importance. It was a sort of little toy image, about three or four inches high, that Mr. Millicent used as a paper-weight. It was carved out of a block of jade. He used to joke about it in a queer sort of way and say it was more valuable than they knew. Sometimes it was on his desk, but only when he was in the room himself. At other times he used to hide it away; but no one ever knew where. He never talked about it, except in that joking manner. It seems to have been an ugly-looking thing, too, but Mrs. Millicent could not make a drawing of it."

A sudden light danced in Derrick's eyes. "Then there was no concealment about this?"

"No more than that it used to be stowed away, and he'd never allow it to be touched. You know how men sometimes get queer ideas about things?"

"Yes, I know."

"And it's generally something quite unimportant. Well, it was like that with this image. Matter of fact, it was so ugly that no one in the house seemed to want to touch it, except Perkins."

"Ah!" said Derrick slowly. His eyes were very keen. "Now, there are a few

other questions I'd like to ask, but first you might tell me what other evidence was given."

The sergeant glanced out of the window. "That's queer! I was going to say that Miss Millicent couldn't tell us anything important, and there she is now."

Derrick looked up. The girl was just abreast of the tiny office, walking slowly. Involuntarily she turned her head, and their eyes met. Color mounted to her cheeks, and she bowed. Derrick went out to her quickly. There were no preliminaries.

"May we come over in a few days? I think perhaps you could help then." He spoke as though their last conversation had only been interrupted.

"Do!" she nodded.

"And till then I hope you're not worrying, or anxious?"

She shook her head, smiled, and sent him a look of complete confidence. "Would it seem odd if I said that I worry less now than in the past two years?"

"I'm so glad of that!"

"It's quite true. I'm happier, and so is mother. I"—she hesitated a little—"I think we don't feel so horribly alone."

"You're not." His voice was queerly strained. "Indeed, you're not."

She glanced at him again, then turned quickly away.

Derrick looked after her, following the slight figure till it came to the corner of the green. Something of him went with her, and he reentered the sergeant's office wondering at himself.

Whatever doubts the latter might have had about this unofficial conference had been laid at rest. The new master of Beech Lodge was animated by more than mere curiosity. That was now established; and, surveying the past two years, the big man realized how heavily the unfathomed crime had rested on his own spirit. The memory of it could never leave him till the mysterious scroll was unrolled. This visit of Derrick's might result in nothing; but, in a way not entirely clear, the chance of solution seemed at last a little more probable. He looked at the young man almost with respect.

"As I said, Miss Millicent could really tell us little more than her mother. She seemed just as frightened of something that might still take place as of what had happened. She knew about the image, but nothing of its history; and my impression was that she linked it up with the crime in a way that none of the rest of us did. She had no explanation of this. I got the impression that she understood her father, if one can put it that way, better almost than her mother—although I have no real reason for saying this."

Derrick glanced at him shrewdly. "Nevertheless, I'm glad you mentioned it. Anything else?"

"No, sir. Perkins was the next witness. She had been in Mrs. Millicent's employ for nearly five years. An Englishwoman, aged thirty-eight, she had

traveled a good deal before she went into service. She stated that on the night in question she was on her way up-stairs from the servants' hall—there was no other servant there at the time—and passed the study. The door was closed, and there was no sound; but she could see the lamplight under the door. A little later, when she was ready for bed, she went back to the servants' hall for a book and noticed that the door was ajar and the lamp still burning.

“She went in, thinking that Mr. Millicent had gone to bed and forgotten to put it out. There she found him, bent forward over the desk, his head on one side and a deep wound in his neck from which the blood had poured in a pool. She said that for a moment she could not move, then ran up-stairs, hammered at Mrs. Millicent's door, and told the latter that there had been an accident in the study. Mrs. Millicent called to her to send Martin at once for the doctor, so she raced down to the cottage at once without going again into the study. She found Martin, who ran for Dr. Henry, coming back a little later with the doctor and groom in the cart. Then the groom came for me. As you probably know, Beech Lodge is about half-way between Bamberley and the doctor's house.”

“Did Perkins admit having missed anything from the desk?”

“She mentioned the paper-knife but said nothing about the image till she was questioned.”

“And then?”

The sergeant reflected a moment. “I didn't make much of what she said then. She was very upset, and rambled a good deal, till I think the coroner was glad to have done with her. I almost thought she attached as much importance to that as to the paper-knife, but of course she was hysterical.”

“Possibly,” murmured Derrick. “So I take it that Martin could not actually have seen the body till he returned with the doctor?”

“That is his evidence, which I will come to in a minute, and also Perkins statement. It would be a matter of perhaps twenty or twenty-five minutes after Perkins waked Mrs. Millicent.”

“And Mrs. Millicent, and I suppose her daughter, stayed with the body till the doctor came?”

“Yes.”

“Where was Perkins then?”

“Also in the study, trying to help Mrs. Millicent, who she thought was going off her head.”

“Let me go back a minute. The first time Perkins passed the study on her way up-stairs the door was shut, and the next time ajar. How long intervened?”

“Perkins says perhaps half an hour, while she undressed.”

“So during that half-hour the crime was committed, and the door was probably left ajar by the murderer?”

“I could never see it any other way, Mr. Derrick.”

“And that is the time left unaccounted for?”

“Exactly. Now you’ve reached the point where I’ve had to leave the thing for two years, and you’ve reached it by the same road of reasoning.”

Derrick smiled. “Tell me what the doctor said, sergeant.”

“Very little. He testified that from the condition of the body life could not have been extinct for more than one hour.”

“That again narrows it down to about one half-hour in which the thing happened. The question is what did happen, so perhaps we’d better hear what Martin said.”

“There again it didn’t amount to much. He stated that he was smoking in the garden of the cottage when Perkins came running in, half dressed, crying out like a mad woman that Mr. Millicent had been murdered, and—”

“She used the word ‘accident’ to Mrs. Millicent,” interrupted Derrick.

“Yes, but not this time. She told Martin to get Dr. Henry as soon as possible. There was no horse at Beech Lodge then, so he ran all the way to the doctor’s place. The rest of it coincided with Perkins’s evidence. He also said that he had been outside the cottage all the evening and could swear that no one had entered the grounds from the road.”

“Had there been any difference between him and Mr. Millicent?”

“Apparently not. Mr. Millicent had been in the garden with him that afternoon, discussing the pruning of the roses and general preparations for the winter. Mrs. Millicent confirmed this, subsequently, and said that her husband trusted the man implicitly.”

“Did Martin mention the paper-knife?”

“He was questioned but said he knew nothing about it. From what the others testified, it seems that he very seldom came into the house, so it’s reasonable he should not have known.”

“Or the image?” asked Derrick thoughtfully.

“No, sir, nothing of that, either.”

“And how long had he been in Mr. Millicent’s employ?”

“A matter of something less than five years.”

“And before that?”

“According to his statement, knocking about in the Orient.”

“Do you think it is possible that he may have met his master somewhere in the East, and the fact never came out?”

“I hadn’t thought of that, but now it begins to seem possible.”

“And that there had for some time existed between them something that ultimately culminated in murder?”

“We could not get as far as that at the inquest, sir.”

“Let it stand for the present. What was Martin’s manner or attitude while he gave evidence?”

“A bit surly, as he always is, though I think without meaning it. It’s a bit against him that he’s apt not to look one in the face.”

Derrick nodded. “Now I’ll only put one or two more questions. From what you know, do you imagine there can be any link or understanding between him and Perkins?”

The sergeant shook his head with decision. “What makes me feel there is not is that, from all I can gather, Perkins dislikes the man.”

“That seems to be so. When I took him on she preferred to do the boots and coals herself, though he was available. She’s doing them now. On the other hand, Martin has come back around the world, and Perkins seems riveted to the house. Neither of them displayed any particular interest in their wages. Martin jumped at thirty shillings a week, which is not much as things go now. The point is, why are they both so keen on Beech Lodge?”

Burke stroked his chin. “I suppose that’s one of those coincidences you spoke of. I’ll admit that they almost certainly know a good deal more than we’ve been able to get out of them, but we haven’t got enough evidence to hang your hat on. One can’t make an accusation on anything else, much less an arrest. It’s up to me to prove that so and so is guilty, and not for him to prove that he isn’t.”

“What then would you call a step toward real evidence?” asked Derrick, with a little lift in his voice.

“Proof that either Perkins or Martin had been lying at the inquest, or”—he added with an incredulous smile—“the discovery of that paper-knife, or even the image.”

Derrick put his hand in his pocket and laid a small dark green object on the table.

“Was it at all like this, sergeant?”

The blood rushed suddenly to the big man’s temples. “My God, sir! where did you find that?”

CHAPTER VI

GOD—OR DEVIL?

THE THING on the table was a diminutive image, about three and a half inches high. It was carved, apparently, from a single block of the most perfect jade, and when the sergeant, fingering it delicately, held it toward the window, the light filtered through it, illuminating it with striking translucency. The base was perhaps two and a half inches square, supporting a tiny throne, on which sat a figure clothed in flowing robes. Each individual drape and fold was produced with absolute fidelity. The hands of the figure were folded, showing narrow finger-nails of extreme length; and though the general suggestion was that of the god Buddha, Derrick remembered that in such images as he had seen the right hand was raised in benediction.

But there was no benediction here. The head was bent slightly forward, the slits of Oriental eyes were represented as half closed, and over the whole face rested an expression of utter and fiendish malignity. One could not imagine anything more devilish and cruel. There was power in the face, an abysmal knowledge that penetrated all human frailty and disguise, and a certain fixed, implacable purpose. Derrick had spent hours in secret scrutiny of the thing, and it seemed to him that here was the presentment of the embodiment of evil, and, fixed with an infinity of patient art, there had been transmitted to this opaque and precious stone the picture of some soul, wicked and irretrievably damned. Even now as he stared a chill ran through his body, and he glanced at the sergeant to determine whether he, too, were not susceptible to this malign emanation.

“I don’t know that I ever saw a more ugly thing in my life,” said the latter slowly. “Where did you find it, sir?”

“It’s not much use at the moment to try and tell you what led up to that. I can only say that ever since going into the house I have been conscious of something. I had no reason to believe that anything of this kind existed there, and in spite of what you have said I can’t quite see that this is really evidence, as yet. All we know is that it used to stand on Millicent’s desk and was missed after the murder. It may be the thing that both Martin and Perkins were seeking, but it was removed during that half-hour of which we spoke.”

“My first move would be to confront them both with this thing when they didn’t expect it, and watch what happened.”

“I’m afraid I can’t agree with you there. I’ve never studied your profession

but fancy you'd get as much out of them as out of the image itself. Perkins has been under very close observation for weeks without knowing it, and her face is a mask. Martin is much the same. The minds of both of them are foreign countries, so far as we are concerned."

The sergeant leaned forward. There was no doubt about his attitude now. "Perhaps you're right, sir, but what is in your mind as to the next move?"

"I haven't gone far enough to say, and there's an old proverb about hurrying slowly. Meantime I'd like to know whether you agree that to-day there are aspects of the case that so far have not been considered at all?"

"In fairness to you, sir, I must admit that."

"Then you'll also agree that of the two ways of approaching it the inductive method is the only one to be considered?"

Burke was genuinely puzzled and showed it. "I'm afraid I don't quite follow you there, Mr. Derrick. It sounds like one of those magazine stories where the police always fall down and the amateur pulls the thing off."

Derrick laughed. "I've an idea the police won't fall down this time if they adopt the right method—at least the method that I would follow myself."

The sergeant looked at him curiously. "And how would you start in this case, may I ask?"

"Not knowing who the murderer is, let us assume one and proceed on that assumption. We can safely say that he did his work between nine and ten at night. We assume also that he did not come with any murderous intent, unless, and this is a point that must be carefully considered, unless he knew that there was on Mr. Millicent's desk a weapon suitable for his purpose. We also assume that he knew about the image, though for some reason he denied this, and, more than that, believed that it had something to do with some act that weighed against him—say, in the Orient. Mr. Millicent also knew this, and therefore concealed it, and thereby maintained his hold over the criminal—or the man who finally became the criminal. That the image should have remained undisturbed for two years points to the absence of the criminal for that period."

Derrick paused for a moment and looked hard at the sergeant. "Are you with me thus far?"

"Yes, go on, sir," was the tense answer.

"Well, add to that the characteristics of Perkins and Martin, and there remains the doubt as to whether the woman actually did run to Mrs. Millicent's room the minute she made the discovery. Admit the possibility that she actually saw the murder committed, and, having secret reasons for sparing Martin, allowed him to return to the cottage before giving the alarm. Assume, for instance, that she was terrified by Martin into doing this."

The sergeant struck his clenched fist into his palm. "By God, sir! but that's

more than likely.”

“There’s nothing in the evidence to prevent it being the case except the testimony of two persons who you believe know more than was drawn out. It simply involves the reversal of the sequence of two actions to both of which Perkins was sworn. To-day she is to all appearances a broken-hearted woman. Why? Two reasons; one that the master to whom she was so undoubtedly devoted was killed; the other that for fear of her own life she has committed herself to the protection of the criminal. In this connection there’s a very interesting point. When Martin came to me and asked for a job, I made a point of privately inquiring from Perkins whether, from all she knew of him, and under all the circumstances, I would do well to take him on. Her answer was that if I wanted a garden like Mr. Millicent’s I should take him. It seems to me now that she was afraid of what would happen if she said anything else.”

“Yes, sir, that fits in perfectly.”

Derrick got up and relit his pipe. “Then, I think we might let the matter rest there for a while, and I won’t trouble you any further this morning. If it is decided to do anything later on, it will all be done through you, as I do not wish to appear in the thing at all.”

“Very good, sir, and if I can help, which I’d like to, I’ll go as far as my duties permit, and maybe”—here the sergeant grinned meaningly—“a bit further.” He pointed to the jade god. “Had I better keep this thing here?”

Derrick shook his head, picked up the image gingerly, and slipped it in his pocket.

“No, thanks, I want to use it for a while. By the way, do you know whether I can get a couple of pounds of green wax in Bamberley?”

Jean Millicent’s unpremeditated visit to Beech Lodge had marked a turning-point in the long, gray months that followed her father’s death. The violence and brutality of this had shocked her beyond words, while to her sense of loss was added the numbing knowledge that on the very threshold of life she had been confronted with the worst that life had to exhibit. Millicent himself had had no surviving relations; her mother’s people, after the first horrified sympathy, did not allow the matter to burden them further; and, as the girl impulsively told Derrick, she felt tremendously alone.

Between mother and daughter there was complete love—and a limited understanding. The real link had been with Millicent, from whom Jean inherited the subjective side of her nature. She had a profound belief in mysterious influences, incapable of analysis, but controlling nevertheless the world of unseen things. She realized that she moved among these, swaying unconsciously to their faint pressure, the recipient of distant and unmistakable

signals that flicked over the horizon of existence. She had never talked much about this with her father. His own belief had of late been too burdened with an apprehension she never fathomed. But she understood where her mother often failed to understand, silently completing the sentences he sometimes left unfinished, putting her mind parallel with his, and building up a queer unexplainable union that expressed itself not so much in speech as in those fleeting glances of comprehension that are more eloquent than any words.

Something of this she recognized in Derrick, and the psychology of the moment was such that it meant more than she could well express. While she was with her mother, her heart needed no other companion, though her spirit was lonely. But she had not been lonely during her visit to Beech Lodge, however strange the circumstances. She knew now that the visit was intended. For the first time she had been in touch with another intelligence that acknowledged what she acknowledged but remained poised and unafraid. It was like traveling through an unknown and threatening country, and meeting one to whom all its roads are familiar and who traverses them without fear.

A few days after Derrick's visit to the sergeant, he and his sister walked two lovely miles to the Millicents'. Edith was glad of it for several reasons. She admitted being lonely, and also welcomed anything that lifted her brother out of himself. For the past few weeks she had watched him closely, saying nothing. He was less distraught and more like his old self, but she knew that the novel progressed not at all. He was busy in his own peculiar way, and she asked no questions.

She was charmed with Mrs. Millicent, found they had much in common, and noted with contentment that Jean and her brother seemed like old friends. While all four were together, the subject of Beech Lodge was instinctively avoided, but a little later Derrick found himself in the cottage garden with Jean. It was after a pause that she sent him a straight questioning look.

"Well, I'm waiting. Something tells me you've been very busy and, I think, successful."

"Busy, yes," he smiled, "but I don't know how successful."

"Did you have a long talk at the police station?"

"Fairly long. The sergeant regarded me at first as most officials regard the amateur, but he was interested before I left. It seems that he regards your father's case as the one unsatisfactory spot on his record. It's odd to talk to a man who is so blunt and at the same time has to admit that he's beaten."

"But you haven't told me yet. I know by your face there's something."

"Yes," he admitted, "there is. Will you let me know what you can about a small image that came from Burma?"

"The jade god?" she said swiftly.

"Yes—or devil."

“How extraordinary! Have you come to that, too?”

“Or else it came to me. Look!”

She shrank involuntarily, then, without touching the thing he had taken from his pocket, stared at it closely.

“Are there two? Where did you find that?”

“No,” he smiled, “this is a cast in green wax made from a mold I took of the image itself. I—” he hesitated—“I did not like to carry the original about with me.”

“I think you are very wise, but where did you find the original?” Her eyes were full of wonder.

“It happened a week ago, the day before I went to see Sergeant Burke. I was in the study, looking at your father’s portrait as I often do, when it seemed more than ever that he was trying to tell me something. That has often been the case before, but never as vividly. He wanted to speak, and I believe he was speaking, but not in a language I could understand. Then I got up and stood in front of him and could have sworn the expression of his eyes changed. They appeared to be looking down at something below himself and not far away. Without knowing it I put out my hand as though to meet an invisible one held out to me, and touched the oak frame on the side of the mantel. You know those old carvings?”

“Yes,” she said breathlessly.

“It was just under the upper one. Then I heard a click, and a small panel fell forward, opening a tiny cupboard about six inches square. The original of this thing was inside, as though it had been waiting for me. I did not touch it at once but looked up, and there was a sort of relief in the painted eyes.”

“Go on; please go on!”

“I haven’t much more to say, as yet, except that to my knowledge both Perkins and Martin have searched the study for something I take to be the original of this. There’s one other thing to be found now. Evidence was given that it was there that evening and has not been seen since.”

“I know what that is.”

“Well, I have an idea it’s not far away.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I don’t know, but I feel it. Meantime will you tell me what you know of the image?”

“Father brought it back from Burma about seven years ago,” she said slowly, “and seemed both to love and fear it. I have always thought it terrible, as though half the evil in the world had been captured in that bit of green stone. From the time he brought it back he himself appeared to change. I felt that the more because we were very near each other, he and I, and he believed what you believe. We never talked much about it, as that didn’t seem necessary. As

to the image, I knew it was somewhere in the study but didn't know where. No one did. All he ever said about it was that he got it up country. I have seen Perkins come in when it was on the desk, try not to look at it, then stare as though fascinated."

"Did Martin ever see it?" put in Derrick.

"Yes, and it had the same effect on him. I often wanted to smile at grown people feeling like that, but somehow I couldn't."

"Then, if either Perkins or Martin wanted it there would have been no great difficulty in stealing it?"

"Perhaps not, but I had a queer idea that though their fingers itched for it they were afraid to touch it."

"Yet it kept Perkins at Beech Lodge, and brought Martin back half round the world. It sent out vibrations to which they had to respond."

"You believe that?"

He nodded.

"It all fits in," she admitted slowly. "Always in the study I've felt some kind of war going on between influences; good fighting with evil. Father used to feel that, too. The room found its own voice and spoke, and against that was the voice of the jade god, confusing and confounding everything with threatening messages."

"And you are satisfied there was no common interest between Perkins and Martin?"

"I don't see how that could be. She never had anything to do with him and didn't even like having him about the house. I never saw them together."

"May I ask if you know what your father actually did in Burma?"

"No, sometimes he talked about the Mong Hills, but he never made any money in the Orient and used to come back saying that he had been in touch with strange things and people. That used to content him, but latterly he sometimes used to look desperate. As to money, we have always had enough to live quietly."

"Do you think he had any premonitions of death?"

"No, I'm sure of that. Once he said that it was harder to live than die, so he expected to live a long time."

"Was that after his last trip?"

"Yes."

Derrick was silent for a moment. "Does Mrs. Millicent know that I'm working on this?" he asked presently.

She sent him a quick smile. "Yes, and she thinks it's tremendously kind of you but that it can't come to anything."

"My sister knows, too, and can't see the point, either."

"She would feel that it is interfering with your work. I feel it, too, and it

may prevent a splendid book from being written. Am I tremendously selfish?"

He looked at her steadily, and her eyes met his without flinching. She stood, tall, slim, and straight, with a proud carriage to her head and a broad serenity of brow. Imagination was in her face, the beauty of whose contour filled him with a sort of comforting satisfaction. It was firm but gentle, courageous but sweet. Her eyes were a little wistful, and charged with changing lights and shadows that he found infinitely appealing. She awakened both heart and spirit, and he knew she could awaken his soul. What would it be like to be cared for by such a girl? He felt that already there existed between them something more than friendship.

"Will you forgive me for putting you through such an inquisition?" he asked.

"There is nothing to forgive, and everything to thank you for."

"I think you are very brave."

"Brave! It is you who are brave. We have no claim, no reason why you should be involved in all this."

"And yet," he said thoughtfully, "I was involved before we two ever met." He made a sudden impulsive gesture, but it was his eyes that spoke next.

She smiled gravely, and at that smile he knew that another voice had reached him from the unknown. It carried no mysterious threat; it was unburdened with tragedy; it emanated neither from wood nor stone nor a jade devil. It was part of the rest, but all grace and purity and joy; a whisper of life, not death. What sped between them then he could never tell, but some echo of that whisper must have reached Jean, for her glance, strange and lingering and perhaps prophetic, met his own for a memorable instant while the color climbed delicately to her smooth cheeks.

"You see," she said softly, "unless I can think of myself as having shaken all this off, and laid the ghost of uncertainty and, yes, fear, I can never have any real future."

He pressed her slim fingers. "Don't worry about the future," he whispered.

Edith was very cheerful on the way home. She had had a long talk with Mrs. Millicent, promised her Derrick's last book, found they had mutual friends, and in general enjoyed herself. It was a relief to be with some one professedly practical. Also she was beginning to entertain a shrewd suspicion that her brother was rather more than interested in Jean and turned the conversation in that direction before long. She chatted away, swinging her stick and feeling more at peace with herself than for some time past.

"I don't think they'll stay there very long," she hazarded. "It's too lonely. Mrs. Millicent spoke of France for the summer and feels that Jean should have a change. It's no place for a girl like that."

"Oh!" said Derrick uncomfortably.

“From what I gathered she blames herself for having stayed there at all. It seems she wanted to move away altogether, but Jean wouldn’t have it. She’s worried about the child and says that she cannot shake the dreadful thing off, which isn’t a healthy state of affairs at that age. You two hit it off very well, Jack, from what I saw. You had a regular conference.”

He laughed. “Did we?”

“Didn’t you? You ought to know. I never realized fully before what a variety of interests you seem to demand. First you come into the country to write a novel—and, by the way, you’ll notice I’ve said nothing about the novel recently—then you switch off to a murder case, and I haven’t mentioned that either recently, and the latest development is a perfectly new young woman of undoubted charm, of whom I begin to have suspicions.”

“And of whom perhaps you won’t say anything at all,” he parried.

Edith nodded. “Nothing could arouse feminine intuition more than that remark. However, she’s awfully attractive.”

Derrick grinned. “Suppose we leave it at that.”

“All right, brother, but just in case my feminine intuition happens to be right, I wouldn’t take Miss Millicent too seriously.”

“You’re very oracular to-day, Edith. What is it?”

“Her mother practically said that she didn’t understand that girl, but did know that she still felt very strangely about her father’s death.”

“One can imagine that.”

“Yes, of course, but it works in a curious way on her mind. She imagines herself linked with it in some odd fashion and won’t think of marrying till the thing is cleared up, which, of course, it never will be now. She argues that she has her father’s blood and all that, and she may have inherited some kind of threat or danger or whatever it was that killed him. The very idea seems grotesque to me, but there you are.”

“What else did Mrs. Millicent say?”

“Very little more about Jean, and nothing of her husband, but she did talk about Perkins and Martin. I suppose she wanted to reassure me.”

“Anything new about them?”

“Nothing much. Perkins seems to have been just as invaluable to them as she is to me. You know, Jack, I’ve rather changed my mind about that woman.”

“In what way? Perkins hasn’t changed that I can see.”

“Not a fraction. She looks just as forbidding and severe and wet-blankety as ever, and that used to worry me more than you ever knew. Also I was puzzled about you, and the influence the place seemed to be getting over you, upsetting your work. I’ve got over that now, and Perkins has turned out a regular trump. I’m beginning to see what’s behind that manner of hers.”

“I wish I could.”

“Jack, it’s only that of a broken-hearted woman, her way of expressing it, and nothing else. Yet in spite of that she’s a household treasure. Things do themselves; there’s no lost energy and no lost time. If Perkins could be duplicated in sufficient quantities she’d revolutionize domestic life in England.”

“It’s a pity she’s never married and started a new breed.”

Edith decapitated a surviving thistle. “That kind doesn’t marry very often. They’re born into the world without any desire for marriage, and perhaps it’s just as well in this case. She’d be working for her husband and not for us. Marriage,” she added quizzically, “isn’t the solution for everything.”

“But why do you say she’s broken-hearted?”

“Because of a queer thing that happened last night. I wasn’t going to say anything about it, but you’re so unusually sensible to-day that it doesn’t matter. I was lying half awake last night, and seemed to hear some one talking at a little distance with no attempt at concealment, and quite loud, so I wasn’t nervous. It was a woman’s voice. I got up and prowled about and found it came from Perkins’s room. She was talking in her sleep in a queer, flat tone, talking very fast, apparently arguing with some one, greatly excited and rather desperate.”

“What was she saying?” put in Derrick sharply.

“That’s the strange part of it; I couldn’t understand a word. It was all in some strange liquid sort of language, ending in ‘ong’ and ‘yang’ and ‘ing,’ and sounds like that. Three or four times she said, ‘Master, master.’ That must have meant Mr. Millicent, to whom she was so devoted. All of a sudden it stopped, as though her brain had come back from its travels, and I heard nothing more. This morning I looked at her very closely, but not a line of her face had changed, and her eyes were just the same as ever. She had evidently been dreaming about Mr. Millicent’s death, and, Jack, that’s the biggest thing in her life now. She was dour and silent before; Mrs. Millicent said so to-day; and one can imagine what a tragedy like that must mean to a queer locked-up nature like hers.”

“Can’t you remember any of the foreign words she used?” he asked casually.

She frowned a little, thinking hard. “There were two that came quite often, more than any others, one something like ‘rumah,’ ‘sambayung,’ and the other like ‘santari.’ That’s as near as I can get to it. Why do you ask?”

“No particular reason, except that I’d like to identify the language.”

“You’re not going to speak to Perkins herself, are you?”

“No,” he smiled. “Far be it from me to put my finger into the wheels of domestic comfort. Anything more about her?”

“Nothing except that I’m going to try and cheer her up, and coax out a smile or two. As it is she smiles about once a week. Then there’s Martin.”

“And what of him?”

“I don’t quite know. I’ve been watching him at work and talking to him occasionally, and what strikes me is that here at Beech Lodge are two of the loneliest souls imaginable. I’ve got it now!” she added suddenly. “Why shouldn’t they marry?”

“Oh!” said Derrick, startled.

“Well, just think a minute. It might work splendidly for all concerned,” continued Edith, warming to the idea. “Martin, in spite of his appearance, is as faithful as a dog, and he absolutely loves flowers. This place is going to be a picture next summer. He’s had some sort of a blow, too, and his eyes are often more sad than I can describe, and not a bit shifty or furtive. And he’s beginning to like you just as he used to like Mr. Millicent from all accounts. Jack, why shouldn’t they marry? Don’t you suppose it’s possible that that’s what brought him back, looking for Perkins?”

Derrick did not answer at once. The idea was too fantastic. It was not Perkins that Martin sought when he returned, nor was she the type of woman to bring a suspected man round the world to a place which for every reason he should avoid. They shared something; he was sure of that; but whatever it was it had dug a gulf between them, and to discover a bridge to span that gulf was Derrick’s aim.

“If I were you I’d put that idea out of my head,” he said quietly.

Edith was a little disappointed. “Why? Stranger things have happened before this.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to say that stranger things would probably happen, but he only laughed.

“We know nothing of their past—that is, before they came to Beech Lodge—and their future is their own. It’s too delicate a business. Perkins doesn’t like Martin, though she was bound to recommend him as an excellent gardener, and it would be stretching the point a good deal to imagine that she is anything to him. She hardly speaks to him as it is. Didn’t you say just now that she was not the marrying kind?”

“Yes, I did; but since there’s no probability of my arranging my own wedding, I rather like to potter about with other people’s. That may be useful to you, Jack, later on. As to Perkins, I dare say you’re right, and after all, if they did ultimately come together, it couldn’t be utterly festive, could it?”

“No,” he laughed, “it couldn’t. What else is there in the mind of the thoughtful Martha?”

“Nothing except that I’d like to make those two lives a bit more cheery, if I could; and naturally one’s mind pitches ahead.”

“It does,” he admitted. “Do you feel prophetic at the moment?” She sent him a keen glance, at which he colored in spite of himself. “I don’t believe, old boy, you’re quite ready for me to go on yet.”

Now, if one takes the case of a highly sensitive and imaginative young man, whose mind is continually exploring for new sensations, and plunges him into a situation that is clothed with grimness and mystery, there will inevitably be set up a series of reactions such as Derrick had been experiencing for weeks past. And if, further, he then comes into touch with the girl whom he desires for his own, discovers her to be involved in the mystery, and realizes that she will remain out of reach till the problem is solved and her spirit set free, there will be added to his efforts the greatest incentive of all.

So it was with Derrick. Both from Jean herself and from Jean’s mother he now knew exactly where he stood. Though not told in so many words, he was under no misapprehension. All thought of his own work disappeared. This was his work, and the call of it was irresistible. As for Edith, and he smiled when he thought of her, she was in no danger. She stood too far outside the sweep of the drama, and it would be an error in tactics to tell her too much. He believed he would need her help at the end, but the end was not yet.

He was returning from a long and solitary walk when, nearing Beech Lodge, he noted on the road ahead a curious figure. It was that of an elderly-looking man who tramped some hundred yards in advance. His clothing was loose and weather-beaten. He stooped a little forward as he walked, and supported himself on a staff which he had evidently cut by the way. As Derrick drew abreast he took a sidelong glance and at once remarked the brightness of the stranger’s eyes. Physically he did not seem more than fifty years old. A first impression of age was given by the whiteness of his beard, but in spite of both stoop and stick he moved with an agility that belied his apparent years. His skin was a dark olive shade, his nose hooked like a raven’s beak, and his cotton shirt was open at the neck, showing where a thin gold chain lay yellow against the swarthy flesh.

Derrick, meeting a swift look, experienced a sudden thrill. What manner of man was this to find in a Sussex lane? It seemed that something invisible but enormously potent moved down the road beside him. Then, instinctively, he halted at the gate of Beech Lodge and waited till the stranger came up. The latter made a sweeping gesture of salutation, and swung forward the pack that had been balanced on his shoulders.

“Good morning, sir. Will you buy a trinket and help an old man on his way? Cheap, sir, cheap, so cheap that they’re nothing short of presents, trade is that bad. Worse than I ever saw it in this country before.”

He spoke in a thin singsong voice that carried with it a sort of outlandish lilt. No British peddler this, but one from foreign parts. Derrick felt a now familiar thrill, and the spirit of him scented the Orient.

“What part of the world do you hail from?”

“Any and every part, sir. So long as it’s south of the line it makes no difference to me. Central America, Bengal, Borneo, the Cape, Cochîn, and Singapore, they’re all the same.” He shivered a little. “Time was when I thought the old country was the only place in the world, but I’ve got over that now, specially in winter.”

“Have you been here long this time?”

“A matter of a few months, but I’m going back East. This wind is too much for my bones.”

“What have you got?”

The pack was unrolled deftly on the wet grass, and inside lay a long strip of raw silk. Opening this after a swift glance down the road, the stranger revealed a medley of things, some beautiful, many valuable, and none of them ordinary. No Manchester stock was this. He had chains of native workmanship, hammered bangles of gold and silver, semi-precious stones carved with amazing cleverness, bits of oddly shaped ivory, all the paraphernalia of the peddler of the Far East. These he showed with obvious and lingering interest as though he loved them, pattering meantime of the Sunda Islands, the Moluccas, Bali, Lombok, and a host of Eastern ports and places whose accustomed names fell from his lips with glib fluency. There was no doubt about his knowing the East.

“This, sir, is a bit of hammered tin from Kuantan in Pahang, and you don’t get much of that kind of work nowadays. They wash the tin out of the gravel on the hillsides, and there are only three men in Malaysia who turn out this grade of art. This gold bangle is from Berak—all Chinese labor there—and you can have it for ten shillings. Better take it, sir, for it weighs twenty pennyweight and is worth a sovereign for the gold alone.”

“Then why not sell it as gold?”

“I wouldn’t offer it unless I were footsore and had to have somewhere to sleep. Can’t sell this sort of thing in an English village. I’d get arrested for having it; that’s why I’m heading for London.”

His piercing eyes rested on Derrick while he spoke, and in them moved something more than a mere interested scrutiny. Then they roamed curiously about the neighborhood. A brain was working behind those eyes, and it occurred to Derrick that this man knew well where he was.

“Ever been in this part of England before?”

The lean brown fingers hung motionless over the trinkets. “No, sir, there’s nothing to bring my kind here unless it’s the June race meet. Won’t you take

this bangle? There's a good twenty pennyweight of fine gold in it. There isn't a lady who would turn up her nose at it. I've seen a woman bought and sold for one not half as good."

Derrick hesitated. Strange thoughts were coursing through his head and with them the growing conviction that this, like all the rest of it, was meant to be. Perhaps it was grotesque, but had not Perkins said weeks ago that others were coming to Beech Lodge, drawn by mysterious signals they could not withstand? Then Martin had come, and Jean Millicent, and who should say that here was not the last of the gathered company. It was not a bundle of trinkets that had brought this wanderer to these tragic gates.

"What's your name? You speak good English, but you're not English, are you?"

The peddler shook his head. "No, sir, my name is Blunt. My father was English and my mother a Malay woman. I was born out there and spent most of my time between the islands. Now I'm for getting back as soon as I can, so I'm heading for the East India Docks, where I'll sign on. It's too cold for me in this country. Couldn't I spend the night in one of the outhouses, sir?"

"Well," said Derrick thoughtfully, "I think perhaps my gardener might find a corner for you in his cottage. I've no objections. You can see him about it, if you like."

The man's dark eyes took on a sudden gleam. "That's good of you, sir, and I won't be a bit of trouble to any one. If there's any work to be done, I'll do it. Here, you'd better take this bangle now."

He held out the yellow circlet. Derrick was about to refuse when something whispered to him to take it. Slipping it into his pocket, he was surprised at its weight.

"Why do you offer something worth a sovereign for a night's lodging?" he queried.

The peddler sent him a curious glance. "That's all right, sir. A few pennyweight of gold is neither here nor there in a lifetime."

Derrick nodded. "Perhaps not—to either of us. If you turn in here I think you'll find the gardener just on the other side of the cottage."

The man rolled up his pack and moved along the drive toward the house. Derrick stood irresolute for a moment; then something impelled him to follow. Presently he stopped and, making no noise, slipped behind a sheltering tree. The peddler was now thirty yards ahead. At this moment Martin, who had been working among his rose-bushes, looked up and saw the stranger.

What happened next was all over in an instant. He made a swift involuntary gesture in which fear and astonishment were tensely blended. The spade slipped from his fingers, and his eyes protruded. He seemed to sway a little as he stood with an uncouth elephantine motion, and his lips trembled,

but no sound came from them. Then, as Derrick emerged from behind the tree and came carelessly toward him, he made an extraordinary noise in his throat and turned again to his work. And, so far as the master of Beech Lodge could determine, the peddler had given no sign whatever.

Derrick lounged forward with a manner of complete indifference.

“Martin, this man has asked that he might sleep somewhere on the place tonight, and I told him I had no objection to his spending it in the cottage if you’re willing. His name is Blunt, and it’s for you to say. You will be responsible for him if he does stay, so you can settle it between you.”

The gardener’s face had become rigidly impassive, but there was no concealing the blood that surged into it. He glanced first at his master, then at the mysterious stranger, and moistened his dry lips.

“Name of Blunt, sir,” he said thickly. “That will be all right as far as I’m concerned. I’ll look after him.”

Derrick, fearing that his curiosity might become too apparent, nodded and strolled on toward the house. He was very deep in thought. Another factor was now added to the problem and had to be dealt with. In a way it was not unexpected. There had been built up a triangle with a dead man in the center and an undeciphered personality at each corner. Was this all coincidence, or was not destiny rather arranging the puppets of a great drama without any extraneous assistance?

His first instinct was to report the new arrival to Sergeant Burke, but on second thought he decided to say nothing at the moment. The sergeant’s methods were too heavy-handed, too likely to disturb whatever process was now at work. However vague to human eyes it might be, he was convinced that subtle causes were in motion, wheels of fate that revolved within other wheels, a mechanism that operated silently, mysteriously, and with some inflexible purpose. As to himself, he could only wait. Instructions would come, as they always had come, and in the appointed time, from the same imperceptible and unchanging source.

As though in search of these, he went into the study and gave himself up to thought, leaving the windows of his mind open to the lightest breath of influence. His vision embraced four divergent figures, all of them inextricably linked. Perkins, with the half-told tale of her life shrouded behind her sphinx-like face, a domestic automaton as imperturbable as the jade god itself, the rigid guardian of her own secret, who talked a strange language in her sleep, and in that sleep mourned the disappearance of her murdered master. Martin, new come from round the world, the recipient of viewless signals that reached and followed him through the rotting jungles, signals that worked and whispered till they penetrated his slow brain and he came back perforce ten thousand miles of land and sea, a suspect to the source of suspicion, to work

within sight of the window of the dead man of whose violent passing he no doubt knew the secret.

Then the peddler, with restless intelligence in his ageless eyes, himself a traveler from the same land of strange peoples, tongues, and gods, tramping indomitably along the deep Sussex lanes till he arrived as though by chance at the door of one who apparently knew him not, yet regarded his advent with fear and astonishment. And, last of all, Jean Millicent, the shadow of tragedy clouding her bright youth, a creature made for love and tenderness and care but weighted with brooding apprehensions, toward whom his own spirit had begun to move, striving, seeking, and hoping.

Compassed with thoughts like these, he saw himself in relation to those profound forces which, whether acknowledged or not, dominate our lives. The winds of circumstance seemed to him no longer the winds of chance. There was purpose behind all, some high and remote goal to which we are led along roads that might seem strange and byways that wander apparently from the general direction. He knew now that it would be futile to attempt anything save the task that lay directly ahead, and till that task was discharged Jean Millicent could never be his.

He was still plunged in reflection when Edith's entrance brought him sharply back to earth. She came into the study, noted that he was not working, seemed about to speak, then smiled at him inquiringly. He smiled back. She took a penny from her pocket and laid it silently on the desk. Derrick was feeling for another when his fingers closed round the gold bangle.

"Can you wear this?" he asked casually.

She examined it with delighted and intense interest. "It's perfectly lovely, Jack; but where on earth did you get it? Not in Bamberley?"

"Not much," he laughed. "I got it as a present a few minutes ago from my paying guest, or rather Martin's."

"What do you mean?"

"There's a peddler down at the cottage now. He has a pack full of things like that."

She shook her head. "Jack, you know you can't afford it."

"It's all right and didn't cost me anything. It's the price of a night's lodging with Martin."

"Then why didn't the man give it to Martin?"

"That never occurred to me. He was tired and footsore, wanted shelter for the night, and I suggested to Martin that he take him in and be responsible for him. The man insisted that I take this, so there you are. Cheap at the price, I call it. There's a sovereign worth of gold in it."

Edith pushed the bangle on her wrist and twisted it thoughtfully. "Why don't you tell me the real truth, old boy?"

"I have. Want to see him? Interesting sort of person, white beard, bright eyes, and been everywhere. You'll never guess where he's come from now."

"Where?"

"Burma," said Derrick meaningly.

"Isn't that where you told me Martin had come from when he turned up here?" she asked slowly.

"Yes."

She was silent for a moment. "Well, Jack?"

He glanced at her thoughtfully. "It's all part of the rest of it. I'm caught up in something stronger than myself. I can't help it."

She took off the bangle and laid it on the desk. "Do you know where it's leading you?"

He nodded, smiling. "Yes, I think so."

"To Jean Millicent?"

"I believe that," he said gravely. "It seems now that it was meant I should find her like this. It was all meant."

Edith nodded. "When I saw you two together the other day I felt the same thing, so you'd better give her this. It's more appropriate. You see, Jack," she went on with a smile that was rather sober, "I'm not the marrying kind."

"Nonsense," he expostulated.

"It's quite true, and girls know it by instinct rather early in life. Then they try to forget it, and settle down in a sort of way to making other people comfortable. But they can't help seeing what's going on all round them—I mean other girls with their men—and feeling a bit out of it. It's a bit solemn for a woman to realize that she'll never waken the biggest thing in the world in the heart of a man, because she lacks the indescribable something that is necessary, and it makes a good many of us queer and cantankerous. You see we don't possess what every woman longs for.

"Sometimes, too, she has a sort of perception about others. I had it when I saw you with Jean; and, Jack, it made me happier than in a long time. That's why I want you to give her this bangle, which is really lovely, and also tell me just what I can do to help. You needn't make any bones about that. It's my job, and I'm thankful for it. And for goodness' sake, old boy, don't think of me as being down in the mouth. I'm not. I understand about you and Jean, and nothing would make me happier, but as for all the rest of this queer affair I don't understand it at all. So tell me what I can do, and I'll do it. And don't you ever think of me as a good-hearted and deserving spinster, or I'll never forgive you."

It was a long speech for Edith, who but seldom let herself go. Derrick was oddly touched and patted her arm affectionately. He knew she wanted no thanks and felt that in the next few days he might need her more than ever

before.

“I’d like to tell you something. You probably won’t accept it as I do, but you ought to know, and somehow I’m glad you don’t believe in the occult.”

“I don’t,” she said frankly.

“Well,” he laughed, “please carry on. Nothing could help me more. I’ve no desire to spend the rest of my life in criminal investigation. I know you think I’m being carried too far by this one and am collecting a lot of unimportant data that I anticipate will produce something remarkable later on. Perhaps I am, but I’m going to see it through, and you know what I’m working for.”

“She’s a darling,” murmured Edith, thoughtfully.

“It means everything to have you say that.” He looked at her keenly and, deliberating how much to tell her of what was in his mind, decided to leave the matter where it stood and disclose only what was necessary.

“You’ll think it wild of me to associate the coming of this peddler with Millicent’s murder, but I do. I want to keep him here a few days if I can. There’s something, I don’t know what, in the air; but the thing that brought him is probably what brought Martin. I’ll talk with him later on. Would you like to go up to town for a few days?”

“Why?” she asked, puzzled.

“I’ve been thinking it’s rather unfeeling of me to expect you to be here at present under the circumstances. A good many women would not like it.”

Edith smiled and shook her head. “My dear, I can’t take it as seriously as you do, and I’m not nervous. Do anything you like that you believe will bring you nearer Jean. Be as mysterious and occult as you please. It won’t worry me a bit. But the house must be looked after, and that’s for me. I hope this won’t upset Perkins, as things are going very smoothly in her domain, and don’t forget that it will imperil next year’s roses if you demoralize Martin. Now it’s time for lunch.”

CHAPTER VII

A MYSTERIOUS PEDDLER

HE WENT to the Millicents' that afternoon, the bangle in his pocket, and found Jean unaffectedly glad to see him. Mrs. Millicent had said nothing to her daughter, but her manner had been that of one who approves. She liked Derrick and had conceived a genuine fondness for Edith. The contemplated summer in France was becoming a little indefinite. In a few moments she murmured something and disappeared. Derrick thought rapidly and looked straight into the girl's clear eyes. Then he held out the bangle.

"Will you take this from me? It has a curious something about it."

Jean hesitated, the look on his face being unmistakable. "It's charming. Where did you get it?"

"From Burma," he said slowly. "It arrived this morning by a peddler who is staying the night with Martin. He seemed grateful for my allowing it and insisted that I take this from his pack."

She stared at the yellow circlet. "Does he know Martin?"

"He pretended that he did not, but Martin knew him without question and was horrified to see him."

Jean did not speak, but her eyes were full of swift wonder. "And then?"

"Then it was my turn to pretend that I had noticed nothing. They are together now and will be till to-morrow morning, at any rate. That's one reason I came here."

She did not ask the other but slid the bangle on her wrist with a slow and lingering touch. Derrick's gaze did not leave her. He saw the color flood and desert her cheek, and the pulse throbbing in her slim throat. How utterly desirable she was! This was the indescribable quality about which Edith had talked with a cheerfulness that he now saw must have cost her dearly; the thing that secured what all women at some time long to possess.

He waited breathlessly, but she was still silent. Her heart whispered one thing, but over her there yet hung a cloud of memories that well nigh blotted out all else. For so long she had thought of herself as the child of a foully murdered man, for so long had the menace seemed to be transferred to herself, that the promise of a future such as she believed she saw in Derrick's eyes seemed almost as unreal as it was divine. She was already more than fond of him and admitted it in secret hours. It was something new and strange and alluring for the mind to feed on. But what escape would it mean till the secret

of Beech Lodge had been read, and the weight lifted from her soul? She took the bangle because she did not want to hurt him, but her eyes avoided his.

“What do you think is going to happen now?” she asked shakily.

“I don’t know. I wanted to see you first of all. Do you remember such a man ever coming to Beech Lodge before?”

“What is he like?”

He told her, and she shook her head. “I can’t think of any one. Martin had no friends even in the village, and father had no visitors from the East. Can it be the image that brought him?”

“Nothing else, as I see it.”

“But how could he know it was there?”

Derrick smiled. “How did I know? It’s all part of the main puzzle, and perhaps the missing part. I hoped you might be able to tell me something that would throw some light on this man’s arrival. I have a queer idea that it closes the circle, and am going to get him into the study on some pretext.”

“Alone?”

“Yes, to begin with.”

“Have you told the police about him?”

“I’m not ready for the police yet. The first thing to find out is whether the study means anything to him. That little god, or devil, is there, safely out of sight and touch, but if the peddler is what I take him to be, he will know it, and if he has come here for it, some attempt will be made before long.”

“But what about you?” she asked nervously.

“He’s not interested in me, but I expect he has something to say to Martin. He’s probably saying it now. Oh, my dear!” he went on unconsciously, “don’t you see that we’re getting nearer to the end of it every hour?”

Nothing he might have said could have touched her more, or given her a swifter assurance of what lay next his heart. It moved her to see that he did not know he had said it. So tender was the thought that she hid it away to delight in after he had gone. She was ready to love in secret, but he must not know that yet. Then, in this new light, she was suddenly afraid for him.

“Are you quite sure there’s no danger?”

“The danger,” he said slowly, “is to the man who committed the crime.”

There was a little silence till instinctively they turned to other things. It was a strange talk, of the lips and mind only, veering sometimes to ground where as yet it was trespass to enter, and just as often diverted with a deftness that only added to the growing reality of what they both felt but must not declare. He studied the girl, wanting her the more as moments passed, finding in her the charm that is beyond explanation, delighting in her perception, caressing her with the arms of his spirit, and wondering a little at the strangeness of his own voice. Often in days to come they would remember this meeting and

smile at each other.

And Jean, timid lest she show what must not yet be shown, discovered in him a companion of her fancy, a swift interpreter, creative, sensitive, and ambitious, whose nature was fresh and unexhausted. She did not realize how secluded a life had been hers. She only knew that never before had she met a man just like this. And, above all, he made her feel safe.

He walked thoughtfully back to Beech Lodge and, approaching the gates, unconsciously slackened his pace. He pictured the jade god in its hidden cabinet, ominous behind the mellow oak, its creamy fingers resting on its rigid miniature knees. Who had lifted this thing from the place where it should be, and where was that place? It had brought death to Millicent. What would it bring to others? He pictured Perkins, haunting the room of tragic memory that would not let her go. How much more did Perkins see than that to which she had sworn? He pictured Martin, his thick fingers among the rose-trees. What was written on the screen of Martin's mind, what had jerked him out of the jungle, and why should fear be written on his swarthy face at sight of the stranger of that morning? How could he fear a man he did not know? But he did know him!

Pondering this last, and with the cottage but a few yards ahead, Derrick thought he could hear voices, and stepped close against the high hedge that fronted the grounds of Beech Lodge. Peering through this, he could make out the window of the cottage kitchen, and it was from here that the voices came. There was a little stirring of wind that made it difficult to distinguish anything clearly, but even at this distance it was evident that some kind of heated argument was in progress. Martin was speaking with a stubborn sort of rasp in his tones that carried with it a queer suggestion of nervousness, while the other man talked with a contemptuous lift in his voice as though he reminded the gardener of things he had culpably forgotten. Coming as close as he dared, and, leaning tensely forward, Derrick listened. He could not understand one word.

The men were using some unknown language, sometimes sharp, sometimes liquid, shooting it out with a speed that showed complete familiarity. Into Derrick's brain flashed his sister's description of how Perkins had talked in her sleep, and he knew that this was the same tongue. Breathless at the discovery, he listened the more intently. Martin was rapidly getting on the defensive, jabbering a jargon of defiance, in which, however, fear seemed always present. Derrick started at the sound of his own name, then Millicent's, then Thursby's. The word "Buddha" was repeated, but always linked to some unintelligible prefix, and never with the usual respect accorded to the god by

the Oriental.

What the peddler now said appeared to take the form of some kind of pronouncement as though he were delivering a verdict, framed almost in a mysterious chant that sounded as though it came from an infinite distance. In the middle of this Martin burst forth in a great English oath, to which the stranger replied with one word that came like the hiss of a snake, whereat Martin choked audibly and fell silent. Then Derrick, his brain working like an engine, stepped back on the road, strolled on to the gate at his usual pace, and, turning in, went casually on to the house. No sooner had his foot touched the gravel than instantaneous silence spread in the cottage. And at that he smiled grimly.

Passing directly to the study, he closed the door and, making sure he was not observed from the lawn, opened the oak panel. Inside was the jade god and its waxen copy. Weighing these in either hand, he deliberated a moment; then, putting the original back, he closed the cabinet and dropped the model into his pocket. From the top drawer of the big desk he took a small automatic. Finally, with god and gun balancing each other in their concealment, he lit his pipe and strolled back toward the cottage.

This time he knew he was observed, for, as he neared the gates, Martin emerged from the front of the cottage and touched his cap. His face was of a curiously mottled appearance, and betrayed signs of great tension, but as his eyes met those of his master he pulled himself together and assumed his ordinary gruff though respectful manner. Derrick nodded affably.

“Well, Martin, what do you think of those Lady Hillingdons for next year? I see you’ve been at them.”

“They promise well, sir, but I don’t think so much of the Richmonds.”

“Sorry to hear that. Why not?”

“One thing, they weren’t properly pruned last winter, and for another the mildew’s been at them.”

“You don’t seem to think much of the man who was here last.”

“I don’t, sir, and that’s a fact!”

“And what do you make of your visitor of this morning? Does he know anything about flowers?”

“No, sir, flowers aren’t exactly in his line from what I make of him. Queer sort of chap, I should say, but I don’t take it there’s any harm in him.”

“He told me he came from the East. Does he know any of the parts you know?”

“Yes, sir, some.”

“Never happened to come across him before, did you?”

Martin stiffened ever so slightly. “No, sir, never set eyes on him. The East is a big bit of country, and there’s room for all kinds there.”

“You know some foreign lingos?”

“Yes, sir, a trader needs them if he’s going to do any business.”

“Have you tried your friend in that respect?”

“I tackled him just now with Hindustani, but that beat him.”

“It would beat me, too. Does he know any Malay?” Derrick smiled a little.

“Not that I know any myself.”

“Only a word or two, sir.”

“Curious that two traders like you, both of whom have lived in the Orient, should have to fall back on English to converse.”

Martin’s eyes were unfathomable, and Derrick searched his mind for the next move. The man had twice been proved a liar, but the object of his lies was as remote as ever. Then suddenly came the thought of Perkins, babbling what was probably Malay in her dream-haunted sleep.

“I wonder if Perkins happens to know any of those Eastern lingos?”

The man’s face underwent a swift change. There was fear in it now. He ground his heel nervously into the soil, while the big fingers clenched tight. There was in his manner that which suggested a new anxiety, and for the moment he seemed oddly helpless.

“I couldn’t say, Mr. Derrick, but if I may make so bold, I wouldn’t try. She’s a queer woman, and”—here he touched his forehead meaningly—“she’s best left alone. Mr. Millicent never bothered her, and he knew her well.”

Derrick nodded. “You may be right. Where are you putting your visitor to-night?”

“On the floor in the kitchen, sir; he says that’s good enough for him. He’s about used up and asked if he might rest for another day or two. Showed me his feet. They’re in bad shape. I told him it was for you to say.”

Derrick felt a quickening of his pulse. Once again everything fitted in. The peddler would stay, but not on account of sore feet. He pressed his fingers against the image in his pocket, but his mind sped to the dark recess where the real god stared malevolently into the darkness and waited till his servants should gather at his baffling summons. Then he glanced at Martin, experiencing a throb of pity for one who was so secretly tortured. He began to see how the man must already have suffered, anticipating the inevitable, paying in advance, with the pangs of two years, part of the price of a blow that took place in a second. But there was no room now for compassion.

“Did you happen to see the inside of the peddler’s pack?” he asked carelessly.

Martin shook his head. “No, sir, he won’t trouble to show that to the likes of me.”

“I don’t know! I’d ask him if I were you, and have a look at them. They’ll probably remind you of a good many places you ought to know. Also I think

I'd keep an eye on him to-night."

"He's all right so far as that's concerned," put in the gardener hastily.

"He may be, but one can never tell. I fancy he wouldn't mind picking up anything portable, especially if it happened to be in his own line. One can never be sure about men like that. I've known them to wander about the country picking up odds and ends that were of no value to most people, but of particular interest to others. I've half a mind to send him along to the village as it is."

"That will be all right, sir," put in Martin hurriedly; "he's a harmless old soul with not as much strength as a cat. I'll stand good for him."

He spoke with great earnestness and unconsciously raised his voice. Derrick at this moment felt his gaze drawn toward the cottage and, glancing over Martin's shoulder, noted that at one of the tiny windows of the kitchen the blind had been drawn slightly aside. The window was open. Pitching his own tones a little higher, he looked straight into Martin's troubled eyes.

"You remember that talk we had about Mr. Millicent's death the first night you came to see me?"

"Yes, sir," replied the gardener with reluctance.

"Well, I've said nothing about it since then, but I've thought a good deal. What about you?"

"I don't forget it, either, Mr. Derrick, but what else is there to be said? I told you what I know."

"Then I take it that nothing has occurred to you since?"

"What could occur, sir? It's more than two years ago now. The poor gentleman's cold in his grave, and the world has moved on. I'm trying to forget it as hard as I can."

"Yes, I know, but sometimes, Martin, when a man comes back to a well-known place which is associated with an event like that, the mind takes a curious turn and pitches on something it did not see before. It's almost as though the place had kept something up its sleeve to reveal later on. Perhaps it's your friend's arrival that has started me thinking."

Martin sent him an indescribable glance. "I don't quite follow, sir."

"I was wondering," went on Derrick in the same clear tones, "whether it was possible that any one answering to the description of this stranger had been hanging about the night Mr. Millicent was killed. Things like that have been known to happen."

"For God's sake don't talk that way, sir." Martin's face was now desperate, and he glanced apprehensively over his shoulder.

Derrick smiled reassuringly. "I can't see that there's any harm done by mentioning it, and it might be as well to let your friend know that we're not asleep."

The man winced as though struck. "Mr. Derrick, sir, if there's anything you want to say about Mr. Millicent now, couldn't we go a few steps up the drive? It isn't wise, is it, that this fellow should know anything about it?"

"What's the matter with you, Martin?"

"Nothing, sir, but I can't help being upset when I talk about the thing."

Derrick hesitated, then thrust the probe still deeper. "I can't see what difference would be made if he did learn of it. However, let that go, and perhaps you're right. You remember my asking you if anything was missed at that time?"

"Yes, sir, and I told you all I knew."

"And the motive for the crime is as much a mystery to you as ever?"

Martin's lips were trembling now, and he could only nod.

"Well, I had a chat the other day with a man who was on the case, and he told me that another thing, not that creese, was missed and has never been seen since. It was a sort of image, carved in jade."

"I never heard of that, sir," stammered Martin thickly.

"Yes, and apparently it had been picked up by Mr. Millicent in the East years before."

Martin made a convulsive gesture. "Please, sir," he begged, "don't talk like that here."

Simultaneously his gaze was drawn to the cottage window as though by mesmeric power. It seemed that now he had ceased to feel anything except a mounting fear that struck to his very heart. Little tremors ran through his massive frame, and he began to sway with a slow, rhythmic motion as if endeavoring to maintain his balance. His face was a changing mask in which there was not so much of guilt as of a deadly recognition that he was being overtaken by some remorseless destiny from which there was no escape. No longer a gardener, a pruner of rose-trees, or a traveler from far countries. He became in that moment a man under a curse.

Again Derrick felt a fleeting pang of pity for such torture, but remembered the triangle of death, with Martin standing at one corner. At the same time he sensed the strangeness of the situation, in which he, a dweller in a quiet country-side, should be inextricably involved in a problem so grim and unexpected. Might it be some period of fantasy or subconscious phase from which he would presently awaken? To this there were two apparent answers. One, the faint tingle that seemed to spread from the thing hidden in his clenched hand. The other, the picture of a girl waiting, waiting. At that, all thought of compassion vanished from his mind. It was real, all real, and destiny was at work in Beech Lodge. Then in a flash the next move became clear.

"I wonder," he said slowly, "if this was the sort of thing that was missed

from the desk?” He took the image from his pocket and balanced it openly in the palm of his hand. “Of course,” he added, fixing Martin with a steady eye, “you can’t tell me, because you say you never saw it.”

The gardener’s figure seemed to shrink visibly, and his eyes protruded. He made a choking sound, the blood rushed in a mottled flood to his cheeks, and the big hands clasped and unclasped mechanically. Derrick, staring at him, felt a throb of triumph and slid the image out of sight.

“God!” said Martin chokingly. “Oh, God! Where did you get that?”

Then he swung round and glared at the cottage.

Out of the door came the figure of the peddler, and Martin, watching him, made a gesture of despair foreign to so powerful a man. The stranger’s eyes were preternaturally bright, and there was now no trace of the weary limp with which he had moved only a few hours ago. His head was erect, the bent shoulders were straight, his body was lithe and had taken on something of the springy contours of youth. Instinctively Derrick’s fingers tightened round the image, but it was at him rather than at his pocket that Blunt looked first.

“Excuse me, sir,” he began, “but when I was smoking inside just now I couldn’t help hearing you say that some one had been killed in your house. Might I ask who it was?”

The audacity of the thing made Derrick blink. He could not trust himself to glance at Martin but knew that the gardener’s eyes were fixed intently on the peddler’s face. There followed an instant of silence. Derrick realized that he was hunting big game, the biggest game of all, and it behooved him to keep his head.

“Will you tell me first why the matter is of any interest to you?”

Blunt’s lips formed an inscrutable smile, but his gaze was as blank as seawater.

“It’s of no more interest than anything else of the same kind, but I’ve seen a bit of that sort of thing in the East, and it may be I can be of use in getting at the bottom of it, if that’s not been done yet.”

Derrick pondered. “This was not the usual kind of sudden death, and there were no clues left.”

The man nodded understandingly. “There ain’t so many deaths of what you would call the usual kind where I come from, either, but there is most always a clue of some sort if one knows where to look. That’s a matter of instinct. Can’t explain it, but I reckon I’ve got it.”

Over Martin’s features crept a shade of admiration. Derrick saw this, and it stiffened his resolution. The hunt was afoot now, one against two. Soon, he was convinced, it would be one against three, when Perkins joined in. She would prove perhaps the most elusive of all. Then his mind jumped back to the man in front of him.

“I don’t see how a complete stranger could spot at first sight anything that skilled detectives failed to discover after very close examination,” he said coolly. “You’ll have to convince me that it’s something more than mere curiosity on your part before I go any further.”

“And against that there’s such a thing as looking at some object for so long that after a while one doesn’t see it at all. It’s the fresh eye that picks things up. Would it surprise you if I said that you’ve got something close to you at this minute that might be a clue, and you never guess it.”

Martin drew in his breath sharply, but Derrick’s eyes never left the stranger’s face.

“Isn’t that a rather wild shot of yours?”

“It may be, but I’ll risk it. I reckon I’ve sucked in something from the places I’ve been in that helps to get under the skin at times. Getting back to clues, this world is full of clues that go unnoticed just because people don’t know how to look at them. Same thing when you get so used to a thing that you can’t tell whether it’s in the room or not, without making sure. That’s because you don’t hear what it says.”

“Ah,” put in Derrick swiftly, “then you believe that things talk?”

“It’s the only talk worth listening to now and then.”

Derrick’s pulse quickened. “Is that what you depend on in this case?”

The peddler nodded. “Perhaps it would surprise you if I said that something was talking at this very minute, a queer kind of stuff that I only half get.”

Saying this, he lifted his eyes, and sent Derrick an extraordinary look. There was power in it, and a certain mesmeric weight, and in a strange but unmistakable fashion it invited the young man to acknowledge what he himself believed. This look stated very plainly that the stranger saw through Derrick’s camouflage, and also quite understood the present necessity for it; but it suggested, too, that behind the newcomer was an authority that as yet he had no intention to disclose. There were no words in which to phrase what Derrick felt. Presently, and as though to make the thing as easy as possible for the master of Beech Lodge, the little man gave a short laugh.

“You might as well let me try it, sir. If I fail there will be no harm done.”

Derrick, without realizing it, took his cue. “Well,” he said good-humouredly, “at any rate, you can’t do much harm by having a look at the room. What do you say, Martin? I’ll let you decide, since you’re responsible for Blunt while he’s here.”

Martin twisted his lips in a vain effort to speak, but it seemed that any reminder of responsibility was almost too much for him. He shot the peddler a swift glance, in which fear and respect were mingled, and when he looked at his master his eyes implored that he be not further involved. In that moment

Martin acted like an honest man. Then the expression passed, and his face was once more a mask.

“That’s just as you feel about it, sir.”

Derrick turned to Blunt. “Well, then, you can come up, say, at six o’clock, and you’d better bring Martin with you. And, by the way,” he added, “if you want any details about this murder before you come, Martin knows a good deal more than I do, so you’d better pump him.”

Blunt shook his head. “It’s just as well I shouldn’t know anything at all, sir. Sometimes the more one thinks one knows the less one finds out.” Again he sent the young man that extraordinary look.

“All right; but if you change your mind, and Martin gets stuck, I’ll put you in touch with Perkins at the house.”

Martin started at this, but Blunt seemed unmoved. “Who might Perkins be?”

“The maid who was here when Mr. Millicent died. She found him.”

The man’s expression did not change in the slightest.

“I won’t want to bother her, sir; and look here, if you doubt my faith you can take my pack till you’re satisfied I’m straight. Anything else?”

His voice lifted as he spoke, and Derrick knew what he meant. The sharp eyes peering from the cottage window had missed nothing. The stranger was aware that something lay hidden in that pocket, nor could all his art conceal the hunger that was growing in his soul. Derrick, his mind tense, and realizing that every step taken now must inevitably affect the last scene of the drama, gripped the image with fingers that felt suddenly cold, then drew it out and dropped it carelessly into the peddler’s hand. The man quivered at the touch.

“While we’re on the subject, there’s something that may interest you. Ever see anything like it before?”

A tremor ran through the lean form, and the bright eyes became clouded with emotion. The brown fingers closed caressingly, till, all in a breath, a look of concentrated shrewdness spread over the swarthy face. The man stared at the molded wax, then at Derrick. “You clever devil!” was what the eyes said. He grasped the meaning of this model, there could be no doubt of that, and telegraphed an unconscious admiration to the one who had fashioned it. He scanned the small square base, the cloaked shoulders, the tiny folded hands, and the hellish sneer on the pygmy features, and nodded. Yes, it was all there, and nothing was there. A great gulf yawned between wax and jade. But the peddler remained master of himself, while Martin, at his elbow, seemed rooted to the ground.

“What do you think of it?” asked Derrick smoothly.

The peddler shook his head. “Of this, sir, nothing at all; but if I could see the original it might be another matter. Do you happen to have it?”

"I do, but not here. And it doesn't belong to me. Ever see anything like it?"

Blunt nodded. "Yes, but not often. The original of this may have come from Indo-China, up northeast of the Bay of Bengal. I reckon it would be about five hundred years old. They don't make them often nowadays. These things sometimes drift down into the Malay country, but they're not supposed to. Look here, sir, I've a leaning for carved jade, which brings a good price from the Chinese, and I'll trade you anything in my pack for the original of this."

"But I've told you it's not mine."

"Maybe, sir, but if you'll put me in touch with the owner I'll make it worth his while to sell."

"We'll see about that later. Why did you say that these things are not supposed to get out of Indo-China?"

"Let me ask first, sir, if this ever brought any bad luck to the man who owned it?" He paused and smiled cynically. "I mean the original."

Derrick nodded. The daring of it was prodigious.

"Does it happen to be the man you spoke of just now?"

"Yes."

Again the odd smile, and the peddler handed back the image. "It's a queer thing," he said slowly, "but I've heard tell that the spirit of Buddha doesn't like these things drifting about. It's talk of the East, of course, and perhaps it isn't worth much in England. But there's something at work in those parts that gets hold of people without their knowing it. It isn't so long ago that I was in a temple up country where there was something like this, and it just looked at me and dared me to steal it. I reckon I would have tried to if it hadn't been guarded by about a hundred priests. It was the same size as this, and just as ugly, and carved out of jade, too.

"All round it there were the usual images, but arranged like rows of policemen. Next it was an empty stand, and I guessed that that was where another one just like it had been, but when I asked where it had got to there was a hell of an excitement, because the beggars thought perhaps I had it and had come after its mate. It took me all my time to get them quieted down. Queer sort of game, wasn't it, sir?"

"Yes," said Derrick, in a strained voice. "Anything else?"

"We had a lot of talk back and forth but didn't get anywhere. They seemed to claim that the thing was a sort of link between what one saw and didn't see, and in a way joined them up to make a kind of general picture. I didn't take much stock in all that, for Indo-China is stuffed with temples where they palaver about such subjects year after year. So that, sir, is why I happen to be interested in the original of this, and if you could put me in the way of getting it I'd make it worth your while."

Derrick glanced involuntarily at Martin. On the man's face had settled a look of utter hopelessness. There was no sullenness now, nothing grim or repellent. His eyes, at times so furtive, held only despair. His figure was slack, the broad shoulders dropped, and the big hands hung inert by his side. As though conscious of his master's scrutiny, he looked up and pulled himself spasmodically together.

"Well," said Derrick, "I don't know if the present owner puts any value on the thing, but I'll find out." He took back the wax impression and slipped it into his pocket. "I don't suppose this model really interests you from what you tell me."

The peddler shook his head. "The copy is dead," he replied slowly, "but, from what I gathered in the East, the real thing may have a sort of life in it."

"All right, I'll see you both at six o'clock."

The man touched his cap. Derrick strolled on through the white gates, and, turning to the right, took the road that led away from Bamberley. Following this a quarter of a mile, he left it abruptly, traversed a neighboring copse, and doubled back along a parallel lane. He walked fast and came to the village in a little more than half an hour. In the tiny police office sat Sergeant Burke. Derrick waved his hand, went in, and took the proffered chair. Burke's face was full of sudden interest, but he asked no questions. Presently Derrick leaned forward.

"I think, sergeant, that an attempt at robbery will take place at Beech Lodge within the next hour or so."

Burke sat up straighter than ever. "What's that, sir?"

"I'll explain in a minute, but first I want to make sure that, so far as the evidence went, no stranger was seen in the vicinity of the Lodge about the time of the murder."

"No, sir. That seems to be without question."

"No peddler or traveling tinker had been in Bamberley that week?"

"No, Mr. Derrick, these people are all licensed and registered, and we examine the license of every one who comes along. They are under the head of itinerant vendors."

"Well, there's an itinerant vendor at the Lodge now, and he's more keen on buying than selling. He doesn't make any bones of the fact that he'd like to get hold of the original of this."

Derrick put the model on the table, and Burke fingered it curiously.

"Neat sort of job you've made of it, sir. Weighs about the same, too, doesn't it?"

"Yes, I put some shot inside the base and balanced it with the other. It's the other that my peddler friend is coming to see at six o'clock. Martin will be there with him."

“When did this fellow turn up?”

Derrick told him all that had happened, Burke’s face growing ever more tense, while he thrilled to the belief that the Millicent case was alive again.

“You haven’t missed much, sir,” he rambled presently. “Now what can I do?”

“At six o’clock those two men will be in the study. Blunt will be apparently in charge of Martin, whom I have made responsible for him, but actually I suspect it is the other way round. From what I can see, Martin is under Blunt’s thumb. Blunt will be asked if the room suggests anything to him in connection with the murder. He will probably pretend it does, and begin some kind of queer story, which may after all have something in it. I expect that he will in some way involve Martin, and that’s what Martin is in such fear of. At the same time, so far as Blunt is concerned, I can’t feel that Martin is so very important. It’s the image he’s after. Whether he can resist the impulse when he sees the real thing I can’t tell, but if he does not, that’s where you come in. The Millicent case will then start all over again with an attempted burglary, and I shall be in a position to testify that Martin lied to me about the burglar. And that’s as far as I can go at the moment.”

Burke nodded approvingly. “Then you want the grounds guarded?”

“Yes, in any way you think best. I would not bother about the front door; it would take too long to get out that way. The French window is the place.”

“The trap will be set at a quarter to six,” said Burke, glancing at the clock.

Derrick grinned contentedly. “It would be a bit of a feather in your cap, sergeant, if you could pull this thing off after two years.”

CHAPTER VIII

THE POWER OF THE UNKNOWN

DERRICK walked quickly back, slackening speed as he approached the Lodge, and reëntering the grounds from the direction in which he had started. There was a light in the cottage kitchen, but neither man came to the window as he passed. In the study he found Edith beside the tea-tray. She handed him his cup, and with it sent an inquiring glance.

“How’s your friend the peddler behaving himself, and what did Jean say?”

He flushed a little. “She didn’t say very much, but”—he smiled reminiscently—“she took the bangle.”

“I’m glad of that, my dear,” she said softly. “Had she ever heard anything of the peddler?”

“Not a word, nor has Sergeant Burke.”

“You’ve been there, too?”

He nodded. “I thought it best to have a chat with him. He’ll be here in a few minutes.”

“Why, has anything happened?”

“No, but something may, and I want to be ready, in case.”

“I don’t understand, Jack. What do you anticipate?”

“Well, our friend has an odd idea that he may be able to suggest something that would help in the Millicent matter in the way of a clue if he could see the place where it happened. So I’m having him in here shortly with Martin, who doesn’t seem to fancy the visit at all. The sergeant won’t be in evidence, and they know nothing about him.”

“Oh!” she said slowly, “can I do anything except keep out of the way? I’ve an idea that’s what you want me to do.”

Derrick laughed. “It is, exactly. There’s one other thing. I’d like to see Perkins for a minute before the others come.”

Edith got up. “Then finish your tea, and I’ll send her in for the tray. She’s been even more queer than usual to-day, so I fancy she knows that man is here. Good luck to you, brother, and I’m so glad I know what you’re working for.” She bent over, kissed him impulsively, and went out.

He sat motionless for a moment, vibrant with the knowledge that he was playing for great stakes. Martin—the peddler—Perkins—the jade god—all intervened between him and the goal of his desire. At that his nerves seemed slowly to be turned to steel.

The door opened. Perkins came in and busied herself with the tray, and for the first time he noted that her fingers were trembling. Something of the transitory pity he had felt for Martin came over him, and he made a gesture toward a chair.

“Please sit down a minute, Perkins. I want to ask you something.”

She seated herself silently and sent him a blank glance.

“What I want to inquire is something more about Martin. Can you tell me nothing of his history before he came to Mr. Millicent?”

“Why should you ask me, sir?”

“Who else is there to inquire from? You occupy just the same trusted position that you have for years past. You’ve let me into your feelings enough to know that you perceive things that are not usually seen, and you’re aware that I’m doing what I can to clear up the mystery of your master’s death. Shall I say to you that I’m convinced you are trying to shield some one in this affair?”

“Don’t say that, sir,” she whispered shakily.

“What other conclusion can I come to?”

She stared at him as though he was an intruder on some strictly private domain and had come to rifle her very soul.

“Do you think there’s any connection between the murder and the arrival of this peddler?”

Perkins shook her head. She made no attempt to disguise her knowledge of the stranger’s advent and now seemed touched with the same helplessness that had so lately swept over Martin. Her hands were slack in her lap, and he noted their smoothness and strength.

“I’m afraid I cannot help,” she muttered.

He looked straight into the passionless eyes. “And yet you must know so much more than I do. Here, in this room, the voice of a dead man is sounding now, asking for vengeance. There are other voices, we have both heard them, but this is the clearest. Here your master died, and the evil thing triumphed, and you told me that fear came before he died, the fear that is worse than death. Can’t you hear that voice?”

The blank-faced woman shivered as he spoke, and Derrick knew that the truth had crept a little, a very little nearer than ever before. There was mystery in the study, but the greatest mystery of all was locked within this unresponsive breast. There was some chord which, if he could only touch it, would vibrate in unison with her guarded secret and unloose its bonds. Perkins trembled again and waited.

“He was good to you, as everyone has told me,” went on the steady voice, “and it seems that you were devoted to him. For six years you had his confidence and lived under this roof. I do not know what may have taken place

before that, if anything, but is six years forgotten so soon?"

"Don't!" she said brokenly. "Don't!"

"Two men are coming here in a few moments," he persisted. "Of one of them I know little, and nothing of the other. But I am assured that in the peddler's heart are things at which I have not guessed. He, too, has his secret, or he would not be here. He poses as a stranger, but something tells me that he is no stranger to Martin, and perhaps not to you."

"Why do you say that?" she flashed.

"It matters not why, but I have my reasons. It may be that there are now assembled all those who were here two years ago, and the Millicents are not far away. One of these men was in the grounds of Beech Lodge when its master met his death, Perkins; was the other here, too?"

He shot out these last words in a tone so sharp and commanding that the woman quailed visibly. Her fascinated eyes were fixed on him in a stare that began to be strangely hypnotic, till it seemed that she was receding visibly from his reach, dwindling to a distance, and leaving behind her only a baffling intelligence that mocked and dared him to follow if he could. She had recoiled, but with her secret locked tighter than ever. He became aware that fear, though fear was in her every motion, could not conquer her. She relied apparently on powers that from long use had become stronger than fear. When at last she spoke, it was as though a safe distance had been established and her spirit had caught its breath again. She seemed now safe from further probing.

"I have told you already what happened that night, how I found the master"—here she hesitated a little—"and then went for Martin. There was no one at the cottage but him. There is nothing else to be said."

"And Blunt," he said again. "The man who will be here in a few minutes, the man who is so anxious to enter this room, has he never been here before?"

"I am not Blunt's keeper," she parried. "I do not know, but"—and at this point an extraordinary light flickered through her dull eyes—"he may have been. I cannot see in the dark."

"He made an offer for something this afternoon," said Derrick quietly, "something that seemed of little worth to me."

She looked at him silently, as though in contempt of his childishness.

He felt in his pocket and leaned forward. "The offer was for the original of this," he replied, and put the wax image on the desk immediately in front of him.

In the next moment he snatched it away. Perkins, springing with convulsive strength, had laid her nervous grip on the model, her eyes suddenly ablaze with mad cupidity. In a fraction of time she was transfigured into a wild thing dominated by one uncontrollable desire, and her movement had the swiftness of light. Her hands closed like claws, but even as she touched the

thing her grip relaxed, for in that instant she knew it was not real. She sent Derrick the same strange look of baffled incredulity he had received from the peddler, then sank back in her chair, trembling and unnerved. Her gaze rested on what lay safe in his grasp, wandered to the picture of her master, and round the paneled walls, searching for what she knew must be somewhere close at hand. The hunger in her eyes slackened, becoming reborn again as though fanned into life by this knowledge, till again she was almost a demon, urged by some driving force, terrible in its power.

Once more the light faded, the tense figure slowly relaxed, the face resumed the sphinx-like character to which he was so well accustomed, and there was before him the former Perkins, silent, mysterious, and remote. She quivered as though from the storm that had passed over her and, with her body limp, waited for what might come.

“Does Martin want the real image, too, like yourself and Blunt?” he asked deliberately.

She remained silent, her lips pressed tight.

“Then what is this thing?”

Even while he spoke there came to him the certain knowledge that in the emerald depths of the hidden figure lay that which passed man’s understanding. Nor could any man tell how this should be. The fact was potent enough, and, as to the rest, it mattered not when or why. The tiny god exemplified something for which there was no explanation. It was absurd to expect Perkins to make one. It rested in the abyss that yawns at the feet of all, whether they see it or not. Sometimes one might touch it in the darkness, only to lose it. The thought of it imposed sudden silence in careless hours and made the lips dry and the blood tingle as it does when we feel on our brows the touch of vanished fingers, and out of nothingness comes the echo of a remembered voice. No, there was no explanation. Perkins spoke after a stinging pause.

“Where did you find it? I mean the other?”

“It found me. Can you understand that?”

She nodded, her eyes still wide. “All the time I knew it was here. I could hear it talking, talking in the dark.”

“It has been there for two years, and I do not know how much longer. Did it send the fear that was worse than death?”

“What else could have sent it? But it was not on his desk when I found him.”

“Then if the man who killed your master had captured this as he hoped, there would have been no death here that night?”

“No,” she whispered, “no death, and perhaps no fear.”

“So that the man who wanted it then may after all be the same as the one who wants it now, and, having washed his hands, he returns for what he then

sought?”

Again the sudden light in the baffling eyes, as of torches lit in the gloom. Derrick saw it and racked his brain. It was not an old thought that moved behind the mask now, but some conception new to that mysterious mentality. Were Blunt indeed the criminal, and assuming his return to recapture his prize, why should the suggestion of this produce so vivid a reaction? If this were the truth, why conceal it? What could this woman lose by coming into the open? She would write herself down a liar, and an innocent man be avenged. No, there was something else, and it beckoned a mystical finger to Derrick's imagination and invited him on. The grim reality of the moment fell on him like a cloak. In a few more clock-ticks there would be others with whom to deal.

“Perkins,” he said evenly, “for better or worse this matter must soon take another form. Two men will shortly be in this room, and one of them in all probability is guilty of murder. You know this, and I know it. The hand of fate may descend suddenly and point clearly, or it may be that the innocent may suffer for the guilty. God forbid that this should happen, but it has happened before, and sometimes because those who knew the truth were not there to tell it or, knowing it, kept an infamous silence. I ask you again, has Blunt to your knowledge ever been at Beech Lodge before, and, if so, was he here at the time your master died?”

“I am not Blunt's keeper,” repeated the woman.

Derrick slid the wax image into a drawer. “Thank you, Perkins. You've told me what I wanted to know.”

The door closed behind her. Derrick did not stir but waited till the last sound died away. The hour of decision had come, and there was but one thing to do. He took a glance at Millicent's calm face, read in it a mute approval, and, opening the invisible panel, took the jade god from its dark recess.

Setting it a little on one side of the lamp, he stared hard into its pygmy countenance. There still sounded in his ears Blunt's voice telling of strange gods in strange countries, and there came now the unforgettable whisper of the East, with its mystery, its scarlet passions, its swift terrors, its throbbing invitations, and the jungle call of its fevered life. There was more than that. On these miniature lips was set the smile of sardonic knowledge and the curve of utter evil. The lids that lay over the slant and lazy eyes were heavy with slumber, but it was a repose that carried with it no oblivion. Unnameable knowledge rested on the face, a knowledge that sneered at good and gathered to itself the wickedness of misty centuries. Here was the touch of supreme art, the superb assurance of a master hand, but the issue was to charge the mind with a blinding comprehension of all that decent men most strive to forget.

Still staring, he yielded unconsciously to the spell. Beech Lodge grew

oddly indefinite. The landmarks of his mind seemed unsubstantial. He was free as the wind, with neither kith nor kin. He found himself wondering why for months he should have been possessed by the desire to avenge a man he never saw. The tiny green eyes suggested that Millicent, and even Millicent's daughter, did not matter so much after all. "Come East," they signaled, "where man can taste all the wild joys of life, and women know how to love as do no others. Books, what are books? Dead things and dusty against the curve of a breast and the languorous hours of tropic nights. Good is ever the same, and it is only evil that changes, assuming a thousand lovely shapes, inviting, alluring, the wine that, having tasted, no man may forget. Come and drink deep while your blood is hot. There are those who wait to show you the way, and soon it will be too late."

Thus spoke the jade lips; thus cajoled the jade eyes. Even the milky fingers with their narrow, transparent nails seemed to lose their stiffness and beckon, while the blood deserted Derrick's heart and the hair prickled on his head. He was listening to the soul of the man who had carved this thing, and what manner of man or devil could he be? But, whoever he was, he knew, Derrick felt that, and knew it utterly. Yes, life was short, too short. Perhaps the jade god was right!

His brain began to swim, and the image now to recede, now to approach, dwindling to a pin-point, and swiftly enlarging till it towered over him, when something drifted in from the outer world. He blinked like one wakened from sleep. It was a tapping at the French window. He got up and crossed the room unsteadily. There was visible through the glass a peaked hat, a broad, red face, and a pair of bright, inquiring eyes. He breathed deeply and with a sudden sense of relief. Here was something sane and strong and wholesome. It seemed to dear away the miasma that surrounded him.

He stepped out and found the sergeant flattened against the wall in a vain endeavor to minimize his own bulk.

"Got here as soon as I could, sir, and had a squint at the cottage; they're both there. Peters is behind the hedge at the back. Anything new since I saw you?"

"There may be a good deal. I think it's likely that the peddler is the man we want after all, and not Martin. The woman Perkins declines to say whether she has seen him before or not, also whether he was in this neighborhood the night of the murder."

"Good enough, sir. That ought to help. Anything else?"

Derrick glanced at his watch. "Yes, the sight of the image produced on her the same effect precisely as it did on the others. She, too, tried to get it. That's all there's time to say now, sergeant. The men ought to be here in five minutes."

“Are you armed, sir?”

“Yes, but I hardly think it’s necessary. You’ll be able to attend to that end of it. Mind you, I’m not at all sure that anything is going to happen. This is only a shot in the dark. Can you see the image on the desk quite clearly from where you are?”

“Yes. Is that the real one? It looks somehow more alive than the other.”

Derrick smiled. “Just what Blunt told me. The dummy wouldn’t serve the purpose with him, so we must take this chance. Don’t stir unless one of them tries to get away with it. If no such attempt is made, it’s for us to make the next move. I take it, sergeant, you’re willing to work with an amateur a little while longer?”

Burke nodded grimly. “I’ll follow any one who can lead me to the man who killed Mr. Millicent.”

He moved back and out of sight. It was nearly dark now, and Beech Lodge was encircled with ghostly shadows. Edith had obliterated herself in her bedroom, and was pretending to read. All she asked was that this too serious play-acting be concluded as soon as possible. It deranged the house and made her restless and uncomfortable. Derrick manipulated the curtains so that they hung partly open, revealing the French window, then seated himself at the desk and shot an oblique glance at the jade god. He was not afraid of it but experienced no desire to stare straight into those emerald eyes. He glanced at Millicent’s portrait, asking mutely whether so far all was well done, but Millicent seemed uninterested. What could he mean by that? Then steps in the hall, and low voices, and a tap at the door.

Came Perkins’s flat tones saying that Martin and Blunt were outside. She looked not at all at the image but seemed to know it was the original. Whatever emotion it may have aroused, she gave no sign, and he marveled at her self-repression.

“All right, they may come in, and I think you’d better stay in the room while they are here.”

A flicker of surprise flitted across the blank face. Then she nodded with only the ghost of a smile. It seemed that she was not unwilling to stay, and the smile was a little satirical and rather cruel, he thought. But he remembered that she was not Blunt’s keeper. In the next moment the men entered, their caps in their hands. Derrick leaned back in the big chair. The curtain was up now.

“Blunt,” he said with slow distinctness, “it may be that we are both wide of the mark in this attempt, and, frankly, I don’t see how you can be of any real assistance. It is only because you told me that sometimes you had been able to get under the skin of things that I’m making it. You understand that?”

The peddler nodded, and for an instant their eyes met. The man’s gaze swung back to the thing he had been staring at since he crossed the door-step.

Irrepressible hunger and desire was in the stare. Derrick seemed oblivious to this.

“The murder took place in this room two years ago. Martin has told you that, I assume?”

“Yes, sir, he has.”

“It occurred between nine and ten at night. Over the mantel you will see a picture of Mr. Millicent, who was found dead in this chair where I am sitting. Apparently he had not time to make any defense. This jade thing used sometimes to stand in front of him, but it seems that it cannot have been there that night. It is not known, as yet”—here Derrick paused for a second—“how the murderer entered the house.”

He hesitated an instant, then looked suddenly at Perkins. “That’s right, isn’t it? It’s not known?”

“Not as yet, sir,” she answered slowly.

Martin made an involuntary gesture, but the peddler wheeled and sent the woman a swift and penetrating glance that had in it something of contempt, as though he had caught the drift of her words and they actually amused him.

“Can you tell me anything more, sir?”

“Yes, though it may be you know it already from Martin. The weapon that is believed to have been used has disappeared, a Malay creese that was always on this desk. No motive was then ascribed to the crime, but it now seems that this might have been robbery, which was unsuccessful. No strangers are shown to have been at the house that day, and not as far as Perkins is aware have any been here till very recently. No clues—and I take it that it is possible clues in which you are interested—were left. Now you can tell me if anything suggests itself to you. If you want to ask any questions, ask them.”

The bright eyes were fixed on the speaker’s face. Martin was rooted to the ground but cast furtive looks at the peddler, swerving from these to stare with a dumfounded expression at the image. He had nearly mastered his feelings, but there was a twitch in his fingers he could not manage to control. Perkins, her lean hands folded, regarded Blunt with a fixed and provocative gaze, as though inviting him to escape if he could from the net she was weaving. But Blunt seemed unmoved. His keen eyes slowly examined every angle of the room, scrutinized Millicent’s portrait with temporary interest, then traveled to desk and chair, mentally photographing their minutest detail. Finally he looked at the French window, and Derrick wondered if by chance he knew what waited outside.

“Was that door locked at the time?” he asked after a long pause.

Derrick turned to Perkins. “Was it?”

“Yes,” she said curtly.

“And the front door?”

"I am not sure of that. Mr. Millicent usually saw to it before he came upstairs."

Martin started. "What are you trying to get at?" His voice was rough and threatening, his eyes vicious.

For answer the peddler fixed on him a glittering stare, whereat the gardener blinked and was silent. Derrick caught his breath. The very air was now ominous.

"Anything changed here since the murder happened?" asked Blunt with a curious lift in his voice.

"Just what do you mean?"

"Things are talking to me now. They're a bit confused, and all I can get is that this room may not be the same as it was then."

Perkins put her hand to her throat. "How do you know?" she whispered.

Derrick leaned tensely forward. This was evidence, new evidence.

"Go on, Blunt. Tell me just what you're after."

"I mean, are things in the same place as when that man was killed?"

A slight sound escaped from Perkins, and her nostrils dilated, while Derrick caught a swift but meaning glance that passed between herself and the gardener.

"I don't know; I never thought of that. Are they, Perkins?"

"No." She spoke with a sort of satisfaction, not unmingled with surprise. "And," she added meaningly, "no one else has asked that question for two years."

"Why do you ask, Blunt?"

The peddler seemed untroubled. "In a way, I was told to," he broke off, and regarded Perkins with absolute composure. "What change is there now?"

"The desk was in the other corner," she said faintly, "and facing the window, and this screen was on the other side of the fireplace opposite the sofa." She got this out with a quick look at Martin in which she seemed to expect his approval and almost thanks.

"Then any one sitting at the desk would naturally see out of the window but would not notice the door without turning?" put in Derrick sharply.

"Yes, sir, it was like that."

"Well, Blunt, does all this take you anywhere?"

The peddler came a shade nearer the desk. His eyes were now half closed, and his dark features had smoothed out till they were strangely inexpressive. He might have been under the influence of a dream. The silence began to throb, and over Beech Lodge crept the touch of the mysterious East. None moved, for in that moment the jade god asserted his domination. The air seemed to palpitate, tremulous with unseen vibrations, and a whisper of wind drifted from the pattering fire. Then Blunt began to speak in a sort of half-

chant without color or inflection, his voice sounding thin and clear and distant and carrying with it a nameless note of authority.

“I see far away a picture of a place, large and poorly lighted. Strange people are there, moving without sound, and strange smells are in the air. Around it there are many trees, and when one comes that way a whisper runs ahead through the forest, telling of his coming. I see a man not unlike this one”—here the peddler made a gesture at the portrait—“but dressed otherwise and with his skin dark like that of the quiet people. He has journeyed from across the sea, drawn there he knows not why, and saying nothing of the purpose of his journey, because he himself did not know it. Traveling slowly, and taking at times many false trails, he comes at last to this place, and, staying not long, goes away by night, but not empty-handed. Behind him he leaves sorrow and a great anger and fear.”

The voice trailed out uncertainly, and a shudder ran through the peddler’s body. His whole figure was now swaying, and his head moved with a slow rhythmic motion.

“Go on,” said Derrick tensely.

“Not far from this place there is another man, and to him many call as with one voice, and a burden is laid upon him, and after a little while he is not seen there any more. Meantime the first man has returned to his own land and the faces he knew best, and tried to shake off the memories of what he had done and that distant place. But he could not do this. Time went on, and always in his dreams he returned there and could not forget. The thing he had taken was his master. At first when he wanted it, he thought he loved it, and then learned it was not love but fear. It was a thing of power, and stronger than himself. Mystery was in it, and thereby it was able to give tongues to that which could not otherwise speak. It was a tongue for the dumb.”

Derrick nodded without knowing it. The world was full of clearing mists through which he began to perceive that which heretofore was hidden. His eyes wandered to Perkins. She stood rigid, as under a spell, her soul carried away by some invisible stream. Martin’s furtive gaze had changed, and his face was graven with despair, behind which moved desperate possibilities. Derrick saw these and thankfully remembered the man crouching against the wall outside.

“Go on,” he repeated.

“Others had heard that voice, thousands and thousands of them, and they too loved and hated and desired and feared this thing. It was always like this from the very first, because its hate had conquered love, and the fear in it was at war with desire. It had sucked in all that the hearts of men can feel, and because of its wisdom, and because it was at war with the spirit of Buddha, it had been kept close till that day. But only those on whom the spirit of Buddha

rested might know the greatness and danger of this thing. And it was written that should it go from that place death would follow wherever it went.”

Something in the unbroken monotone captured the brain of Derrick, and the room swam. A mesmeric influence was at work. Everything around him began to slide, smoothly, imperceptibly. Was Millicent’s death so important after all? Soon it would be forgotten—with all else. What did he owe Millicent in any case? Why trouble to waste his time on another man’s affairs? Perkins, Martin, and even Blunt himself became blurred in this general indistinction, merging peacefully with other unrealities.

“So death came into this room, brother to fear, following the steps of the doomed. It was in no hurry but waited till fear had established itself firmly. There was not any escape, and there could be none, and the man who was to die walked between them for years, seeing their faces whichever way he turned.” The peddler waited an instant and leaned slightly toward Martin. “So it will be with the next appointed to die.”

Perkins was as though turned to stone, and Derrick’s breath came faster. There fell a stinging silence, while the atmosphere seemed to hum and quiver. Then from Martin proceeded a strange choking sound, and in that second Blunt leaped forward. With the swiftness of light he traversed the ten feet between him and the desk and grasped the image. At the mere touch of this, an amazing virility shot through his body, and he darted like a stone from a catapult across the room toward the French window. Derrick tried to shout, but his tongue had lost its power. Following a violent splintering of glass and wood, a bull-like roar from Burke, and the lithe figure was half-way over the lawn. Behind it lumbered the big frame of the sergeant, losing ground at every stride.

Oblivious of the others, Derrick dashed out and took up the chase. The jade god was in flight now. He had drawn level with Burke when there sounded directly ahead the noise of a struggle, a sharp whistle, the curse of a man who is strained to the utmost, and finally a strange, shrill cry. At that the sergeant slackened his pace.

“That’s Peters,” he panted, laboring for breath. “I gave him orders to station himself there behind the hedge, and a good job, too. He’s got our friend.”

Derrick sped on. “Come along,” he shouted over his shoulder. “He may need help.”

Burke grunted. “Not him, with a chap that size, but the little devil pushed his finger into my throat, and I saw stars. Make your own pace, sir, but it’s all right now.”

On the other side of the hedge the peddler lay flat, the constable bending over him. The face of the latter was flushed and the collar of his tunic torn. He saluted mechanically when Derrick ran up but said nothing till Burke arrived,

breathing like a leaky bellows.

“I don’t know what to make of this, sergeant. The fellow ran practically into my arms before he knew where he was and put up no end of a fight. He got his finger into my throat and would have done me in if I hadn’t thrown him. Then he got up and went for me again like a wild animal. I got this thing away from him, and he spun round on his toes, put something in his mouth, and crumpled up. Now he looks as though he were dead, but I haven’t used any unnecessary force.”

“All right, Peters; he’s not dead. It’s only bluff. You can make your charge now, Mr. Derrick, and we’ll run him in.”

“Charge? I’ve nothing to charge him with.”

Burke grinned. “Do I take it that he attempted burglary and smashed that door by your request?”

Derrick laughed outright. “I’d clean forgotten that already.” What he did not tell the sergeant was that somehow he felt immeasurably younger and happier.

“Well, it’s plenty to hold him for a while till we get at the real thing. This will be theft and damage to property. Pick him up, Peters!”

“One minute,” interrupted Derrick. “Did he say anything to you?”

“Not a word, sir.”

The young man did not answer but knelt quickly beside the prone figure. A sickly color, half gray, half blue, was stealing slowly over the peddler’s features. His eyes, partly open, were glazed and sightless. His body, so lately animated by amazing vigor, had crumpled like a wet leaf. Derrick, feeling himself queerly numb, slid a hand under the torn shirt. No pulse of life was discernible. Close by lay the jade god, its tiny malignant face sneering up from the wet grass. The master of Beech Lodge saw it and shuddered. Was this the next man appointed to die, and had he been the prophet of his own passing? Then Burke knelt beside him, stared hard in his turn, and gave the white beard a strong and sudden jerk.

It came away in his hand, revealing a thin, oval face, a firm mouth and chin, the face of a man not over forty. The jerk had parted the lips, and these sent out a mocking grin, suggesting that it was nothing to Blunt what they did now. Derrick’s breath nearly stopped. A new shadow fell across the body. He looked up and saw Martin. There was a grim satisfaction in the gardener’s dark eyes. It shot through Derrick’s mind that this would free Martin from further suspicion. Burke stared at him, too, then at Derrick. He did not speak, but the same thought was in his mind. He turned again to the limp figure in the grass.

“It looks as though your friend were done for this time, Martin. I’ll not ask you anything now. Your opportunity will come later. Better give Peters a hand and take this chap to the cottage.”

The peddler was carried away, his slight frame sagging limply between gardener and constable. Derrick, watching this, yielded to a vivid realization of the immutability of fate. Ten minutes ago this man was charged with life, throbbing with a desire that he hugged to his soul, and for which he had journeyed from a mysterious country, forgetting all else in one supreme ambition. Now the thing that had driven him thus far had struck its own ambassador, the next appointed to die, and the thing itself leered up from the ground at his feet, malevolent, devilish, and seemingly yet unsatiated. Derrick picked up a stone and was about to splinter the sneering jade when something flickered in the green eyes, mocking and immune, warning him that the time was not yet. Presently he felt that Burke was regarding him with broad amusement.

“If I may say so, sir, I wouldn’t smash it yet. We’ll need it for evidence, and if possible I’d like to hear what Perkins and your gardener have to say about the thing. Shall I take it to the station?”

Derrick stiffened. “No, thanks,” he said abruptly. “I’ll look after it till it’s needed. I think perhaps it feels more at home at the Lodge.”

He picked up the jade god from the ground, dropped it in his pocket as though the touch burned him, and went slowly across the lawn beside Burke. Passing the house, he saw Edith at a bedroom window and waved her a cheery greeting. She signaled back, and he noticed that she smiled with relief. What a standby she had been, he reflected. In a flash his thoughts sped to Jean. He had not seen Perkins, but the woman was at the study window, her hands at her thin breast, a sort of ecstatic joy in her sallow face. So on to the cottage, where the peddler’s body had been deposited on the kitchen floor. Derrick regarded it silently, and again that recurrent sense of unreality came over him.

“What next?” He turned to the sergeant.

“Nothing at the moment, sir, till we get hold of Dr. Henry. It will be queer to have him here once more in the same matter. Had this man any possessions, Martin?”

The gardener gave an odd smile and picked out of the corner a tightly knotted pack.

“This was all I saw. It’s trinkets and such like, but he didn’t show them to me.”

“Has this not been opened since Blunt gave Mr. Derrick that sight of his wares?”

“Not so far as I know. He slept in his clothes.”

Burke fingered the bundle but did not slacken its knots. He sent Derrick a thoughtful glance.

“It’s not likely there’s anything else of importance, and from what we’ve seen to-day we’re pretty near the end of the Millicent case. Would you step

outside a minute, sir?”

Derrick followed him, wondering a little. Burke halted out of earshot.

“I don’t want to say anything unnecessary in front of Martin,” he explained, “but all we’ll need now is what I’m convinced they are ready to tell us about Blunt’s last visit. We’re in a position to use pressure to bring out that evidence, and with it will come the reason, which so far beats me, for their ever trying to conceal the fact that he was the murderer. One thing I can imagine is that he had them hypnotized in some way, and as a matter of fact I began to feel hypnotized myself when I was listening to that chant of his outside the French window. Did you get any of it? If it had not been for that I would have nabbed the chap when he came out. As it was I felt half asleep.”

Derrick nodded reminiscently. “Yes, I did get it. Anything else with regard to either Martin or Perkins?”

“Nothing to-night, except that I would not say another word. Let this thing soak in, and it will do the work for us. In a day or so they will both be anxious to tell all they know. Now, just as a matter of precaution, I’m going to search the cottage, with your permission.”

“All right. It’s practically empty. Martin only brought a bundle, and I sent him a few odds and ends from the house to make the place livable. Shall I tell him?”

“Yes, sir, if you please.”

They went in together. Peters had lit his pipe and was smoking placidly with no concern for the thing on the floor, but Martin stood, still staring down. There was a kind of wonder in his face, and with it a strange thankfulness. He was like a man who straightens his shoulders after they have been crushed by some killing load.

“Martin,” said Derrick crisply, “Sergeant Burke is going to make a search of the cottage.”

“That’s all right so far as I’m concerned, sir, but there isn’t anything here except what any one can see.”

There was that in his apparent readiness which gave his master a feeling of solid relief. The latter found himself glad to admit that for months he had been on the wrong trail. There were matters still to be explained, deliberate lies to be accounted for, that secret search of the study to be acknowledged and justified; but all this, thought Derrick, was mysteriously involved with the potent thing that now dragged at his pocket, and when the light did come no corner would be left obscure. He remembered, too, that at times Martin had looked like an honest man. And did villains ever love roses like this gardener of his?

“Martin,” he said, “you’d better leave the sergeant alone while he’s making this search; he won’t need you.”

The man nodded with the air of one who has nothing to fear, cast another

contented glance at the peddler's body, and went out. They watched him cross the drive, hesitate a moment as though deliberating which way to turn, then stand, his hands deep in his pockets, staring down the road. Again Derrick felt reassured.

"Sergeant, I'm greatly relieved about that chap, even though I did bark up the wrong tree."

Burke rubbed his big palms together. "Well, sir, it was a fortunate kind of bark just the same."

"So it's turned out. Now while you're making this search could the constable go up and stay in front of the house? Also, he might just assure Miss Derrick that everything is quite all right. She'll be more convinced if it doesn't come from me."

Peters got his orders, and the two were alone. Burke gave a broad grin. The idea of promotion had flashed into his mind. Then he, too, indulged in a long stare at what had been Blunt.

"Well, sir, I expect we've both got the same conclusion in our heads now. Curious, too, how it's come about."

"What's that, sergeant?"

"That we needn't dig any deeper to find the man who killed Mr. Millicent. That theory of a criminal returning to the scene of his crime certainly worked in this case."

"Yes," said Derrick thoughtfully, "but what brought Martin back?"

"I've an idea we'll get that out of him in a day or two. Have you studied this chap's face, sir?"

Derrick scrutinized the rigid features. They were gray now, the lips still set in a strange cynical smile. It was not the face of a peddler but had unmistakable signs of birth and breeding. The head was well shaped, the ears small and set close to a finely molded skull, the forehead high and rather broad, the eyes far apart. Nothing of the murderer was suggested here, but much of the dreamer, the visionary, the adventurer of sudden purpose. Over him was the touch of the East, visible in the olive tinge of his skin, the slenderness of hands and wrists, and the faint blueness at the base of his narrow finger-nails. Derrick pondered over the possible history of this man with the build of an aristocrat and the insignia of the Orient. What strange tales those fixed lips might have told. But they were all his secret now.

"He's not a peddler," he said, turning to Burke, "and probably never was. We'll have to depend on Martin and perhaps Perkins for the rest of it. Are you going to have a look at that pack of his?"

It was unrolled on the floor beside its late owner but revealed nothing more than the trinkets Derrick had already seen. The man's pockets were empty save for a knife and a few coins, and the clothing itself bore no marks that yielded

the slightest clue to his identity. Burke made a grimace.

“We’ve drawn a blank this time; now I’ll have a look through the cottage. How long did you say Martin had been with you?”

“Something more than three months now, and he brought all he had on his back. I don’t fancy you’ll find much of interest here.”

The sergeant rooted about with a certain methodical deliberation, finally coming to a small bureau, the drawers of which he pulled open with the manner of one who expects nothing. Martin’s personal property was in truth scanty. He paused at the bottom drawer and looked up.

“Matter of fact, Mr. Derrick, while we know our dead friend is the fellow who held the knife, we’ve got to admit that we can’t prove it unless we drag the truth out of the others. Martin must know perfectly well that he’s up against a sort of third degree examination, and what convinces me that he’s ready to give us the inside of this thing is that already he’s looking almost cheerful. And if he weakens, that woman Perkins will weaken, too. I’m about finished here now.”

He jerked open the last drawer as he spoke, jerked so strongly that it came out on the floor. Like the others it was empty. But between the bottom of it and the floor itself lay a small bundle of dirty shirts.

“Your man isn’t what you’d call exactly a careful housekeeper. He needs a wife.” He picked up the bundle between thumb and forefinger. “Look at this.”

Came a dull knock, a clatter on the floor, and a knife with a broad, curved blade a foot long and a strangely carved handle slid across the floor and rested almost touching the lifeless palm of the peddler. The big man drew in his breath with a great gust and stood glowering. His eyes met Derrick’s.

“Call in your gardener!” he said huskily.

Derrick’s brain was in a whirl. He stared back and, not trusting himself to speak, tapped at the window. He could see Peters pacing slowly up and down in front of the Lodge, and Martin, who was still standing in the same place, apparently plunged in thought. The latter turned at the sound, mechanically touched his cap, and came slowly back. The sergeant nodded, put his hand in his pocket, and stepped a little on one side of the door. A shadow darkened the threshold, and as the gardener crossed it a grasp of iron fastened on his shoulder.

“John Martin, I arrest you for complicity in the murder of Henry Millicent. Anything you now say may be used against you.”

A few minutes later Derrick walked slowly and rather wearily toward the house, and Edith met him at the door. For her the past hour had been full of a drama almost too tense for her practical soul, and she realized what it must have meant to her brother. One look at his face was enough. She hooked her arm into his and led him into the dining-room, where dinner was ready. At the

door she pressed his hand for an understanding instant.

“I’m not going to say a thing about it, nor are you, till afterward. Perkins saw the whole thing, and the poor woman is happier than I’ve ever seen her. Congratulations, brother; and now forget it for an hour.”

He sat down with a vast relief. It seemed strange that in the midst of this deadly game such matters as food and cooking should proceed uninterrupted. It was Perkins’s work, Perkins, who, outwardly undisturbed by that which must have shaken her very spirit, was still the perfect servant, the ageless domestic automaton. He knew that Edith did not want him to look at the woman, but could not refrain from quick cursory glances at moments when she could not detect them. There was really no difference, except that the sallow cheeks had a faint color, and the lips were a shade less grim than usual. For the rest of it her face was still a mask, her figure just as unbending, her movements just as measured and deliberate. But what secret thoughts must be traversing that unlocked mind, what emotions stirring in her breast! And through it all she seemed not to know that he was there.

Later, in the study, he filled his pipe, shot a contented glance at Millicent’s portrait, took the jade god from his pocket, and set it on the desk where so often it had glimmered before. Edith scanned it with an interest she had never displayed till this evening, and sank comfortably into a big chair.

“Well,” she said curiously, “aren’t you going to tell me anything about it?”

“Yes, dear, everything.” He paused for a moment. “First of all, the thing is practically over, except another inquest and what will naturally follow that.”

“The last thing I saw was that poor man being carried to the cottage. Then that nice constable came up and talked to me as though I were six years old. I did like that. But there was no real information in it.”

Derrick laughed. “I’m afraid I did that.”

“I thought you had. Did you notice any difference in Perkins at dinner? Isn’t her control amazing?”

“Not much, except that she seemed in a way less grim.”

“Of course she is. She must have suspected the peddler all along, and when she saw him carried off like that one can imagine what she felt—at least one could if it weren’t Perkins.” She hesitated. “Is he dead?” she asked gravely.

He nodded. “The life seemed to go out of him when he was struggling with the constable. Peters said he put something in his mouth—which was no doubt poison.”

Edith shuddered. “How dreadful! It was the fear of the other kind of death, wasn’t it? What did Martin say or do then?”

“Nothing, but stare and stare and look satisfied in a grim sort of way.”

“He must have been something more than satisfied; so is Perkins. This is probably the first evening for two years when they have known peace. You

remember, Jack, I told you I didn't think Martin was really guilty."

"Martin," said Derrick slowly, "is now in jail, charged with complicity in Millicent's murder."

At the door came a sudden and violent crash. It had opened without sound, and there stood Perkins with the ruins of coffee-cups at her feet. Her hands were gripped together, her lips parted, and the suffering of the damned was written on her colorless cheeks. Her eyes, now large and staring, seemed to be fixed immovably on space. Then, imperceptibly, she regained a sort of shuddering consciousness.

"I'm extremely sorry, madam, but I tripped over the door-mat."

The voice was lifeless, devoid of inflection, so flat as to be almost unhuman. She stooped, gathered up the shattered china, and disappeared. Edith, too shaken for a moment to speak, regarded her brother with frightened astonishment.

"What do you mean?" she stammered presently.

"Exactly that. Neither you nor Perkins could see what happened after Blunt was taken to the cottage."

He went on with a sort of labored carefulness and told her all, shooting meanwhile quick glances at the door, where shortly Perkins would reappear. Neither of them doubted that she would be master enough of herself for this. In the middle of it she came in, looking straight ahead. The tremor had left her body, her hands were again steady, her face impassive as ever. She put the tray beside her mistress and went out. At the click of the latch Edith gave a gasp.

"I didn't know such a woman existed," she whispered. "Till a minute ago she thought that Martin was a free man and innocent."

He shook his head. "Free, perhaps, but not innocent. It was obvious from what little I got out of her this afternoon that she was doing all she could to divert suspicion to Blunt, without actually accusing him. She was afraid of Blunt and wanted to get rid of him."

"But why save Martin at the expense of Blunt?"

"That I can't say."

"But the only evidence you have against Martin is that the creese was found hidden in his cottage wrapped up in his clothing?"

"Yes."

"Could that be called final and sufficient? Could he be convicted on that?"

"It's enough to start with and puts it up to him to disprove his guilt, and he can't do that without telling the whole story."

Edith was unconverted. "He actually left that thing, which may be enough to condemn him, hidden in an old shirt where any one could have found it. That doesn't seem likely, does it?"

"Perhaps not, but there it was."

“Jack,” she said suddenly, “that’s not the action of a guilty man. How long had the peddler been there?”

“Only a few hours, as you know.”

“And why did he ask if this room was the same as it was the night of the murder?”

“I’ve been puzzling over that. It could not have been a shot in the dark, and it laid him open to the suspicion that he had seen the place before.”

“Then, listen, Jack,” she said excitedly. “I’m sure he did see the place before. Everything points to that, and you’ve got the wrong man, and it was Blunt who killed Mr. Millicent on account of that thing.” She pointed to the jade god. “Can’t you see how clear it is? He had some sort of hold over Martin and Perkins, probably through that same horrid influence, and they were afraid to incriminate him. Two years afterward he turns up again, and Martin was amazed and terrified to see him, thinking the matter was done with. While he is with Martin, and that was very cleverly arranged, they have arguments which you overheard, and somehow he manages to conceal in Martin’s clothes the knife, or one just like it, before making another attempt at the image. You’ll have to be frightfully careful now what is done, or an innocent man may be punished.”

Derrick looked at her, genuinely puzzled.

“There may be something in that. Anything else to suggest?”

“No, I’m not a detective, but it’s the way any sensible person would look at it, if I may say so. And, yes, there is one thing.”

“What is that?”

“I’d go straight to Jean to-morrow morning and tell her the whole story. She might be able to help, as it will probably suggest other things to her you haven’t discussed yet.”

Derrick took a long breath. “I will,” he said.

CHAPTER IX

THE ESCAPE

IT HAD been a cold night, and frost still sparkled on the dank grass when Derrick neared the Millicents'. He had spent sleepless hours picturing this meeting, recounting all there was to be said, and casting about as to how the story might be put so as to revive as little as possible the poignant memories of two years ago. It was a strange mission that carried him now to his girl, but she greeted him with a calm suggesting that she was not altogether unprepared. Mrs. Millicent, unmistakably agitated, pressed his hand with a nervous tremor.

“You have more news for us, Mr. Derrick? Jean has told me what you told her yesterday. It is all utterly puzzling, and I wish I could help, but I can't.”

Derrick nodded sympathetically. There was no such fiber of courage here as had been transmitted to her daughter. She was gentle and patient, and her heart centered on Jean, but she was not the woman to grasp a situation like the present one. He wondered how much Millicent had taken her into his confidence, how much she actually comprehended of the real man who sometimes seemed to look out of those painted eyes, then concluded that this could only have been fractional. She might have soothed his secret fears, but she could never understand them. Her mind was too ordered, her horizon too defined. She loved as a mother, and mourned as a wife. That was her existence. There could be no object gained in probing this gentle breast.

But, with Jean, Derrick knew it was different. Hers were eyes that saw, and a brain that pierced beyond the obvious. She had her mother's charm but her father's imagination. Derrick knew, and it fortified him to know it, that she could follow, pace by pace, wherever he led, and that her vision might even be keener than his. She, like himself, responded to whispers from the unknown and was also undismayed. So when he told his story it was to her rather than her mother that the tale was recited.

Both listened in rapt attention, Mrs. Millicent in sheer wonder, Jean with a keen and fascinated absorption. When he came to the finding of the creese, the older woman shivered, but Jean, her eyes cloudy with thought, did not stir. When he concluded, he felt that while Mrs. Millicent's heart was lacerated afresh, Jean was possessed of more profound and vital emotions. And it was she who spoke first.

“It is very strange that the peddler should tell you something I meant to tell

you but forgot.”

“Yes?”

“It’s about the study. You remember, mother, how it always was?”

“Yes, dear.”

“The desk stood in the other corner, not where it is now, so that father looked out of the window. The sofa was between the fireplace and the window, and the screen between the door into the hall and the desk. Did the peddler seem to know that?”

“He did not say so but appeared to notice that things were changed. I asked Perkins about it then, and she told me what you have.”

“Don’t you think that in spite of what you found at the cottage he was really the guilty man?”

“But why?”

“For one thing, he might easily have had that—that weapon in his pack without you seeing it, and—”

She broke off, and stared at the bangle on her wrist, slowly drew it off, and handed it to Derrick.

“Please, I can’t wear it now.”

He nodded understandingly, pinched at the twisted metal which was shaped oddly like a serpent, and put it in his pocket. Jean breathed a little faster.

“And, apart from that,” she went on, “doesn’t he seem to you to have been the superior intelligence? Your description of him is not that of an ordinary man, and he seems to have very nearly mesmerized those who were there, including the sergeant. Don’t you see that perhaps Martin and Perkins are, or were, only tools in his hands, and he represented to them some power they had to obey without question. One could then understand the look you say was on Martin’s face when the man died, and,” she added, “it would also explain Perkins acting as she did after dinner.”

“But Perkins was shaken beyond words.”

“Yes, because it meant that though the peddler was dead, the power behind him still operated.”

Mrs. Millicent got up unsteadily. “Jean, dear, I’ll have to leave you to talk the rest of this over alone. I’m sorry, darling, but—but—”

She went out hurriedly, and the girl was silent for a moment.

“Please don’t be upset about mother, and really it’s much better.” She put her hand impulsively on his. “Do you begin to see what it has meant to carry the mystery and the terror alone? She could not help me, and I’m glad for her sake.” She looked in his eyes with such utter confidence and appeal that he thought his heart would break.

“Oh, my dear, my dear,” he whispered, “you don’t know yet how well I

understand. It will take all my life to show you.”

Jean turned pale, and from her parted lips came a little sigh of content that, faint as it was, penetrated his very soul. Then she breathed quickly, smiling at him as though she thanked him for a perfect understanding, and for knowing her spirit so well that he could afford not to say more.

“Is it not possible,” she continued quietly—“and of course it is possible; we both realize it—that Martin was unconsciously guilty? I mean that not till after it had happened did he realize what had taken place. If Blunt could dominate him yesterday, why not then?”

“Stranger things have happened,” he admitted.

“Well, if that’s the case it also explains Martin’s helplessness and Perkins’ silence. She knows that Martin did it while under this influence, while they both know that, now Blunt is dead, the influence cannot be proved. It would sound like a fairy-story in court.”

He nodded gravely. “All that may be. Does anything else occur to you in this connection?”

“Nothing about the others at the moment, but Blunt sticks in my mind. You say he was partly Oriental?”

“He had native blood. I’m sure of that.”

“Then he was probably occult. Father was, but I have never told mother that. And death might not mean much to him, as after death he would expect his soul to live on in some other body. The poison he took must have been almost instantaneous, and—”

She looked up suddenly. The big figure of Sergeant Burke was coming rapidly up the narrow brick walk that led to the porch. Hat off, he mopped at his red brow. A bicycle stood against the gate.

“He seems very upset. Perhaps you’d better speak to him, Jack.”

She used the word before she knew it and bit her lip. Derrick hesitated a moment, sent her a brilliant smile, and went out. The sergeant’s bulk filled the doorway, and he breathed fast.

“I’m glad to find you, sir. Went to the Lodge first, and Miss Derrick told me you were here.” He gulped in more air. “A very extraordinary thing has happened.”

“What’s that?”

“Blunt, sir, has escaped!”

Derrick frowned a little. If this was a joke, it was a poor one; if not, the man was mad.

“I don’t follow you.”

“It’s just as I say, sir. He’s got away.”

“A dead man! Who took him?”

“Damn it, Mr. Derrick, don’t you understand English? He’s not dead—he

never was,” exploded Burke chaotically; “he’s come to life again, and escaped.”

Derrick blinked. It was ridiculous, absurd, and yet—Burke’s face was so red, his eyes so strained, the whole great body of him labored under such excitement, that his earnestness could not be doubted.

“Will you please tell me exactly what has happened?” he said with slow and almost painful distinctness.

“I will. The body was taken to the jail at the same time as Martin, and I sent for Dr. Henry, but he was away at Eversleigh on some serious case. I put it in an empty room used as a morgue at the other end of the building from Martin’s cell. I examined it before I turned in. It was just the same, but colder, with the hands quite stiff, the face a sort of blue gray, and no pulse. A little after midnight I got to bed, knowing that Dr. Henry would come to me as soon as he arrived. He was out all night and didn’t get back till time for breakfast, after which he went straight to the station. I had been back for three hours then, saw Martin, who was all right, but didn’t go into the morgue. When I took Dr. Henry there it was empty—and that’s all.”

Burke concluded this remarkable statement with an eloquent and helpless gesture, looking at Derrick with a sort of faint hopefulness that perhaps the thing was not quite as baffling as it sounded. He was grimly conscious that the Millicent case was reopened, but not in the manner and with the prospects that a few days ago were so comforting. His dreams of promotion had vanished. Why promote a man to escape from whom it was only necessary to feign death? But all the signs of death had been there. This and much more had jockeyed through his brain as he pumped savagely up the long hill from Bamberley village. His attitude now invited his amateur adviser to suggest the next move if he could. The story would be all over England in a day or two. And Burke hated to think of that.

“You’ve heard of cases of suspended animation?” asked Derrick after a long pause.

“Yes, but I’ve never seen one before.”

“Nor I, but they’re not uncommon in the East. It’s evident that Blunt is master of most of those tricks, but so far as my knowledge goes the suspension is generally for much longer than a few hours. This, no doubt, is the effect of what he put in his mouth when Peters caught him.”

“That’s as I see it, but it doesn’t help matters.”

“What does Martin say?”

“Nothing; but I’m sure he knows.”

“Why?”

“There’s something in his face this morning, but I can’t read it. I’ve an idea that Blunt must have seen and spoken to him on his way out.”

Derrick whistled softly. "That's more than possible."

"The point is," went on Burke, with a desperation he took no pains to conceal, "that if there's anything to be done, it's got to be done quickly. If by to-night we can fasten on something that will prove Martin's guilt, the matter of Blunt's escape won't be quite so serious. If not, I doubt whether the discovery of that knife will actually convict him so long as Perkins sticks to the evidence she gave two years ago. That's how the matter stands now."

"I'd like to think a little before saying anything. Are you going back to the station?"

Burke nodded.

"Well, I'll be there in, say, an hour and a half."

The sergeant hesitated. "I might as well tell you, sir, that I've already gone a good deal beyond my official limits in the matter, but I'm ready to go further, which means risking my job, if you can see any light. I'll wait for you at the station."

He moved off with no spring in his walk, swung a thick leg over his wheel, and disappeared.

Derrick went back to Jean and by the tenseness of her face knew at once that she had heard everything. They looked at each other for a moment without speaking.

"Well," he said slowly, "isn't it extraordinary?"

"No," she answered under her breath, "not so extraordinary."

"Why?"

"It's all part of the rest of it. Do you remember what I said about some power operating behind?"

"Yes."

"Well, it just means that you are dealing with things that can't be explained by any reason or argument or logic, and Sergeant Burke hasn't the right kind of experience for this. He's fighting against things he can't see. He's hoping now that Martin or Perkins will break down and tell everything. They won't."

"How do you know that?"

"I can't explain, though I'm sure of it. Does anything suggest itself to you?"

"To be done now?"

"Yes."

He shook his head. "Burke's proposal seems to be all there is left."

"I think perhaps there's something else," she said almost timidly. "Do you remember what you told me some weeks ago about the picture that must always be passing through a criminal's mind?"

"Yes, distinctly."

"And the strange impulse to return to the scene of his crime that he has to

fight against? Well, let us assume that Martin is the criminal and has returned.”

“There’s no question of that,” he put in quickly.

“Perhaps not, but the picture he found was not the one he had been carrying with him.”

“Why?”

“The study had been changed—I mean its arrangement; therefore the possible effect that might have been produced if he had seen the picture in actual existence did not take place.”

“Go on,” he said tensely.

“But if on the other hand, and without expecting it, Martin were brought suddenly face to face with that picture, if the study were reset just as it was before, and if”—here she trembled, and went on bravely—“if he thought he saw father lying there as he did see him two years ago, don’t you think that something real and truthful might be startled out of him?”

“By Jove!” whispered Derrick. “Do you mean it?”

She nodded. “Yes, all of it. I don’t just know how I feel it, but I know, here.” She touched her breast. “It’s the right thing to do.”

“Would you help?”

“Yes.”

“I hate to ask it. And if it’s attempted Perkins must know nothing about it.”

“No, she mustn’t; and, Jack, there’s something else.” It seemed natural now to call him Jack.

“Yes, Jean?” He lingered on the word. How near it brought him!

Her eyes told him that she, too, felt the nearness, but for the moment her brain was working too swiftly to yield to aught else.

“There’s the peddler. One can’t tell where he is, but not far away. I’m sure of that. He won’t finally go till he has that which he came for. Where is it now?”

“Behind the panel.”

“But if you do what I suggest, and to-night, it should be on the desk beside you.”

“Beside me?”

“Yes, if you—if you take the part of my father.”

He caught his breath at this supreme courage. “Would you come and arrange the study?”

“Yes, when?”

“Let me settle that with Edith. I’ll see her at once and then go on to Burke. She’ll probably come this afternoon and ask you to dinner. Will that be all right?”

He longed to take her in his arms, but again it was only their eyes that met—and spoke.

It was to Bamberley police station and not to Beech Lodge that Derrick went first. He found the sergeant in the little office, his face a map of uncertainty. He looked up inquiringly as the young man came in. The last few hours had been bad ones for Burke. Then Derrick put the matter without delay, told how the suggestion originated, added that he had agreed that it was the next and best move, and waited for the sergeant to speak. Presently the latter shook his head.

“I dare not, Mr. Derrick.”

“Why not?”

“Stop and think, sir. Here’s a man under arrest, and I myself have charged him with complicity in murder. I’m responsible for him till the authorities proceed. One suspect has already escaped. Now you propose that I let the other man out of custody to try an experiment which is, well, Mr. Derrick, fantastic any way you put it.”

“Exactly; but if you stop to think, sergeant, the whole affair has been more or less fantastic ever since we started. We acted on possibilities, not probabilities, and you must admit we’ve dug up a good deal that didn’t come to light before.”

“Yes, I do admit it; also that ten to one we’ve got the man who killed Mr. Millicent. But I’m frank to say that I don’t like what’s bound to happen over Blunt’s escape. I’m only hoping that Martin’s evidence will let me down with a good general average.”

“And if you don’t convict Martin?”

“Then I lose my job,” said Burke grimly.

“Would you have to advertise the fact if you did personally bring Martin to Beech Lodge at, say nine thirty to-night?”

The big man stared at him. “No, but—”

“Then look here. I’m willing to see this last attempt through if you are, but if you’re not, I step down and out. I can’t give you any reasons for saying that I think it will have surprising results, but I do feel that. Admitting that you risk your job, isn’t it worth while taking the chance of producing both the criminal and the evidence? If you decide otherwise, well and good. It’s going to be rather a thick night,” he added, glancing out of the window.

Burke weighed the chances, his eyes half closed, pushing out his broad, full lips and tapping on the bare table. Yes, the night promised to be thick. He saw himself, the guardian of Bamberley, sneaking out of the village in the fog, a criminal chained to his wrist, but himself the more agitated of the two. Against this he was aware that ever since the Millicent case had come to life things just as strange as this had been going on. A man of order and law and precedent, knowing the police code as a parson knows the Pentateuch, he

shrank from outlawing himself by doing as Derrick proposed. But here again the consciousness of something beyond the ordinary that lay behind the Millicent case projected itself. He could see the grin that would run through police circles from John O'Groats to Land's End when the Blunt story came out, and recoiled at the mere thought of it. Without something, as for instance a conviction, to counterbalance that escape, he was done. And he knew it. It was the vision of that official grin that decided him.

"Will you tell me exactly what you suggest I should do?" he asked heavily.

"First, say nothing to Martin. If you want to let Dr. Henry into this, do so, but that's for you to decide. Fetch Martin to Beech Lodge at exactly nine thirty to-night. Perkins will bring you to the study door, which will be closed. She will knock, and there will be no answer. Then she will naturally open it, and you and she and Martin will see that room just as it looked after the murder two years ago. I will be at the desk in the position in which Millicent was found, and able to give assistance if you want it. You must not speak. I anticipate that Martin, or it may be Perkins, will break the silence, but it is sure to be Martin. His very first words should tell us what we want to know. That's all."

Burke listened with strained attention. "If I did bring Martin I couldn't bring any one else. I mean I couldn't have any one on duty outside. The two constables could not be allowed to know anything about this."

Derrick, realizing that the point had been carried, sent him a grave smile. "I don't think we need bother about the outside of the house to-night, but that's your end of it. All I ask for is you and Martin at nine thirty. I'm not trying to persuade you into this, sergeant, so drop it if you don't think it's good enough. But it's the only program I can suggest, and I've no alternative."

Burke rose mountainously from his chair. "And I've tried to tell you what it involves me in, which is the risk of twenty years' record and my present job." He paused, then gave a determined grunt. "But I'll do it."

Derrick nodded. "I think you're right, and sometimes a man moves further ahead in ten minutes than in twenty years. Nine thirty, sergeant."

CHAPTER X

A NIGHT OF TRAGEDY

IT TOOK all Jean's courage to go with Edith when the time came. She had had a not altogether comforting talk with her mother, in which, knowing that it was unwise to tell Mrs. Millicent too much, she only said that Edith wanted her to dine at Beech Lodge and that she might be able to help Derrick in his self-imposed task. Her mother assented, with a curious glance that suggested that it was not altogether the task that took her daughter to her old home. Jean, realizing the futility of fuller explanation, said little more.

It was something of a help that Edith understood so much and yet, in a way, understood so little. Her sanity, her cheerful hope that the tableau would frighten Martin into saying something that would settle the matter, and the growing affection in her manner, all combined to act like a much needed tonic. Jean found herself talking more freely than she ever imagined she could talk. She realized that this was because Edith was aware what was in her heart, and could perceive love, though the occult was beyond her. And the difference between the two girls did much to cement their friendship.

The affair of that night was tacitly avoided, Edith talking for the most part about that which lay nearest her heart. This was Derrick. She did not grudge him, wanting only his happiness, and the generosity of her nature touched Jean enormously. Edith took it for granted that whether the *tableau vivant*, as she put it, was successful or not, the next important event would be of a brighter character, and her contented assumption of this had an intriguing effect. It was strange to be regarded as a sister-in-law before the word was spoken. She was still talking about her brother, his art, his ambition, and the unexpectedness of him that she loved so much, when they came in sight of the gates of the Lodge.

Jean fell silent as they passed the cottage, again untenanted, and the rose-trees that bore the marks of Martin's skill. She recalled her last visit here, and marveled at its outcome. These familiar windows, this well-known door, and most of all that she would soon meet the blank eyes of Perkins, all moved her profoundly. She came to the house again not as a visitor, or to revive memories of the past, but actually to rebuild that past in such a way as to drag into the open the secret of so many years. It was a crusade on behalf of the dead, a high mission that involved putting aside all else till it be performed. Though the wound in her own heart ached, it must ache till the mission be discharged. And behind that was the whisper of love. It was this thought that enabled her to

meet Derrick with a glance of high resolution that he found infinitely inspiring.

Looking back at it afterward, she always wondered whether dinner was not the greatest test of that memorable night. In spite of their combined efforts, it was very voiceless. Perkins, who glanced less at Jean than at her mistress, moved silent-footed as ever, blank to everything except her duties, and even these were carried out with a sort of subconscious detachment. She both cooked and served the meal, and with the same unaltered perfection. Nothing in her had changed, and as of old she made no lost motions. She knew that Martin was in jail, charged with complicity in the murder of her former master, yet no sign of it appeared on her ageless face.

But from her emanated something that made the usual conversation well nigh impossible. Had she shown her knowledge, the tension had been less. As it was, Jean pictured her father and mother in the chairs occupied by Derrick and Edith, heard the tones of a remembered voice, saw the same trim, straight figure moving with the same soundless precision—and could hardly forbear to cry out. When, a little later, she entered that other room of grim significance, it was with a feeling that almost amounted to relief. There was no Perkins here.

Derrick, whose eyes were unusually bright, waited till the maid had disappeared with the coffee-cups, then turned swiftly to Jean.

“Now we must act. Edith has given Perkins enough to keep her busy till half-past nine. That’s an hour. It was not safe to do anything here before this, so we must move things ourselves, and if possible without making a sound. One thing I want to ask: was your father dressed as in that picture?” He made a gesture toward the portrait.

“Yes, he always put on that coat after dinner.”

Derrick nodded, opened a drawer in the bottom of the desk, and produced a velveteen smoking-jacket.

“I thought that might be, so rooted out this old one of mine. Now we must shift the desk; then you can arrange the things on it. In a general way, are the contents of the room just the same?”

“Exactly, I think,” said the girl, after a swift scrutiny.

“And that French window, was it locked?”

“Yes, always before dinner at this time of year.”

He gave a curious smile, “To-night I think we’ll leave it open.”

“How stupid, Jack!” interjected Edith, “and let the man escape.”

“He can’t, because he’ll be chained to the sergeant. It’s with another object. Now are you ready?”

Jean sent him a quick glance. She guessed the object, and it made her heart beat faster.

Gradually the room assumed its former appearance. Edith assisted with a businesslike, good-humored alacrity, in the manner of a housekeeper who

helps to arrange a stage for young people's tableaux. To her these were chairs, tables, and rugs, nothing more. She wondered a good deal why a practical man like Sergeant Burke should be willing to take part, a man responsible for the custody of his prisoner, then reflected that it was all rather queer, and there was no point in worrying about what one didn't understand. The consoling phase of it was her conviction that this was the last act of the somewhat disconcerting drama of the past few months, that it would soon be followed by the wedding of two of the principals, and then her brother would settle down and get on with his work. The thing that really most bothered her was the lease of Beech Lodge. She knew that Jean would never live here again.

It was as well she took her present occupation so placidly, for to Jean and Derrick, especially the former, the rearrangement of the study brought with it an austere and growing significance. They moved in the presence of what had been Millicent, recreating a poignantly familiar scene, directed by the gesture of an unseen hand. They were automatons, obeying they knew not what elusive instinct. And it seemed that as the room took shape it throbbed once more with a medley of tiny voices, each thrilling its own message in a fine, thin, vibrating tone. The chair where the dead man used to sit, the desk over which he leaned, the blurred stain that bore its cloudy witness to his passing; all these became vocal, joining in a mysterious communication which announced that nothing is ever utterly dissipated or lost, but in some form or quality remains, an imperishable record for all time.

Nine o'clock struck, and Derrick glanced from the French window into the darkness. The night was profound, and over the country-side rested a great blanket of fog. Putting out his hand, he could hardly see it. Beyond was the world, populous with life, lost and infinitely removed. From the trees bordering the lawn came a slow, soft drip, sounding like a vast, subdued weeping in this black obscurity. Anything might move here and be undetected. All in a breath he became convinced that there was something close by. But it did not move.

He pictured what must be going on now in Bamberley jail. Burke in his shiny cape, tramping down the barred passage to Martin's cell, handcuffs dangling, grim, resolute, conscious of the desperate risk he ran, his jaw like iron. How had Burke disposed of his constables, and what kind of story had he told? Again Burke, with his dark-lantern at Martin's barrier, the glint of yellow light on the gardener's sullen face, the brief word of command, the click of metal that chained them together. Did Martin ask questions? Was he surprised, or unwilling, or did he take it all with his customary dogged silence? Then two burly figures engulfed in the fog, the wet glimmer from Bamberley windows—if Bamberley were not already asleep—the scrape of heavy feet on the graveled road, this strangely assorted pair moving up the long hill beneath

trees that stretched ghostly arms overhead. What must Burke be thinking now?

He turned abruptly, leaving the window ajar, and drawing the curtains close. Crossing to the mantel, he beckoned to the two girls.

“Now I’m going to show you a part of the mystery of Beech Lodge.”

He touched the woodwork, a small panel fell forward, and inside gleamed the jade god.

“Isn’t that clever?” said Edith cheerfully.

Jean did not stir. Her eyes, very wide open, were fixed on the image. It was all very extraordinary—and very simple. Had her father found this hidingplace, or had he made it during the long evenings he spent alone after it became imperative to have some hidden shrine for his deadly trophy? Here was the spot, so near and yet so safe, whence came the mysterious authority that gave tongues to inanimate things. Yes, the jade god was safe there. Again she looked at Derrick.

“I begin to understand now,” she said under her breath.

Edith moved close and peered in. “I’ll have that well scrubbed out tomorrow. It’s dreadful!”

Derrick laughed. “Please wait till I ask it.” He took out the thing and set it beside the lamp.

“It used to stand on the other side of him.” Jean’s voice was quiet and steady.

“I know, but that won’t matter this time, and,” he added thoughtfully, “I want it to be visible from the window.”

He paused, then sent her a glance that gave her renewed fortitude. “Now I’m going to get into position. Please don’t try and help me unless you feel you must, and it can only last a few minutes. You and Edith stand behind the screen, if you feel that staying there won’t be too much for you, and above all don’t stir till I do. It will all turn on Martin’s first words. If anything happens at the window, leave it to me. When Perkins knocks do not answer on any account. Is the lamp right?”

Jean nodded.

He pressed her hand comfortingly, and again their eyes met in a gaze of perfect understanding.

“Get behind the screen now,” he whispered, “and don’t look at me.”

He put on the velveteen jacket and took the dead man’s chair. Leaning his head forward on the desk, the blurred stain was but a few inches from his throat. The deadly crease was beside him. He could see the jade god, its sardonic eyes bent on him, the cruel lips curved as though they comprehended the grim irony of the moment. Under that scrutiny he felt once more the mesmeric power evidenced here only the day before.

“Edith,” he murmured.

“Yes?”

“Twitch the curtains so that they are about an inch apart. Then get back quickly.”

She did this without a sound. Derrick lay still, his eyes closed. He knew that a narrow rib of light was streaming out over the sodden lawn and that the one who hid there could view the strange scene inside. Then silence fell. The tick of the clock sounded heavy and fateful. Shadows danced on the oaken walls, as they had danced two years before, and the flicker of fire cast an intermittent glow on Millicent’s face as it looked down from its gilded frame. From a near-by covert came the soft hooting of a barn-owl.

A faint whisper from the outer world reached Derrick, lying motionless with the blood pounding in his temples. It was that of movement, not sound; the merest fraction of movement, and transmitted by the most delicate waves of air. His senses, tuned to the utmost pitch, caught this, though it was no more than the suggestion that the atmosphere had been displaced not far off. Close to him some one had changed position. That was all he knew, and by the quality of this sensation he also guessed that the change had been made stealthily.

In the midst of this, and while the air seemed to transmit a steady singing monotone, came a sharp knock at the front door. He held his breath for the click of the latch, presently catching Burke’s voice, deep and husky. Followed a sound of heavy feet, and Perkins’s tap at the study door. She waited a moment; Derrick felt a slight draft and knew she was in the room with the two men behind her.

From Martin came a strange, throaty cry, and from the woman a choking gasp. Derrick’s hair prickled, and all power seemed to leave him. Again the gasp. Then flying feet crossed the floor with inconceivable swiftness, and Perkins flung herself beside his chair. He felt the grip of frenzied arms on his shoulders and heard tones of unutterable anguish.

“Master, master, what is it? Speak to me, speak to me! You’re not dead! I didn’t mean it. I didn’t know I did it. I was asleep; don’t you understand? And when I woke your blood was on my hands. Speak to me, master; for God’s sake, speak!”

For an instant Derrick was unable to move. Perkins crouched on the floor beside him, her body shaking, her face buried in her arms. Another cry from Martin, and he plunged, dragging Burke with him. He put his one free hand on the woman’s head.

“Don’t you go on like that, lass. It’s only a plant. You didn’t do it. I’ll swear you didn’t.”

Perkins staggered to her feet. Her eyes were glazed. She stared wildly up at Martin, then at the sergeant as though she did not see him, then at the French

window. The curtains had parted, and in the gap crouched the tense figure of Blunt, poised for a spring. At this last, her features became distorted. All the suffering of the damned crowded into them. With a motion of incredible swiftness, she grasped the creese and plunged it into her heart. Simultaneously Blunt darted forward.

What happened in that instant happened in a flash. Martin fell on his knees beside the woman. Burke, half dazed as he was, flung out his great fist and caught Blunt on the temple. There came a cry from the two who had been hidden behind the screen. Derrick leaped up. He saw Perkins, her breast stained scarlet, with Martin beside her, rocking in an abandonment of grief. Against the wall, as though it had been thrown there like a rag, huddled the insensible figure of the peddler. Burke was breathing hard and already fumbling at the lock of the handcuff that bound him to the gardener. On one side stood Jean and Edith, their eyes starting with horror.

In a moment the sergeant got himself free with a clink of metal. He glowered at the inert body of Blunt with a sort of animal satisfaction, then, kneeling beside Perkins, stared at her hard, and finally put his big head against that crimson heart. Martin did not move but gave one long shuddering sigh. A moment thus, till Burke heaved up, his face very grave, and made an unmistakable gesture. At that Edith put her arms round Jean and held the girl close.

“I’ll take charge now, sir,” said Burke grimly. “These two men must come to the station with me. As for this poor woman, we can’t do better than take her to the cottage, if you don’t mind her being there till morning, and I’ll send a man up there as soon as possible. And,” he added, “perhaps I’d better take this knife for safe-keeping till the inquest.”

“No, no!” Martin turned his grief-stricken face, clutching at the officer’s arm. “For God’s sake don’t do that. Let me stay with her,” he implored hoarsely.

Burke stared at him. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t leave her in the cottage with any one but me. I’ll be there in the morning. I won’t run away. I’ll do anything else you like, but for God’s sake let me stay with her to-night!”

Burke shook his head. “You’ll do what you’re told, and do it now. What is this woman to you?”

“My wife,” groaned Martin, and burst into throttling sobs.

Utter silence fell upon this room of death. Against the wall, Blunt gave a slow shiver and raised his head, regarding the scene with a strange calm, as though such tragedies were only passing incidents in a still greater drama. He made no attempt to move but lay there, resting on one elbow, part of it all, but infinitely removed. Derrick stared at the two girls. Edith’s arms were still

round Jean, but their eyes were fixed on what lay on the floor. Jean looked at the man she loved. The terror was leaving her face, being replaced by a vast incomprehensible wonder mingled with a profound pity. In that moment she was his, and yet unspeakably distant. It was like traversing a forest of dreadful shadows and emerging, suddenly blinded, into the light, where one had to find oneself before seeing anything else. A great pity enveloped her altogether. She came quickly forward and knelt beside the still form.

“Jack, you must ask the sergeant to permit that. Don’t you understand? One poor woman among all these men,” she whispered. “Oh, the poor, poor soul!”

Burke nodded. “Perhaps that will be all right, miss,” he broke in with a queer, deep gruffness. “We’ll let it go at that, but I’ll have to send a man up to stay outside till morning. He won’t come into the cottage. Is there anything you want to say, Mr. Derrick, before—”

Derrick shook his head. “I think it has all been said.”

The sergeant touched Martin’s shoulder. “Will you—” He glanced at the body. “Blunt goes with me.”

Martin nodded speechlessly. With infinite tenderness he picked up his wife as though she had been a child and, staring straight ahead with unseeing eyes, strode through the door which her lifeless hand had so recently opened for him. Then into the hall alone with his burden. The others heard the front door open and close, and after that the sound of slow feet on the gravel. This dwindled. Burke stepped across to where the peddler lay on his side and snapped on a handcuff. At the ring of metal, Derrick felt his eyes suddenly drawn to the jade god.

The thing still rested, the light soaking into its emerald depths, and it seemed that on the tiny features rested a smile of sardonic satisfaction, as though it had known it all, and all the time. What was any individual tragedy, what was this minute portion of the great human drama, with the pangs of a moment, to the profound acquaintanceship with evil that lay hidden here? These actors were only discharging their parts in an endless play that would continue with its constantly changing scenes so long as humanity could feel passion and anger and fear and revenge. Derrick stared at the image and vowed silently that, come what might of his act, this reign of terror would soon end. But here was neither the time nor the place. He made a gesture to Edith, and the latter slipped her arm into that of Jean. When he knew they had reached Edith’s room, Derrick turned to Burke.

“I want to speak to you a minute.”

The sergeant crooked a finger at Blunt and led him into the hall. Again the clink of metal, and the peddler was anchored to a massive chair. The big man came back, smiling grimly.

“That’s a useful dodge when you think of it. Now, what about this image? Hadn’t I better take it to the station for the present?”

Derrick shook his head. “If you don’t mind, I’d rather keep it till it happens to be needed.” There followed a little pause, while through both their brains ran the swift wonder of the night. “I suppose,” he added, “there’s no objection to that.”

Burke grinned. “No, sir; matter of fact, I’m not in love with the ugly thing myself. It worked, didn’t it? that plan of yours,” he went on respectfully, “but not just in the way either of us expected. Who would ever have thought it? As for that poor woman, why, there’s only one explanation.”

“What’s that?”

Burke put a significant finger to his forehead.

“Look here,” said Derrick suddenly, “I want to know something. What’s the next move, now that the matter is in your hands?”

“There’s the inquest, perhaps to-morrow, but maybe the day after. It depends on Dr. Henry.”

“And then?”

“The trial of Blunt and Martin, of course.”

“Just what will they be tried for?”

“Housebreaking, attempted theft, and possible complicity in the murder of Mr. Millicent.”

“Then take Martin first. He did not break into this house. I sent for him.”

“That may be true, sir, but you can’t say that for the other fellow, and they seem to be in pretty close touch and to have worked together.” Burke paused and looked puzzled. “I don’t very well see how they can be separated in this affair, judging by what you’ve said yourself in the last day or two.”

“Suppose, sergeant,” said Derrick thoughtfully, “that I should decide not to lay any charge against Blunt after all.”

The big man blinked. “I don’t quite follow you, sir. What’s to be gained by acting like that?”

“I can’t say yet, but do you honestly think there’s any chance of really proving anything serious now against these two men?”

“There’s a good working chance, but I fancy a jury would be as much puzzled as we’ve been, and probably more. You never can tell about a jury.”

“Then I particularly ask that no charge be laid against either of them till I have had a talk with both. I admit, and you’ve said it, too, that all our suspicions were wrong and unfounded. We were working hard, but only playing about on the edge of the truth. Now we have heard a confession of the act from lips where we never expected to find it, and the person who committed the murder has gone before another court. Our discovery, which has led to this, was a matter of chance, and we were on a false trail from the start.”

“I admit that, sir, but you did all the guessing. The only thing we had in common was our suspicion of Martin.”

“That’s true, and I’ll shoulder whatever blame attaches to it. But, officially, the net result is that you have cleared up the mystery of the Millicent murder, and after every one else had failed. You mustn’t forget, sergeant, that so far as any one else is concerned I’m merely an onlooker. I congratulate you, Burke. It ought to mean promotion.”

The other man indulged in a broad smile. He had had no time to think about promotion yet, but the prospect was distinctly rosy. “That’s very good of you, sir, and this certainly ought to help.”

“So that now the matter of Blunt’s escape does not seem very serious?”

“Well, sir, Dr. Henry told me enough about that trick to show that it’s fooled a good many wiser men than me. It has proved not to be important after all, and I don’t think it will be brought up against me. Is there anything you want me for now?”

“Yes, to make the following arrangement. I’ll be responsible for Martin till morning, and he will then go with your man to the station. Meantime, please understand that I lay no charge whatever against him. As to Blunt, in that case also I lay no charge at present, but reserve the right to do so to-morrow if I wish. Meantime, I’d like it understood, if possible, that you are merely taking him at my request because I found him in my house without my authority. I don’t know the law in such matters but assume that you could not proceed against him till I did actually lay the charge. As for the rest of it, I suppose they will both be needed as witnesses to the confession and suicide. With that, of course, I have nothing to do. Can the matter be left that way for the next day or so?”

Burke pondered. He could not get much further at present than that the Millicent mystery was solved, and his own reputation not only reestablished but enhanced, and there was solid satisfaction in the thought. Already he could see the head-lines in the London papers.

“Yes,” he said slowly, “I think we could leave it that way, sir. When would you want to talk to these men?”

“To-morrow morning?”

“All right, Mr. Derrick. I’ll get most of my work out of the way by ten thirty and be ready for you, if that will suit. Nothing more I can do for you here to-night?”

The young man breathed a long sigh of relief. “There’s nothing left to go wrong now, and I’ll put this jade friend, or enemy, of ours back where he belongs for the present. Good night, sergeant, and I’m glad your luck has turned.”

Burke saluted and went out. There was the slight jingle of a chain, and the

front door closed. Derrick pushed back the oaken panel. Involuntarily he glanced at the portrait. Millicent seemed satisfied. He was avenged now.

Then over the young man began to creep sensations in which there was no triumph, no pride, no self-congratulation. The blank-faced woman over whom Martin was crouching in the silent cottage seemed to rise up and point a thin accusing finger. Why had he done this thing? Her secret had been torn from her, and her life with it. What had she ever done to Derrick? His lips became dry at the thought, and he felt almost like a murderer himself. What was wrong with his philosophy? Up-stairs was Jean waiting for him. He would go to her across the body of another woman.

He struggled with this picture, but it would not down. By what trail had he come to so unexpected a solution? Could it be that it was always thus with those over whom the jade god held its malignant sway? Were their lives at the mercy of undercurrents of whose very existence they were ignorant? What did the image mean to Perkins, or any of them? She knew now, perhaps for the first time, but would he himself ever know? Who was Blunt in this deadly circle, and why should Martin and Perkins, being man and wife, remain yet strangers to one another? Had the jade god come in between? His brain rocked with hazardings like this, and at the end of it all he felt guiltier and guiltier.

He went up-stairs and found Jean waiting for him in the hall. She had watched Blunt, swinging one arm, disappear in the fog, walking close to the sergeant. They had stopped at the cottage, where Burke peered in but did not enter. He saw what he expected to see. Blunt did not attempt to look. Then the two passed on through the white gates and were swallowed up. Jean knew that Derrick would now come to her soon.

“Oh, my dear,” she said, “who ever could have dreamed of this?”

He made no answer, for there was none, but the look on his face gave her a new throb of fear.

“What is it, Jack?”

“I don’t know,” he said wearily, “but if it were not for you I would regret having done anything. As it is”—he made a helpless gesture—“see what I have done!”

“Has anything else happened?” she asked timidly.

“No, there’s nothing more to happen now. I’m thinking of Perkins down in the cottage, and that it was I who sent her there. I wish I hadn’t. God, how I wish that!”

“Jack,” she said swiftly, “don’t think of it that way! Dear one, don’t!”

“I’ve done a woman to death,” he said in a half-whisper.

“No, no”—she was trembling with a great longing to comfort him—“no one has. It was all written, and had to be. I am full of the horror of it, too, but you and all of us were only pawns. Perkins’s life was utterly unhappy, and her

death, however terrible, can't be more so. To me it all seems like some law."

"What law?" he asked dully.

"I can't explain. She killed my father, we all know that now, but why we don't know. Nor did she really know why she should kill herself. You did not bring her to her death."

"But if I had not acted as I have she would be alive now."

With that his arms went out, and he held her close. For a moment they clung like children, moved by some common and half-understood impulse. Surrounded by something, they knew not what, it was good to be like this and touch each other in the shadows of life. It brought Derrick a throb of divine comfort, strange and new. It was his turn to feel not so utterly alone.

"To-morrow, and after that?" she asked.

He told her, and what he had arranged with Burke.

"I'm glad. Just think of Martin all these years, how he must have loved her in spite of everything; what it must have cost him to go away as he did, and under suspicion, just to save her. And all that hidden behind his strange and threatening face. It could not have been anything he did that killed her love for him. Jack, dear, I can only feel pity, all the pity in the world, and you must feel only that, too. That poor woman would not want to live it all over again. And, oh, it does make me want to be understanding and merciful when I can to every one, always!"

CHAPTER XI

A STRANGE CONFESSION

THE WHOLE earth, bathed in bright sun and clear air, looked younger when Derrick walked into Bamberley next morning. It seemed but an hour since he had piloted Jean back through the fog, and when they parted she had clung to him for a wonderful moment that needed no words. His mind was still in a whirl, and with difficulty he pitched it forward to Bamberley jail.

Martin had been brought there in the gray of dawn, and with him the body of his wife, which rested where so lately the stiff figure of the peddler lay till subjugated consciousness mysteriously returned. There had been no chance to talk with Blunt, nor did Martin want to talk. He had sat for hours, quite motionless, turning the thing over and over in his slow brain, and it seemed that from the truth itself there was least to be feared. It was strange for him even to contemplate truth now. He was innocent of murder, but he was a perjurer nevertheless. He would have to risk that. Burke did not speak to him, and the moments dragged inflexibly on. But there was a new look in his swarthy face when Derrick entered the cell in company with the sergeant. He got up and nodded awkwardly.

“Do you want Blunt here when you question this man?” asked Burke. “I’ll answer for it that nothing has been fixed up between them since last night.”

“Do you see any objection?”

“They’re your questions, sir, not mine.”

Derrick hesitated a moment but felt persuaded that already he had got far enough under the skin of things to detect any probable collusion. He rather wanted to see these two men together and see if he could corroborate or disprove the story of one from the eyes of the other. Then something suggested that with death so near at hand there was little prospect of collusion.

“Yes, I think Blunt had better be here.”

Martin gave him a swift glance in which there was something that was almost gratitude for his confidence. Blunt was brought in by Peters, the constable. Peters’s face was full of an unbounded curiosity, and he was unaffectedly disgusted when Burke motioned him to withdraw. The peddler looked now not more than forty, and only in the brightness of his eyes was there anything of the bent and bearded man who had opened his pack at the cottage of Beech Lodge. One temple was swollen from Burke’s blow, but there

was no animosity about him. Nor was there any suggestion of fear. He glanced not at all at Martin but sent Derrick a long, steady stare. There was knowledge in that stare, and a certain unshakable fortitude. Such men in times past had died on the rack without a whisper of confession. Their bodies one can conquer, but not their spirits. Derrick knew then that what Blunt would say would be the truth; as much of it as he thought wise, and no more.

“Well, Martin,” began the former slowly, “Miss Derrick and I and all of us are more than sorry about what happened last night, and what I don’t understand is why your poor wife and you should have thought it best to say nothing to us of what you were to each other. Even now I am not here to examine you, I have no right to do anything like that, but just to ask whether you do think it wise to say something of your own free will. I think”—here he hesitated a little—“that I’ve been fairly decent to you since you came. As to your wife, she never said anything which gave us the slightest inkling of the situation.”

The man regarded him with unfathomable eyes, and here again there was no fear. He seemed to be weighing chances, and at the same time to be prepared for any outcome. Presently he looked full at the peddler, and Derrick noted that the latter nodded ever so slightly, while once more there spread from him that nameless atmosphere of authority. Then Martin took a long breath and began in a deep voice, rough and broken with emotion.

“You’ve always been straight with me, Mr. Derrick, and now I’m going to be just as straight with you. I can’t help letting myself in for it”—here he glanced swiftly at Burke—“but I don’t much care what happens. What’s more, I’d just as soon Blunt heard what I’ve got to say, and he can check me up when I get off the track, if he wants to. I’ll start at the beginning, and that’s about eight years ago when we went up country in Burma.”

“Who do you mean by we?”

“My wife and me. I had been trading along the Irawadi, been there for some years, when I heard there was good business to be done further up. We were about ready to pull out, but I changed my plans. Ever been in those parts?”

Derrick shook his head.

“Then don’t go, sir. It’s no place for a white man, and less for a white woman. Folks seem to go mad there without knowing it, a sort of slow, creeping madness that by and by gets them. It’s the jungle that does it, with the smell of the orchids like a woman’s breast, air that thick and heavy you could almost cut it with a knife like cheese, soft under your foot with things dying and being born. There are butterflies as big as your hat that go fluttering round as though they were drunk with the smell of the flowers, as I guess they are; and the flowers are like pulp, with nothing to touch a Lady Hillingdon in the

whole country. It seemed to me after a while that most every one is either mad or drunk in the jungle, which is perhaps the same thing, but of course they don't know it. Anyway, it was eight years ago, no, seven, that Mr. Millicent came along. He had traveled up river to see the country, being interested in that sort of thing. I was away still further up at the time, and when he got back on his way to Rangoon he stopped at my place because there was nowhere else to stay. What happened there I didn't know at the time, but—"

He broke off helplessly, locked and twisted his thick fingers together, stared uncertainly at Derrick and then at Blunt.

"Go on," said the latter quietly.

"It was nearly a year before I found out, but when I got back my wife had gone, leaving no word. Then I went mad, too, blaming myself because I had kept her so long in the jungle and she begging me to take her out. Perhaps as I see it now she felt the madness coming on her, but trade was so promising that I hung on. After a while the natives told me about Mr. Millicent, but none of them knew his name, only that he had come from up country, and there were queer stories about him. I started tracing the thing back till I found a priest who told me that an Englishman like him had robbed a temple up in the Mong Hills. Then I sold my stuff and started for Rangoon. There was more of the story there, and I got Mr. Millicent's address from a clerk in the shipping office. I took the first boat to England, came to Bamberley, and my wife didn't know me."

Martin stopped abruptly, and Derrick made a sudden gesture of sympathy. Blunt's face did not alter a fraction. This was but a tale to him, and apparently not of great interest, a minor scene in the play.

"Go on!" he said again.

"Looking back at it now, I can see one reason for some of it. Soon after we married she had a son, but he didn't live only a few days. She was never quite the same afterward, knowing she couldn't have another. Maybe that had a little to do with her going off after Mr. Millicent. You can't guess what it's like to be hunting a wife who has gone in pursuit of a man you never saw."

"No," said Derrick slowly, "I can't."

"Well, sir, that was my case, and when finally I found her I learned the truth. It wasn't Mr. Millicent himself at all, but that damned jade god he had stolen, that and perhaps the jungle madness. Maybe Blunt here will tell you more about the thing. Mind you, the natives believed in it, and whatever it was that got into her blood made her believe in it, too. At any rate, Mr. Millicent had the ungodly thing, though I suppose he never knew just why he stole it, and that anchored her wherever he happened to be, like a moth trying to get inside a lamp. She couldn't get away if she wanted to. Mr. Millicent himself never knew, I believe that, and was always kind to her as he was to every one

else, and nothing more. Had I thought there was anything else I would have killed him myself, and I don't care if the sergeant hears me say so, either. So my wife went into his family as a servant, just to be near him. Mad, yes, she was mad enough. Did you never notice her eyes, sir?"

"I think we all noticed them."

"Then I needn't say much more about that. As I say, I got to Beech Lodge, and she looked straight in my face and didn't know me for her husband. She knew that she had known me before, but that was all, if you understand. I couldn't force myself on her without destroying what little comfort she got out of being near her master, though God knows that was more pain than comfort. At the same time, I couldn't leave her without some kind of protection, for I had never wanted any woman but her, so I applied for the job of gardener, and got it, perhaps because I knew the country Mr. Millicent was thinking of most of the time. There I was, working for the same people as my own wife, but no more a husband of my wife's than one of my own shrubs. The jade god had her for its own, and it had Mr. Millicent, too. The fear was on him. I could see that."

"Why didn't you tell Mr. Millicent the truth as soon as you got to Beech Lodge?"

"Because my wife would have gone clean mad if I had, for he would have tried to send her away. And back of all this I knew there were those in the Mong Hills who would never rest or be content till they got the damned thing back in their own hands. What's more, they weren't the sort who cared much what they did to get it. Millicent's life wouldn't be worth a snap of the finger when they found out where he was, if they thought he had it. That was always in my head. And there was she, moving further and further away from me, and more and more in love with him. Can you see the sort of life I led? But the master was always straight with me, and no man ever had a better boss."

"The night you applied to me for a job," put in Derrick, "I asked her if she thought under all the circumstances I would do well to take you on, and she said yes, if I wanted a garden like Mr. Millicent's. How do you explain that?"

"Simple enough, sir. She remembered me as a gardener for Mr. Millicent, and that I was good with flowers, and nothing else." He broke off in distress and sent Blunt a pathetic glance.

"You people are getting the truth," said the latter, fingering his handcuffs. "Go on, Martin."

"Well, I waited and waited, knowing that that lot in the Mong Hills would never forget, or give the thing up, and the jade god was working somewhere in the dark. Then came the night when it happened. I was out behind the cottage when my wife came tearing down the drive like a crazy woman, screaming that she had had a terrible dream and Mr. Millicent was dead. She was only half

dressed, with her hair down, and just for a minute I thought the worst of them both, then saw that she was in a sort of daze as she used to be when once or twice I caught her walking in her sleep. The knife was in her hand. I guessed what had happened and got it away from her, and wiped the blood from her fingers, and all the time she kept on talking as though she didn't see me. I told her it was only a dream and went up to the house with her and found it was as she said."

Martin's voice faltered here, and he looked beseechingly at Derrick. "What would you have done, sir, if you'd been me?"

"I think probably exactly the same."

"Yes, because no man could do anything else. Here was this poor woman who did not know she had committed any crime, only that she had found the man she loved better than anything on earth in a pool of his own blood. I knew that I had to act quickly if I was going to save her and got it into her head that she must break the news to Mrs. Millicent, who would send her straight to the cottage again. Her mind was still dazed, but she grasped that, and I sneaked back to my own place. And all this I've told you is God's truth, and it brings you up to the start of what every one knows about the Millicent mystery. Since then I've kept my mouth shut, but"—and here the man stared grimly at Burke—"I'd do the same thing again for the same reason. I know I'm a perjurer and reckon I'll have to pay for that. But I'm ready to pay."

Derrick turned involuntarily to Burke, who had been sitting quite motionless, slowly twisting a pencil between his broad finger-tips. The big, strong face reflected nothing of his thoughts. The sergeant had drunk in every word, his brain turned to detect any seeming flaw on which he might fasten. But so far there was none, except that his stolid British mind could not grasp the seeming potentiality that lay in a lump of carved stone. Blunt did not stir a muscle and regarded his handcuffs with a sort of quiet interest as though they were children's toys. From his expression Derrick knew what Blunt was thinking about.

"Is there anything else, Martin?"

"Only the inquest and all that part of it. After it was over I knew by my wife's face that her soul had gone wandering after Millicent and that I was nothing to her and never could be. But she was my woman, and nothing would alter that. I did not know where the image was, nor did she, and right away it seemed clear that if I stayed I might let out something. I told her I was going away, and she looked at me as though she had never seen me before, so I knew that nothing would drive her from Beech Lodge while that damned thing was hidden there. She wanted to find it, too, but in a way was afraid to find it. So I hid the knife and went off."

"Why hide the knife?" put in Derrick sharply.

“So in case she should ever be charged with the murder I might come back and the thing be found with me. That would let her out,” said Martin steadily.

Derrick caught his breath. He had a blinding glimpse of the unswerving devotion hidden behind this formidable exterior. The sheer depth of it seemed to dwarf all other kinds of worship. The gallows to save this cold and repellent woman, this one woman of his heart. That was the offering Martin stood ready to make.

“Well,” continued the heavy voice, “I went back to Burma, and by that time the story of the theft of the god was pretty much all over the Mong Hills, not talked of openly, but going round in whispers, and I knew that something else was bound to happen. I met Blunt there, and he knew that I knew and followed me. He’ll tell you his own story about that if you ask him. I stayed with my sister in America, but all the time something was calling me back here, so I came, hotfoot. And the minute I reached the house I knew the god was still there.”

“And when you arrived you found you were no more to your wife than before?”

Martin pulled himself together. “That’s it,” he said, with a glance almost of gratitude; “not even as much. And when Miss Millicent came in I knew the infernal thing was at work again.”

“I felt something of the kind, too.”

Martin nodded. “I saw that, sir, though you were all in the dark. Then Blunt got here, as I knew he would, and you can guess the rest. Last night, when my woman came into the study and saw things just as they once were, she thought she had waked up again, and I hadn’t time to stop her. My God, Mr. Derrick, did you know what was coming?”

“No, Martin, I didn’t, except that I frankly expected you might say something. It was a jump in the dark.”

“Then if I had said what she did, or something like it, she would be alive now,” groaned the man bitterly.

Derrick could not answer that, and there ensued a poignant moment which he ended by turning suddenly to Burke. “Is there anything you want cleared up, sergeant?”

“No, sir”—the man’s voice was softer than usual—“but there’s one thing, about Martin calling himself a perjurer. The law does not ask that a man or woman give evidence against each other if they are man and wife. Considering what we’ve heard, I think Martin can forget the perjury part of it. I see now how the knife happened to be in the cottage, for that did surprise me. I thought perhaps Blunt had put it there for his own purpose. We might as well get on to what he has to say.”

“I’ll give you the rest of it,” began the peddler in a clear voice, “and you

can pick any holes in it you like. All that Martin says is true, every word of it. I come from the Mong Hills and was born near there. My father was English, and you might know his name, but he's dead now, so that end of it doesn't matter. My mother was a Malay woman, and she's alive. I lived near a temple in the hills where the priests believed in what they said and read, which isn't always the case in that country. It was a famous temple, and the more famous on account of what was in it, this being a lot of images of Buddha, all the work of one man. The name of the man was Lung Sen, and he had the blood of forefathers who were the greatest artists of their time in wood and gold and jade. Most of Lung's work went to this temple, where it was very precious, but of the man himself the priests knew nothing except that the faces he carved were alive and something moved behind the eyes. One night I stayed with Lung, and before morning came I knew the man as none other ever had. It seemed that there were two men in him, one the carver of images, the other with all the evil of the world wrapped up in his black heart. He told me, perhaps because I had foreign blood and he thought I would understand better, that he was tired of making flat-faced Buddhas and had been tired for years, and that evil was more interesting than good, and it was more difficult to carve evil than the other thing. Then he looked at me for a quarter of an hour while he smoked, and took something out of a roll of silk. It was the jade god."

He paused reflectively, his eyes cloudy with memories, and Derrick had a glimpse of what he must have seen then. The half-light, the dark sardonic face, the long, lean fingers, the obscurity of a riverside hut, and all around it the ceaseless whisper of the jungle.

"When I saw that," went on Blunt presently, "I was frightened, for it was the image of the soul that Lung Sen had hidden from the world. He had spent years making it, putting in the hours when he wasn't turning out the standard article. And as he looked at the thing I saw that his own face had become just like it. There was a sort of living devil there, crammed with all the knowledge in hell and afraid of nothing in the other place. And this was the man who had been carving Buddhas for nearly fifty years according to his own account. I asked him what he was going to do with it, and he said put it in the temple, where they let him do pretty much as he liked, and after a while it would acquire and soak in the power of the real thing, by which it would be surrounded, but would lose nothing of what he had carved on it. That would make it a god of evil, with the influence of the real gods behind it."

The man hesitated an instant and looked curiously at Derrick. "All this may sound like a fairy-story to you, but if you and your people had lived in the Mong Hills all your lives it wouldn't seem like that."

"I think I understand."

"Well, when he finished it, working with sharp sand and thousands of little

wooden drills to cut the stone, he did put it in the temple. I don't know how long the job had taken, but probably not less than thirty years. Then he sat tight, smiling to himself, till the priests found out. They knew in a minute that if the thing ever got away from them it would raise hell for whoever had it, so they guarded it day and night till a year or so later Millicent came along. He heard of it; the thought of the thing began to work in his brain; and, to make a long story short, he bribed a young priest and got away with it. The first thing that happened was that Lung Sen didn't wake up one morning, and his face was just like the jade god's. The priest was never seen again. Then for some reason they sent for me and told me to go in search of it; didn't ask, but told me. And I knew enough to go. It took me years to find Martin, and if you ask why I didn't give it up long ago, I can't tell you, except that I knew another was coming after me, and then another, but I would only see them once. When I got here, I knew by Martin's face that the god was not far off. So now"—here he glanced dominantly at Derrick—"this thing must go back with me. The god of all evil lives in it, and whoever keeps it will be cursed. Joy will die for him, and fear will come, and love be changed to a dream of terror. God hides in that stone, and sacrifices must be made in front of it. What becomes of me does not matter. The woman killed the man, because the image commanded her. She could not help it, her love being turned to gall. And this is only the beginning of what must come if the image stays in your keeping."

The voice lifted with a strange domination that brooked no interruption, and the peddler's features took on a look of exalted prophecy. "What do the children of to-day know of the wisdom that dwelt in the hills of Mong when England was peopled by half-naked savages? They are like children with toys they do not understand. Gautama opened the books of good and evil that all might read. You of the West have read not at all; Lung Sen read only the evil, and he is dead; and this man from an English village disobeyed the law and passed at the hand of one who struck when her eyes were closed. When after two years they opened, she struck again, but this time at herself. She was asleep, but the god never sleeps. So if you do not give it to me, then make an end of me quickly, and prepare for the next messenger, who is now on his way, and will not ask, but take."

Silence descended in the cell. Burke's eyes were half closed, as though he peered at visions hitherto unguessed. A cart creaked in the distance but did not break the spell. Derrick had an abiding sensation that from the East a hand had reached out and touched the village of Bamberley into a strange sleep. Martin sat motionless, reliving the past, while the peddler clasped his lean fingers, a look of intense abstraction on his dark smooth face. Derrick was aware that he felt amazingly impotent, and with difficulty made an indefinite gesture.

"Sergeant," he said, after a long pause, "I make no charge against Martin

and will go bail for his appearance at the inquest when wanted.”

The big man jerked himself together, stood up, groped in his pocket, and produced a key. There was a click of steel. Martin was a free man.

“You might go back to the cottage now,” said Derrick, looking him full in the eye.

The gardener nodded, shook himself like a wet dog, said one sibilant word of farewell to the peddler, and vanished. His step was still audible when Burke fastened an inquiring look on Blunt.

“What about this man, sir? Are you going to let him down as easy as that?”

“I take it that the only charge is of attempted theft?”

“That’s right, but I wouldn’t be so sure about bail in this case.”

“And the only damage is to the French window?”

“That’s for you to say, sir. It’s your house.”

Derrick turned to Blunt. “You have come here in search of a certain thing. In that I believe you have told the truth, but as to what may follow if you don’t get it, that’s another story. I do accept what you said about the image, and that it has for some reason an evil effect. It is not necessary to go into that any further, but since the thing is evil, it should no longer exist, and—”

Blunt leaped to his feet. “What are you going to do?”

“First leave it to the sergeant to decide whether he keeps you here till the inquest, and—”

“I’ll certainly do that,” put in Burke.

“Well, after that’s over there will be no reason for you to stay in England any longer. You can go back to the Mong Hills and tell them that the image does not exist. It won’t.”

“You’ll destroy it?” whispered Blunt, aghast.

“Yes. If it’s the evil thing you say, and I believe you, it ought to be destroyed. If it isn’t, you’ve been lying, which I don’t believe. I’ve learned something from all this, Blunt,” he added thoughtfully, “and my mind is made up. Good morning, sergeant.”

CHAPTER XII

“I LOVE YOU!”

DERRICK got back to Beech Lodge in time for lunch and plunged at once into a vastly different atmosphere. The house was servantless, and this very fact had kept Edith too busy to indulge in any morbid reflections, even had her resilient nature felt so inclined. She was moved by the knowledge that her brother had been under a strain which, however incomprehensible to herself, was nevertheless to him very real. It was reflected in his eyes, his restless manner, and the notes that had lain untouched for weeks. She wanted him to get back to his work, to be normal, and above all things happy. She recognized and admired the creative side of him, made allowances for what she considered the essential vagaries of his temperament, and had long since decided to sacrifice herself if necessary on so unusual an altar. She could feel for him, if not with him.

So, returning from the grim scene of Bamberley jail, he found an energetic, practical young person, obviously full of work, and over whom hung but little of the tragedy of the immediate past. She supplied the touch that the moment demanded. He welcomed this, leaned on it far more than he realized, and sat down at the table with a feeling of prodigious relief. The hand of the domestic artist was visible here, and if at times the diaphanous shape of the stiff figure of Perkins seemed to stand close to his shoulder, the sensation did not oppress him. Edith talked generalities till, nearly at the end of the meal, she sent him a frank questioning look.

“Of course I’m just dying to know if anything new came out this morning. Martin turned up an hour ago. He seemed to me like another man, got out his tools and went to work without a word, and it made me more curious than ever. That queer puzzling expression has gone out of his eyes, and I couldn’t help thinking he was something like a dog that had been stolen and found his way back to his old home.”

Derrick nodded cheerfully. “I rather fancy he feels like that, just for the present, anyway, but we’ll probably have to find another gardener. He won’t want to stay here.”

“No, I suppose he couldn’t.” She hesitated a moment, then gave him the straightforward glance he knew so well. “Do you know, Jack, I think we’ve all been rather stupid about that poor woman; yes, I mean you, too.”

“It’s quite possible,” he admitted, “but why?”

“Well, I suppose it’s easy to put things together, afterward; but, looking back at everything, what happened seems in a way as natural as it was dreadful. The poor soul had her terrible secret and took the only way out of it, but couldn’t we have anticipated that somehow?”

“It was the last thing one could imagine.” He went on, and told her some of what had transpired that morning in Bamberley jail, but not all. She listened silently, with little gestures of wonder, and a softened light in her honest, brown eyes. At the story of Martin’s devotion they filled with tears.

“One has heard of men like that with one great passion in their lives that no one else can understand because there seems nothing to bring it to life. Perhaps women are apt to be hard on women, but it’s hard to see how Perkins could have roused such a thing. After all, it may be the men who are queer, and not us. I suppose this story will be all over England in a few days?”

He made a grimace. “I’m afraid so. The reporters will gather like a flock of crows.”

“But after that’s over will you be able to settle down to work, and—and the other thing?”

“What other thing?”

“When do you go to see the Millicents?” she asked cheerfully. “It’s all a frightful mixture, I know, and it seems rather appalling that you two should have been brought together like this, but perhaps stranger things have happened.”

“Not much stranger,” he said thoughtfully. “I’m going there in an hour or so. They’re expecting me.”

“Well,” she went on with growing earnestness, “I know it’s your affair, but I wouldn’t say a word more than necessary. The thing is done with, Jack, all except this horrid inquest, at which you say Jean and I won’t have to appear, and you don’t know how glad I am of that. I’ve a feeling that you’ll have a good many years in which to tell her the rest of it—I mean anything more you think she should know—but don’t burden her with what is so grim, if you can help it. She’s too young. Girls like her often seem to offer themselves unconsciously to wounds, but they don’t find out till afterward how deep the thing has gone. As for Mrs. Millicent, I wouldn’t attempt to say much to her. Let Jean do that in her own way. Nothing can be as close as mother and daughter in a time like this, and they can’t hurt each other. You’ll probably think me dreadfully cheeky, but I rather feel that you and Jean have been dwelling mentally far too long on things you both think I can’t understand because I’m not occult, but I do understand them just enough to feel that they’re neither cheerful nor in a queer way healthy for people of your age. So please forgive all this, and give me a cigarette, and help clear this table, and for goodness’ sake tell me where I can get a cook and housemaid who won’t

imagine Beech Lodge is full of horrors.”

He laughed outright, the first real laugh for weeks. “You’ve got my future pretty well mapped out, but I think you’re right about the Millicents. Been in the study this morning?”

“Yes, and the room is just as it was when we came here. But that desk was a fearful weight.”

“You moved it yourself?”

“Of course, seeing there was no one else, and all the time I had an odd feeling that the things were glad to be moved back. Is that sort of feeling accounted for in your philosophy?”

“It is now, thanks to you.”

“I’ve been wondering what you’re going to do with that jade image. I couldn’t find the panel this morning.”

Derrick told her.

“But have you the right? It isn’t yours.”

“I’ll chance that.”

“But, Jack, if it was included in the inventory you can’t destroy it without all kinds of dilapidations to the Thursbys. Isn’t it supposed to be valuable?”

“It may be, but most decidedly it was not in the inventory, therefore it was not sold to the Thursbys, and consequently I needn’t answer to them, but only to the Millicents. And I fancy I know what they’ll say.”

“Well, you ought to by this time, and, speaking of the Thursbys, I’ve an idea that if everything that has taken place since we came had happened eighteen months ago they wouldn’t have let this house when you came along and fell in love with it.”

“But they weren’t in it then.”

“No, but they would have been; at least, something suggests they would.”

“Why do you say that?” he asked curiously.

“Because she’s not the kind of woman to be afraid of anything obvious, anything she can see and even partly understand. If poor Perkins had done away with herself then, I rather think Mrs. Thursby would have been as much fascinated as horrified. Don’t you know that sort? It would have given her something to talk about for the rest of her life with no one to interrupt; something infinitely more intriguing than her husband’s grenades, or whatever they are. How do you feel yourself about that?”

“I’m not quite sure,” he said candidly. “What I did feel about the house until yesterday seems to have gone this morning, as though a wind had blown through it with all the windows open. But I wouldn’t mind subletting now, if there were any chance of it, which there isn’t at this time of year. So we have it for another nine months anyway.”

“You couldn’t very well bring Jean back here,” she murmured

thoughtfully.

He shook his head. "No, I couldn't."

Edith got up with the sudden remembrance that her hands were very full.

"Well, I suppose there's time enough for that, and anyway you have to marry her first. Wouldn't it be queer if—" She broke off with a little laugh.

"If what?"

"Nothing, I'm only wandering, and of course just when there's no time for it. Please put these things on that tray and open the pantry door. I won't expect you for tea."

He went off a little later, passing Martin, who only touched his cap. He did look like another man, but neither of them spoke. The shadow of despair seemed to have left his face and to be replaced by a gravity that was new and dignified. Derrick strode on with the consciousness that the wind had blown through himself as well as Beech Lodge. He admitted his debt to Edith and now saw her cheerful sanity in a fresh light. It was strange to have leaned on a person, however dear, because they were incapable of being torn by one's own reactions. How bright she was! How helpful and practical! What a standby!

But he never knew what the past hour or two had cost her—she was too good an actor for that; nor did he guess that she had watched him to the gate, her eyes dim, feeling more lonely than ever before in her life. She admitted there was much she did not understand, or even want to understand, but he did not perceive how often she had come nearly to the breaking-point. With Edith it was as with many another woman, the cost of whose sacrifice is hidden too deep for discovery, and only the beauty of it revealed.

Jean and her mother were together, and Mrs. Millicent greeted him with a quiet affection that touched him deeply. It meant that not only had Jean told her of the tragedy of the night before but also that she saw in him more than the man who had solved the mystery of her husband's death. Jean's eyes met his own as she gave him her hand, and they carried a message that needed no speech. Mrs. Millicent regarded them both with a gentle pleasure in which there was no surprise, then waited a little nervously. The picture of the study of Beech Lodge and what had happened there still haunted her brain.

"Jean told me you were to have a talk with Martin and the peddler this morning," she said. "Did you see them?"

"Yes," he said quietly.

"Did they tell you anything new about my—my husband?" She had summoned all her courage for this question and wanted it over.

Derrick shook his head. "There was very little about that and nothing of real importance. It was mostly about the image he found in Burma which Blunt says has a good deal of past history that makes it of special interest to certain people there. Both men agreed that it carried bad luck, and sometimes danger,

wherever it went. It's quite obvious that in some way it fascinated Mr. Millicent; and"—here he hesitated an instant—"it seems to have exercised later on the same influence over Perkins; and," he concluded slowly, "the thing worked in her brain till finally she did what she did."

Mrs. Millicent shivered. "I know it impressed him tremendously. That was clear from the day he got back from Burma. He once told me he thought it was valuable, but it always frightened me because of its effect on him. It seemed to carry some dreadful secret with it. I asked him to destroy it several times, but that rather shocked him. He never let it out of his own hands and always hid it where you found it."

"Do you feel that way about it now?"

"Yes, more than ever."

"Then may I destroy it?" he asked quickly.

"I should be very glad and feel happier than in a long time if you did."

"I will, and I think others may be happier, too, in the long run."

She nodded. "Isn't it strange?"

"What?" he asked curiously.

Her eyes rested a moment on Jean's lovely face, then turned back to him.

"My dear boy," she said with a sort of soft impulsiveness, "do you think I can't see how it is between you two? The strange part is that the last three months should have resulted in this, that out of shadows and uncertainty should come something so different. I'm afraid I have not understood much of all you've done at Beech Lodge, but I remember so distinctly the day when Jean said she must go in and tell you what had happened there. I can't say anything more about it now, for I'm too conscious of the effect of it all on this child of mine, but soon you and I must have a long talk. How is your sister?" she added unsteadily.

"All right, I think. Her hands are rather full now till she gets some help." He knew that Jean's eyes were fixed on him and found it hard to speak.

"I'm sure of that. She's splendid, and something tells me we're going to be great friends. You'll stay for tea, won't you?"

After that she got up, put her hand on his shoulder for an understanding instant, and went out. She felt as though a new grasp, young and strong, had laid hold of the wheel of life, and was comforted. They heard her step on the stair. Derrick, his breath coming faster, crossed the room, stood for a moment beside Jean's chair, and put out his arms.

"I love you," he whispered; "I love you!"

She gazed at him, her cheeks pale, then flooding with an exquisite color, and came to him with a quick little sigh of happiness. It was not thus they had clung together the evening before. Now there was joy in the clinging, and the sweet promise of more joy that awaited them.

“Do you remember that first morning we met?” he whispered again.

“I don’t know why I went to Beech Lodge. I think I had to.”

“Yes, that was it. I thought you were so wonderful and brave. The house was never quite the same after that.”

“Do you think I was wise to come?” she smiled.

He answered with a kiss, and she stirred in his arms, only to be drawn closer.

“I was tremendously interested in you, even then,” she confided, “and rather frightened. I hope I didn’t show it. Did Edith think I was very bold?”

“Edith thinks no end of you. She’s a trump.”

Jean nodded happily. “You and I need some one like that near us, Jack.”

“I don’t want any one near us for a while,” he protested. “How did your mother know?”

“I’m afraid she must have gathered something from me. Does Edith know?”

“I began to think she knew as soon as I did, if not before. She’s awfully pleased about it.”

The girl was silent for a moment. “Jack, dearest.”

“Yes?”

“Is there much you didn’t tell mother; I mean about this morning?”

“I tried just to say what would help her. The rest can keep.”

“And there was nothing that could make any difference to—to us?”

“I don’t quite understand.”

“There was something I always felt, but I couldn’t make myself tell you. It was the sensation that whatever had descended on father would also involve me in the same way. I can’t really explain beyond that, but it meant that I couldn’t surrender and let myself love you till all this had been lifted away. Last night, when I saw what happened, and in spite of the dreadfulness of it, the strangest feeling came that it had been lifted in that moment. When you were trying to help Perkins, I couldn’t avoid staring at the jade god, because I knew he had something to do with it. He stared back, and for the very first time I was not afraid of him. It was just as though Perkins had paid for everything and set me free. Tell me that nothing was said this morning by either of those men to upset that; but you must tell me on your honor.” She shivered involuntarily, but gradually her tremor ceased under his nearness and strength.

“All that was said, and I’ll tell you all of it some day, points to the same thing. There is absolutely nothing to fear. We’ll prove that very soon, you and I, and there will be no longer a jade god to work mischief. Don’t you realize, darling, those days are all past?”

Her arms tightened round his neck. “Why do you love me, Jack?”

“I’ve been waiting for you all my life.”
Then, slowly, she raised her lips to his.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SACRIFICE

THREE DAYS later Mrs. Millicent and Jean turned in at the gate of Beech Lodge. It was the first time in more than two years they had been there together. Half-way up the drive they were met by Edith, who came out anxious to do what she could to help in what she knew was a trying moment. She kissed Jean affectionately.

“I’m so glad to see you both. You’ll find the house at loose ends, for it isn’t actually running, but just moving, so please forgive that. Our temporary servants are very temporary, I’m afraid.”

Mrs. Millicent nodded. She had dreaded the visit and somehow felt more at peace than she had expected. But her heart sank a little when she entered the house. In the hall she looked mutely about and hesitated as Edith led the way to the study.

“Jack doesn’t know you’re here yet,” said the latter cheerfully. “I’m rather pleased with him to-day.”

“Why?” smiled Jean.

“He’s actually got to work again, more like the old Jack than for months. I hope you’ll keep him at it when your turn comes.”

She opened the door as she spoke. Derrick, who was behind a litter of manuscript, jumped up, thrilled at the sight of his visitor. Mrs. Millicent’s eyes swept the familiar room, fighting lest she see what she feared to see. She noted that the big desk was now covered with baize, the rugs differently arranged, the prints rehung, and a flower-box in the window. Photographs were on the table, another lamp on the desk, new ornaments on the narrow shelf above the dark wainscoting. She recognized the thought that lay behind all this, and it touched her deeply. Then her glance was drawn to the portrait, and she sat down, overcome for the moment.

“Please don’t mind me,” she said valiantly. “I’ll be all right in a second, and it’s quite right I should come here first.” She looked gratefully at Edith, “I’ll be able to say ‘Thank you’ presently. Somehow you’ve made the room seem ever so much bigger.”

Edith filled the gap of her brother’s silence. His eyes were dwelling on Jean’s lovely face, with its smooth oval and the delicate lips. Her throat was very white and perfectly molded, while neck and shoulder joined in a lissom curve he found amazingly attractive. There was strength in the slim

straightness of her body, and grace in every gesture; but her chief allure lay in her eyes. These, full of changing light, seemed like calm, deep pools in the shadows of her dark brows, reflecting mood and thought with a sweet and rare fidelity. They held a soft luster all their own. For an instant Derrick stood quite motionless, a little blinded by it all. Then he heard Edith's voice and responded to a note in it that was meant for him, though she spoke to Mrs. Millicent.

"I thought perhaps you'd sooner come in here at once, and it won't be so hard the next time."

Mrs. Millicent nodded, but her lips were trembling.

"Have you been very much bothered by strangers?" asked Jean quickly. "I've seen so many in the village, and most of them seemed on their way out here."

"It was appalling till yesterday; then Sergeant Burke put a man on the gate, and that stopped it."

"Where is Martin?" asked Mrs. Millicent. She had looked for him among the rose-trees and been relieved not to see him.

"He left yesterday," said Derrick.

"Where did he go?"

"He didn't say. In fact, I didn't even see him, or know he was going. I noticed that he wasn't in the garden at noon, and the tool-shed was closed; so I went to the cottage and found a note addressed to myself. It was rather pathetic. He just wrote that since there was nothing to keep him here now, he was going back. He didn't say where, but it was probably to the Orient. There was a month's wages due to him to-day, and he didn't want them. Then he thanked me for treating him decently, said he was glad I was going to do what I told Blunt I proposed to do, and that was all, except a postscript about the Lady Hillingdons."

"Poor Martin!" said Jean under her breath.

"And that other man?" added her mother.

"He will be free to-morrow, and he also will go."

"To Burma?"

"I think so. He's being detained till then on a technical charge only. He looks different now, with none of his former spring and activity. That's because he knows what is going to be done. He seems dazed, and in a queer way almost horrified, as though it were sacrilege. It was the same way with him at the inquest, which was very short, considering everything. Burke, on the other hand, is like another man and bursting with importance. He expects to be regarded as an authority on unusual cases, and probably will be. There's a great demand for his photograph already."

"And what did the inquest result in?" she asked timidly.

"Only that the poor woman died at her own hands while under temporary

insanity. There could be no other conclusion. Martin was not charged with anything before, so there was really nothing he needed to be cleared of. His evidence, as well as that of Blunt, was taken and accepted, and a statement will most likely be issued about what took place here two years ago. Martin was afraid he would be prosecuted for perjury, but the fact that it was his own wife gets him free of that. So really the matter is closed now, and it's just a case of living down what is always bound to continue for a little while after a thing of this sort. If I were you I wouldn't read the papers for a few days, and then it will be replaced by something else."

He broke off, pitched his mind as far as possible from the subject, then remembered that there was one duty still to perform to close the affair for all time.

"I had a note from Mrs. Thursby this morning," said Edith musingly. "She wrote that they would be passing this afternoon, and might they come in."

Jean looked up. "She must be tremendously curious."

"I expect so. She's rather that sort of woman. I haven't seen them for about three months."

Mrs. Millicent smiled a little. "She's a great believer in the power of money and even thought I'd sell my husband's portrait, to which she took a great fancy. I couldn't have it with me, as there's no room for a big picture in our cottage. There are some more things up-stairs, too, that are ours; but I sold everything else in this room."

Derrick shot a swift inquiring glance at Jean and made a slight gesture toward the mantel. She looked puzzled for a minute, then nodded.

"You didn't sell this, Mrs. Millicent?" He touched the panel, and the jade god gleamed from its wooden prison.

She put her hand to her breast. "So that is where it was kept! I never knew till Jean told me. No, I didn't sell it. I never thought of that."

"It's hard to say just what it suggests to me now," he began slowly, "and still more what it may really mean to a man like Blunt. It's one of those things to which there's no straight answer. But if there had been no jade god here"—he paused, then added with a brilliant smile—"I wouldn't have found Jean. Edith doesn't believe in all this, but—"

"I didn't say that," interrupted his sister, "but just that I didn't understand, and"—she shook her head decisively—"I didn't want to."

"Perhaps you were the most right," he chuckled, "when you suggested that the thing wasn't somehow healthy."

"If I did, I stick to it. It's beastly."

Mrs. Millicent put out a hand as though to touch it, but withdrew at the stare of the tiny basilisk eyes. It seemed to her that this fragment of carved stone, glimmering opaquely as the rays of the level sun filtered through it, still

threatened her, and she felt grateful for the steadiness of the hand that held it. Youth was about to dissipate the nightmare of the past. But somehow she did not want to see the thing done.

“I think,” she said, with a glance at Edith, “that you and I might let these two perform the ceremony by themselves.”

Edith laughed and nodded. “Jack will certainly smash the end of a finger before it’s over, and I can see by his face that he’s in tune for a regular oblation. It’s that sacrificial look.”

Derrick grinned cheerfully but did not speak. When they were alone he put the image on the mantel and took his girl in his arms.

“It’s years since I saw you.”

She smiled back, her face very close to his. “Dearest, it’s only three days.”

“Which is three too many. What an inspiration of your mother’s! Do you know what smashing that thing will be like with you here?”

“What, Jack?”

“Like gathering up all that is dark and ominous and deadly in the world, and obliterating it in front of everything that is sweet and lovely and desirable. You never knew that the first one to go was the one who made it, and then fear of it began to spread. I’ll tell you about it some day—the whole story. But now it’s all ended and done with.”

“Where will you break it, Jack?”

He stole a glance at Millicent’s portrait. “Here, on the hearth, under that. I think he’ll know about it and be glad. It won’t burn, but I’ve got a wax duplicate that ought to make a pillar of flame.”

Opening a drawer in the desk, he took out a hammer and the model, then laid the image on the tile hearth.

“There is proof, at any rate for you and me,” he said thoughtfully, “that this exercised a strange influence over the minds of many persons. It is the object of fear among thousands we shall never see, and the story of it has run through valleys and hills on the other side of the earth where the brown people talk of it in whispers. It has brought men round the world, and there are others who are waiting for the word that will bring them, too. Just so long as it exists there will be pain and theft and crime and fear. And this is the finish of all that, darling.”

He raised the hammer. Driven with all the strength of his wrist, it fell fair on the malignant head. There was a shivering sound as of tinkling glass, and the jade god dissolved into mottled green fragments. He felt a sharp pang in his thumb. An emerald splinter quivered there, like a miniature javelin beaded with blood.

“Evil to the very end,” he grunted, then struck again.

The god’s head dwindled to powder. He swept back the wreckage and

dropped the wax model into the smoldering embers. Flame shot up, leaping, sputtering, and hissing. They stood staring at it, their cheeks touching. It was in Derrick's mind that in this flame the dross of life was being burned away. Jean did not move till the fiery pyramid subsided. And as it died there came the sound of a horn from the drive.

"The Thursbys," he said disgustedly. "Do you want to see them?"

"Please, no. What had I better do?"

"I'd go to your mother, and please ask Edith to join me here." He gave a sudden little smile. "I've a sort of foolish idea that—" He stopped, glanced at the hearth, and shook his head. "No, it's too foolish."

"Tell me quickly."

"Wait till Thursby has gone. Kiss me quickly instead."

She vanished, her cheeks glowing. A moment later Edith came in.

"Well, our friends are here, but why couldn't they be content with what's in the papers?"

He had no time to answer, for the Thursbys were already in the hall. Mrs. Thursby swept in like a fresh breeze, followed by her husband. Derrick thought the latter looked a little sheepish.

"My dear," said the stout woman explosively to Edith, "what a perfectly awful time you must have had! We were over in France when we read of it, and even now when I think of that woman Perkins it gives me the shivers. I've blamed myself so much for not telling your brother everything the first time he came here."

"Matter of fact," chimed in Thursby, with a sidelong glance at the portrait, "I didn't say anything because it didn't seem necessary. I reckoned that ignorance was bliss so far as you were concerned, and we'd had rather a dose of it ourselves. The agents thought so, too."

"Perhaps it was," said Derrick dryly, "and there's no real harm done. The thing is finally cleared up."

"As I said before, I could never understand that woman," went on Mrs. Thursby, "but of course I do now. She must have been disappointed in love early in life, and married Martin to get even with some one else. Women often do that and pay for it afterward. But fancy living with her as we both did! Fancy a mad housemaid at your bedside saying the tea is ready, and thinking, perhaps, about killing one all the time. I wonder what sent her mad, Mr. Derrick. Didn't you hear that?"

"There was insanity in her family."

"Had she been like that for long?"

"A good many years, it seems."

Mrs. Thursby took a deep breath. "Well, that was the only thing the matter with Beech Lodge."

“What?” asked Edith curiously.

“A crazy housemaid. I felt that as soon as we left the place. Of course,” she continued reflectively, “you’ll think I must have been a bit crazy myself for not discharging her. I did make up my mind to that a good many times, but when it came to looking her in the face and saying she wouldn’t be wanted any more, I—well, I just couldn’t. Silly, wasn’t it?”

“I can almost understand that.”

“Glad you can. I couldn’t. Was she nice to you?”

“She was a wonderful servant.”

“Well, you see she liked you, but gave me the creeps. And the funny thing was that I couldn’t imagine the house without her, though it seems perfectly natural now, and this room is ever so much brighter.”

Thursby nodded. “It’s rather a pity you couldn’t imagine it.”

The stout woman laughed. “James has never quite forgiven me.”

“For what?” asked Derrick. His eyes were keen.

“For letting the place at all. We took another, stayed in it a month, then gave that up, and have been living in hotels ever since. I hate living in my trunks.”

“You don’t happen to be in the market for Beech Lodge, do you?”

She sent him a swift look of intelligence. “Whatever made you think of that? Are we, James? If I do the letting, you generally do the renting.”

Light began to dawn on the Derricks, and Edith made a cautious little signal.

“My brother is only joking, of course. The idea is too funny. We’ve just had all the expense and trouble of moving in, and it’s foolish to dream of anything but staying here. Don’t mind what he says.”

Thursby pushed out his lips. “Oh, I don’t know that it’s so foolish. If circumstances, I mean business ones, are satisfactory, nothing is foolish. I learned long ago that when my wife gets a premonition that we’re going to do something, we most always do. For instance,” he blurted, “if she were to say she had a feeling we were going to move back to Beech Lodge I’d bet on it. It’s safe money.”

Derrick laughed. “Aren’t you reckoning a little without your host?”

“I know it sounds like that. I say, I wonder what Mrs. Millicent thought of all this.”

“She probably thinks it’s a sort of release for that woman and every one else,” put in his wife hastily; “and that’s the only way to look at it. A sort of a general clean-up, I call it. Fancy that gardener coming back, too. He must have been the only person in the world who wasn’t frightened of his wife.”

“Where do you think you’ll be this summer?” interposed Edith.

Mrs. Thursby folded her plump hands. “I shouldn’t be surprised if that

depended on you,” she said calmly.

“Oh!”

The other woman nodded and went on with a kind of placid deliberation. “My dear, it’s no earthly use beating about the bush any longer, and I’m going to come straight out with it. Very soon after we let this place to you, we took another, didn’t like it, and then I knew we’d been too impulsive about letting Beech Lodge, and I wanted to come back to it, Perkins or no Perkins. I never gave the dreadful woman a thought, because she didn’t seem to matter nearly so much when one had not to look at her. I told my husband about it, but he only laughed, said I had changed my mind too late in the day and the idea was absurd. Later we went over to France for a while.”

“Were you there long?” asked Derrick curiously.

“No, only a few weeks. I couldn’t settle down somehow. Then we read about what happened here, and I knew what was the matter with me. It was just as though that woman had telegraphed me that she was out of the way now, and I might come back.” She paused, with an odd expression on her round face, and glanced approvingly round the room. “So now, if it is possible to arrange it, I want to come. If you’re agreeable, then it’s up to your brother and my husband. So far as I’m concerned, it’s not a matter of money, and James knows that.”

She leaned back with a nod which announced that on this subject she had now emptied her mind, and there was no chance of misunderstanding it on the part of her husband. He was the means to the end. Thursby’s hands were deep in his pockets, and he stared out over the lawn, his brows puckered, as though he were adding up figures, which indeed he was. Edith’s eyes caught those of her brother, and she signaled a message that left no possibility of doubt in his mind. At that he turned to Thursby:

“Shall we have a stroll? I’ve put in quite a lot of new roses, and there’ll be something of a show here next summer.”

The little man nodded jerkily, and they went out. Mrs. Thursby sat up straight and heaved a contented sigh.

“Then, that’ll be all right, if it suits you. Isn’t it all queer?”

“I think every one feels that.”

“Well, of course I don’t know the ins and outs of it, only what’s in the papers, and I suppose there’s a lot more, but I felt that neither you nor I had much to do with that woman staying on here. However, I’ve my eye on a jewel of a girl now who will go anywhere. Do you suppose if those men agree there’ll have to be another inventory?”

“I’m afraid so, though we haven’t had time yet to do much damage. That French window was broken, but it’s been repaired.” She paused, while something drew her eyes to the hearth. “And there’s that jade image,” she

added uncertainly; “but that’s Mrs. Millicent’s.”

“What jade image? I never saw one here. Where is it?”

“What’s left of it is in the fireplace.”

The stout little woman stooped and picked out an emerald splinter.

“My dear, what perfectly lovely stuff! Were you going to throw it away?”

“It’s Mrs. Millicent’s, and she asked to have the image destroyed.”

“And jade, too! How queer some people are! It’s very fashionable now, and there’s enough here to make some gorgeous ear-rings.”

The thought of the remodeled god with his cold fingers at her throat gave Edith an involuntary chill.

“I really don’t want it, and am sure Mrs. Millicent doesn’t, so please take it if you wish.”

Mrs. Thursby dropped the splinter into her bag, got on her knees, and poked about among the ashes.

“I’m afraid the rest is all dust. What a pity! I’ve been trying to mesmerize James for years into buying me something of jade, but he simply won’t. Now I’m going to give him a surprise, so please don’t say a thing about it. Here they come now, and I think it’s all arranged. James is pretty quick in business matters.”

The Thursbys’ car rolled away a few minutes later, and Derrick darted upstairs. He found Jean and her mother in Edith’s room and, linking arms, marched them cheerily back to the study, where Edith waited with a patience in which there was no virtue whatever. Then he put his arm round Jean.

“Thursby,” he said contentedly, “was like clay in the hands of the potter. I began by reminding him that not only had we the lease till next winter, but also the right of extension for another three years on the same terms. He pretended to have forgotten that, but of course he hadn’t. Then I hinted that I’d get into frightful trouble with Edith if I upset all her plans, and that helped a good deal. It was quite clear from his manner that he had his orders. I dwelt as much as I dared on the discomfort of moving and all that, and the more I said the more anxious he got. He must have the highest regard for his wife’s wishes. Anyway, it’s arranged. He makes good the cost of our moving here, gives five hundred for the cancellation of the lease, and also meets the cost of our moving out. And I think that’s about all.”

“How perfectly wonderful!” said Jean. “Aren’t you glad?”

“Glad is no word for it.”

“Jack,” put in Edith, “I never knew before you were such a business man.” She paused and glanced at him suspiciously. “Just when have you committed us to that move?”

“A month from to-day. I thought it over carefully and decided that ought to suit every one.”

“What!”

Derrick’s eyes grew soft. He leaned over to Mrs. Millicent and took both her hands in his.

“May I have Jean a month from to-day?” he said very gently.

CHAPTER XIV

A BROKEN TILE

ALMOST exactly four months after he had completed his second inventory of the contents of Beech Lodge, Mr. Jarrad, again accompanied by Mr. Dawkins, stood once more in the paneled study. He had come to the house with his admirable manner, in which was blended this time a rather full knowledge of what had recently happened. Mr. Dawkins, who also read the papers, and was, as well, impressed by the air of the older man, seemed rather taciturn. There had been opportunity to say a good deal on the way down from London, and he was distinctly thrilled when they turned in at the white gate. Now the inventory book was opened and laid on Millicent's desk. Mr. Jarrad then took out a large handkerchief and blew his nose with a trumpet-like sound as though he enjoyed it. He had ascertained that the Derricks were in the garden, and both servants back in the kitchen. The morning was fine and clear.

"I don't know," he said with a touch of unction, "when I've heard of a case just exactly like this. Here we are, paid to do precisely the same thing over again simply because a foolish woman killed herself. We've both seen houses that were enough to make any really sensitive person commit suicide, but"—he glanced round with open approval—"they were not houses like this. It all brings back to me the great truth that the foundation of our business is the undeniable suspicion that well-bred people have of each other. There's practically no inventory connection with the lower and lower middle classes. Do you happen to remember a remark I made about 'things' when we were here last?"

"I do," replied Dawkins; "and, what's more, I've been thinking about it ever since."

"Well, these are not the kind of things to make one tired of life. There's another point. I expressed my conclusions about the manner in which 'things' occupy the greater part of the time of so many women."

"You did," said Dawkins soberly, "and I said it wasn't that way with us because we hadn't any. But my young woman has started since then."

Mr. Jarrad smiled. "Quite so; that was inevitable; and now that Mrs. Millicent has disposed of hers to Mr. Thursby, Miss Millicent, who will marry Mr. Derrick next week, is already starting another collection. I hope she may do as well as this. She can't do better. I don't know when I've seen a room I

like more. Her mother's work, of course, all of it."

"Why do you suppose that woman killed Mr. Millicent?" asked Dawkins thoughtfully. "I read it all several times over in several papers, but it always struck me there was a good deal that didn't meet the eye."

Mr. Jarrad smiled again. "Why, do you suppose, does a woman do anything?"

"I don't know yet. I've only been married a year."

"Then you know more now than you will in ten. The appearance of Perkins suggested that she might do anything at any moment, if you remember. If the cause was what it usually is with a woman—jealousy, or, in other words, love that has grown the wrong way—I can only wonder why she waited so many years. There are a good many queer things about the case; for instance, that foreigner who shammed dead when he was under arrest, then slid out of the station."

"I wonder what he was doing here?"

"Might as well ask why Mr. Millicent's old gardener came back as though he wanted to stick his head into the noose," said Mr. Jarrad sententiously. "Might as well ask why my client is willing to pay through the nose to get this house back just after letting it for a term of years—though I suspect there's a woman in that, too. Might as well ask why your client began by trying to hunt out Mr. Millicent's murderer and finished by finding his daughter. Might as well ask a heap of things that will never be answered, and perhaps in the long run it's just as well they're not. We know as much as is good for us as it is, and what we don't know can't hurt us much as long as we keep on not knowing it. Now what about the contents of this room?"

"The stuff seems the same with a few additions, but a little differently arranged; that's all."

Mr. Jarrad strolled about, his sharp eyes very active, returned to the desk, leaned over, then adjusted his glasses. He peered for a moment and frowned.

"That's really very odd."

"What is?"

"You remember we didn't agree about a stain here, and returned so that I could satisfy you on the point? It was a little difficult to detect."

Dawkins wetted his thumb and turned a few leaves in the big book.

"Yes, here it is, a post entry, and initialed by both of us. 'Large, irregular stain on near left-hand corner of leather-desk top, nearly effaced.' Right ho! let's have a look!"

He came over, stared hard, and straightened up with an exclamation. "You must have mesmerized me into seeing that before. It's certainly not there now, and the light is excellent. What do you make of it?"

"What we don't know won't hurt us," said Jarrad with a slow shake of the

head. "Initial this erasure, will you. What's next?"

Dawkins looked troubled, and a little anxious. "But I say—"

"I began just the way you're going on now, but I got over it. I suggest that so far as this room is concerned we just count the books and articles of furniture, pass on their general condition, and call the thing a go. Your clients are not the kind who give me any worry."

Dawkins nodded and began the recital, reading from the book in a rapid and level singsong as though he were chanting the creed of his profession.

"General condition excellent," he concluded, and shut the book.

Mr. Jarrad shook his head. "I can't agree to that now. The maintenance is not what it was. Quite obvious that the housemaid is untrained or lazy; possibly both. Look at this mantel."

He drew a finger across the top of the mantel behind the clock, and left a faint trail where the dust had been displaced.

"Couldn't do that the last time we were here. No, the upkeep is not as good. Condition fair, I should say, at the most. See for yourself."

Dawkins sniffed and investigated. "Perhaps you're right. I suppose my client is a little short of help. All right, 'condition fair.' Anything else?"

Mr. Jarrad glanced at the hearth. "Yes, one thing. One fireplace tile split. You have no note of that, I think, and it's the only real damage we've seen."

"No, I've nothing here. Let me see it."

He was bending over the hearth when Derrick came in. Jarrad made his well-known bow.

"We have just completed this room, sir, and the only real dilapidation we find is in this hearth. It's a small matter, but nothing is too small for us to note. Perhaps you may remember when it happened, as it's evidently quite recent."

Derrick stared at the cracked tile.

"Yes," he said slowly, "I remember that very distinctly."

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Jade God* by Alan Sullivan]