Brood of the Witch-Queen

by Sax Rohmer

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BROOD OF THE WITCH-QUEEN

BY

SAX ROHMER

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PREFATORY NOTICE

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

S. R.

BROOD OF THE WITCH-QUEEN

CHAPTER I

ANTONY FERRARA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

irrelevance.

"Has he!" snapped Sime.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

this?"

Sime stared.

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

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

"Married a Scotch lassie?"

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

"What habits?"

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

"Influenza?"

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

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

"What do you mean?"

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

"You think he has influence—"

"Influence of some sort, undoubtedly."

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

"Rather; quite upset me for work."

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

"Lazy dog."

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

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

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

The room was becoming cloudy with tobacco smoke.

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

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

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

"It was the storm gathering," snapped Sime.

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

He began to knock out the ash from his pipe.

"Go on," directed Sime tersely.

"The big swan—Apollo—was within ten feet of me; he swam in open water, clear of the others; no living thing touched him. Suddenly, uttering a cry that chilled my very

blood, a cry that I never heard from a swan in my life, he rose in the air, his huge wings extended—like a tortured phantom, Sime; I can never forget it—six feet clear of the water. The uncanny wail became a stifled hiss, and sending up a perfect fountain of water—I was deluged—the poor old king-swan fell, beat the surface with his wings—and was still."

"Well?"

"The other swans glided off like ghosts. Several heavy raindrops pattered on the leaves above. I admit I was scared. Apollo lay with one wing right in the punt. I was standing up; I had jumped to my feet when the thing occurred. I stooped and touched the wing. The bird was quite dead! Sime, I pulled the swan's head out of the water, and—his neck was broken; no fewer than three vertebrae fractured!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Incense?"

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

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

"Things—yes! Unholy things! But that brings me to something too. I ought to know more about the chap than anybody; Sir Michael Ferrara and the governor have been friends for thirty years; but my father is oddly reticent—quite singularly reticent—regarding Antony. Anyway, have you heard about him, in Egypt?"

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

"What sort of trouble?"

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

"There's some tale about Kitchener—"

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

"Well—Ferrara lighted a lamp, an elaborate silver thing, and I found myself in a kind of nightmare museum. There was an unwrapped mummy there, the mummy of a woman—I can't possibly describe it. He had pictures, too—photographs. I shan't try to tell you what they represented. I'm not thin-skinned; but there are some subjects that no man anxious to avoid Bedlam would willingly investigate. On the

table by the lamp stood a number of objects such as I had never seen in my life before, evidently of great age. He swept them into a cupboard before I had time to look long. Then he went off to get a bath towel, slippers, and so forth. As he passed the fire he threw something in. A hissing tongue of flame leapt up—and died down again."

"What did he throw in?"

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

"Heat of his rooms?"

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

Sime stared dully through the smoke haze.

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

"His cousin?"

"Yes. I felt like tearing it from the wall. In fact, the moment I saw it, I stood up to

go. I wanted to run to my rooms and strip the man's clothes off my back! It was a struggle to be civil any longer. Sime, if you had seen that swan die—"

Sime walked over to the window.

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

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

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

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

"All right," shouted Cairn.

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

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

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

"Can I come in?" demanded Cairn abruptly.

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

"Why, are you busy?"

"Well—er—" Ferrara smiled oddly.

"Oh, a visitor?" snapped Cairn.

"Not at all."

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

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

CHAPTER II

THE PHANTOM HANDS

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

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

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

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

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

"My God!"

Cairn, still holding on to the other, stooped over the discoloured face. It had been a

pretty face when warm life had tinted its curves; now it was congested—awful; two heavy discolorations showed, one on either side of the region of the larynx.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But the marks on her throat?"

Walton shrugged his shoulders.

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

"Yes; Sime 'phoned me."

"It's nothing to do with nerves," said Walton contemptuously. "Don't ask me to

explain it, but it's certainly no nerve case."

"One of the other patients—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He formed a sudden resolution. A taxi-cab was passing at that moment, and he hailed it, giving Sir Michael Ferrara's address. He could scarcely trust himself to think, but frightful possibilities presented themselves to him, repel them how he might. London seemed to grow dark, overshadowed, as once he had seen a Thames backwater grow. He shuddered, as though from a physical chill.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes—at least it began with one."

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

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

She nodded and tried to smile.

"Who is attending?"

"Sir Elwin Groves, but—"

"Shall I wire for my father?"

"We wired for him yesterday!"

"What! to Paris?"

"Yes, at my uncle's wish."

Cairn started.

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

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

"What is that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Chanting?"

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

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

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

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

"Tell me," he said quietly.

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

"Bad; he was dreaming."

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

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

"Go on," he said.

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

"You would know it again?"

"Anywhere!"

"Actually, there was no one in the room, of course?"

"No one. It was some awful illusion; but I can never forget it."

CHAPTER III

THE RING OF THOTH

Half-Moon Street was very still; midnight had sounded nearly half-an-hour; but still Robert Cairn paced up and down his father's library. He was very pale, and many

times he glanced at a book which lay open upon the table. Finally he paused before it and read once again certain passages.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Exactly, Marston. Good-night!"

"Good-night, sir."

Robert Cairn went out into Half-Moon Street. The night was perfect, and the cloudless sky lavishly gemmed with stars. He walked on heedlessly, scarce noting in which direction. An awful conviction was with him, growing stronger each moment, that some mysterious menace, some danger unclassifiable, threatened Myra Duquesne. What did he suspect? He could give it no name. How should he act? He had no idea.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Miss Myra—"

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

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

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

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

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

Felton nodded.

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

"Well?"

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

"How—disgusting! Did you smell it?"

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

to Sir Michael's room, and—"

"Yes, yes?"

"He was lying half out of bed, sir—"

"Dead?"

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

"Who is with him now?"

The man grew even paler.

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

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

The bed was placed between the windows, and one curtain had been pulled aside, admitting a flood, of moonlight. Cairn remembered that Myra had mentioned this circumstance in connection with the disturbance of the previous night.

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

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

He was quite dead.

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

noticed his son.

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

He dropped on his knees beside the dead man.

"Ferrara, old fellow—"

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

In the hall stood Felton and some other servants.

"Miss Duquesne?"

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

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

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

"Thank you," said Cairn shortly.

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

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

Robert Cairn leant back against a bookshelf.

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

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

"My story begins in a Thames backwater—"

Dr. Cairn stared, squaring his jaw, but his son proceeded to relate, with some detail,

the circumstances attendant upon the death of the king-swan. He went on to recount what took place in Antony Ferrara's rooms, and at the point where something had been taken from the table and thrown in the fire—

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

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

"I cannot swear to it, sir—"

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

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

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

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

"Go on," he said, rather huskily.

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

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

"I can, sir."

"Go on."

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

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

"She says so."

"Anything else?"

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

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

"Then you think—"

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

He buried his face in quivering hands.

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

Dr. Cairn did not speak, did not move.

"Who is Antony Ferrara?"

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

"You have tried to ask me that before."

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

"Yet I can give you none, Rob."

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

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

"You don't know!"

"I have said so."

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

"You have not studied the subjects which I have studied; nor do I wish that you

should; therefore it is impossible, at any rate now, to pursue that matter further. But I may perhaps supplement your researches into the history of Trois Echelles and Concini Concini. I believe you told me that you were looking in my library for some work which you failed to find?"

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

"What do you know of it?"

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

Dr. Cairn started slightly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

God forgive me! What have I done!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Miss Duquesne?" asked the younger.

"She has just gone to sleep, sir."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But Myra—"

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

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

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

CHAPTER IV

AT FERRARA'S CHAMBERS

Dr. Bruce Cairn swung around in his chair, lifting his heavy eyebrows

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dr. Cairn stared hard.

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

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

"In favour of his adopted son, Antony?"

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

"Indeed!"

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

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

stethoscope.

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

His son started.

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

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

"Thank God for that!"

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

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

Dr. Cairn turned to him again.

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

The younger man stared perplexedly.

"But he is nothing less than a ——"

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

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

Robert Cairn was silent, stupefied.

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

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

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

Robert Cairn spoke abruptly.

"He is installed in palatial chambers in Piccadilly."

"Have you been there?"

"No."

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

Robert Cairn stood up, and lighted a cigarette.

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

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

"I will, sir! Good-bye."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

to one corner of the divan and emitted a subtle perfume. As the servant withdrew:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

such a voice as that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a suggestion of laughter in the husky voice, now, of a sort of

contemptuous banter. But Cairn stolidly shook his head and forced a smile.

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

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

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

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

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

"Indeed?" replied Cairn.

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

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

Ferrara shrugged his shoulders.

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

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

"I must be off," he said accordingly.

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER V

THE RUSTLING SHADOWS

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

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

Myra Duquesne got out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Very," he answered her, grimly.

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

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

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

"Oh, what a shame!" she cried.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Quite mechanically he turned and looked back. As one might have anticipated, there

was nothing visible to account for the odour.

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

At an hour close upon midnight, Dr. Bruce Cairn, who was about to retire, received a wholly unexpected visit from his son. Robert Cairn followed his father into the library and sat down in the big, red leathern easy-chair. The doctor tilted the lamp shade, directing the light upon Robert's face. It proved to be slightly pale, and in the clear eyes was an odd expression—almost a hunted look.

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

Robert Cairn helped himself quietly.

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

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

"Not at the moment. You have been."

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

"Certainly."

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

"Well?"

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

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

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

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

"Nerves quite in order, sir."

Dr. Cairn inhaled a deep breath.

"Tell me," he said.

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

His father started.

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

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

"Did you trace where it came from?"

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

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

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

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

Twain's Up the Mississippi, and I sat in the armchair with a large bottle of lager beer at my elbow and my pipe going strong."

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

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

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

He paused, glancing at his father.

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

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

"That seemed to work a change in me," he continued rapidly; "I recognised there was something behind this disgusting manifestation, something directing it; and I recognised, too, that the next move was up to me. I went back to my room. The odour was not so pronounced, but as I stood by the table, waiting, it increased, and increased, until it almost choked me. My nerves were playing tricks, but I kept a fast

hold on myself. I set to work, very methodically, and fumigated the place. Within myself I knew that it could do no good, but I felt that I had to put up some kind of opposition. You understand, sir?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Anything else?"

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

on the floor!"

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

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

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

"Where—to his chambers?"

"Yes."

Dr. Cairn began to pace the room again.

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

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

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

"Stop boy!" cried Dr. Cairn.

Robert started, looking at his father across the table.

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

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

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

"What!"

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

"What do you mean, sir?"

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

"Active, sir?"

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

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

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

When the door had closed upon his exit, Dr. Cairn resumed his restless pacing up and down the library. He had given Roman counsel, for he had sent his son out to face, alone, a real and dreadful danger. Only thus could he hope to save him, but nevertheless it had been hard. The next fight would be a fight to the finish, for Robert had said, "I shan't run away a third time;" and he was a man of his word.

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

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

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

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

"Hullo!"

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

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

"Good-night, sir."

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

"That you, Rob?"

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

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

CHAPTER VI

THE BEETLES

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

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

voice over the wires.

"Well, boy?"

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

His voice ceased.

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

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

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

"Yes—yes—" faintly.

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

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

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

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

Piccadilly was gay with supper-bound theatre crowds when he leapt out and ran into the hall-way which had been the scene of Robert's meeting with Myra Duquesne.

Dr. Cairn ran past the lift doors and went up the stairs three steps at a time. He pressed his finger to the bell-push beside Antony Ferrara's door and held it there until the door opened and a dusky face appeared in the opening.

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

"Not at home, effendim—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Dr. Cairn—"

The husky voice had lost something of its suavity.

"You heard my order!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ferrara spoke, with a calm suddenly regained:

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

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

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

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

"Don't dare to touch that box!"

He paused, glancing up.

"More orders, doctor?"

"Exactly."

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

Ferrara leapt to his feet with a cry that had in it something inhuman, and began rapidly to babble in a tongue that was not European. He was facing Dr. Cairn, a tall, sinister figure, but one hand was groping behind him for the box.

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

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

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

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

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

He turned and walked to the door.

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

Dr. Cairn spun about. In three strides he was standing over Antony Ferrara, fists

clenched and his sinewy body tense in every fibre. His face was pale, as was apparent even in that vague light, and his eyes gleamed like steel.

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

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

"I fear—" began the latter huskily.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER VII

SIR ELWIN GROVES' PATIENT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I had heard that, yes."

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

Groves stared hard at Dr. Cairn.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cairn.

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

"Yes, yes, I believe I was," he agreed, rather lamely. "Well, it's very singular. I was called there last Monday, at about two o'clock in the morning. I found the house upside-down, and Lady Lashmore, with a dressing-gown thrown over her nightdress, engaged in bathing a bad wound in her husband's throat."

"What! Attempted suicide?"

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

"Lord Lashmore remained conscious?"

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

"Wounds?"

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

"He had been concealing the truth?"

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

"He got out of bed and experienced a great dizziness. The hemorrhage was altogether more severe than he had supposed. Not wishing to arouse his wife, he did not enter his dressing-room, which is situated between his own room and Lady Lashmore's; he staggered as far as the bell-push, and then collapsed. His man found him on the floor—sufficiently near to the fender to lend colour to the story of the accident."

Dr. Cairn coughed drily.

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

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

"Not attempted murder?"

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

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

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

Cambridge. It's out of the question."

"Windows?"

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

"Is there no clue to the mystery?"

"There are three!"

"What are they?"

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

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

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

"Lady Lashmore?"

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

"What! Tuberculous?"

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

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

"And Lord Lashmore?" he asked.

"The marks were there again," replied Sir Elwin; "rather lower on the neck. But they

were quite superficial. He had awakened in time and had struck out—hitting something."

"What?"

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

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

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

CHAPTER VIII

THE SECRET OF DHOON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lord Lashmore touched the high stock which he was wearing.

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

"I am afraid I must trouble you."

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

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

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

"Distinctly; on both occasions."

"Did you see anything?"

"The room was too dark."

"But you felt something?"

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

"The body of some animal?"

"Probably the head."

"But still you saw nothing?"

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

"Your cry awakened Lady Lashmore?"

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

"She was found insensible. Where?"

"At the door of the dressing-room—the door communicating with her own room, not

that communicating with mine. She had evidently started to come to my assistance when faintness overcame her."

"What is her own account?"

"That is her own account."

"Who discovered her?"

"I did."

Dr. Cairn was drumming his fingers on the table.

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

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

"I have a theory?"

"I think so. Am I wrong?"

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

"If I had had a theory—" he began.

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

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

"I am not. Sir Elwin has no doubts respecting your brain, Lord Lashmore. He has sent you here because I have made some study of what I may term psychical ailments. There is a chapter in your family history"—he fixed his searching gaze upon the other's face—"which latterly has been occupying your mind?"

At that, Lashmore started in good earnest.

"To what do you refer?"

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

Lashmore cleared his throat.

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

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

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

"What do you know about her?"

Surprise was in his voice, and anger.

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

"1615."

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

"Poland."

"She was a Pole?"

"A Polish Jewess."

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

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

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

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

this birth kept secret?"

"Dhoon Castle has kept many secrets!" It was a grim noble of the Middle Ages who was speaking. "For a Lashmore, there was no difficulty in suppressing the facts, arranging a hasty second marriage and representing the boy as the child of the later union. Had the second marriage proved fruitful, this had been unnecessary; but an heir to Dhoon was—essential."

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

"Damn it! What do you mean?"

"He was the rightful heir."

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

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

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

"Perhaps you know—what it contains."

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

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

"I thought no other in the world knew that!" he said, hollowly. "Your studies have been extensive indeed. For three years—three whole years from the night of my twenty-first birthday—the horror hung over me, Dr. Cairn. It ultimately brought my

grandfather to the madhouse, but my father was of sterner stuff, and so, it seems, was I. After those three years of horror I threw off the memories of Paul Dhoon, the third baron—"

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

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

He stood up again, restlessly.

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

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

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

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

which had accumulated there since the night of my father's coming of age.

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

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

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

"'Summon all your fortitude,' he said.

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

Lord Lashmore wiped his brow with his handkerchief.

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER IX

THE POLISH JEWESS

There was a silence of some minutes' duration. Lord Lashmore sat staring straight

before him, his fists clenched upon his knees. Then:

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

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

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

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

Lord Lashmore's eyes shone feverishly.

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

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

"Lord Lashmore, the curse of the house of Dhoon will prevail until the Polish

Jewess who originated it has been treated as her son was treated!"

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

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

Lord Lashmore passed his hand across his eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But—"

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

"By what means?"

"By unhallowed means; yet there are those who do not hesitate to employ them. The

danger of such an operation is, of course, enormous."

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

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

Lord Lashmore was watching the speaker.

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

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

"Why not come to dinner?"

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

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

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

Dr. Cairn raised his heavy brows.

"Why?" he asked.

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

"Paid a visit to Myra Duquesne in Inverness?"

"It would not have surprised me."

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

Robert Cairn looked up quickly.

"Lady Lashmore," he began—

"Well?" prompted his father.

"One of the Paul Pry brigade who fatten on scandal sent a veiled paragraph in to us

at The Planet yesterday, linking Ferrara's name with Lady Lashmores.' Of course we didn't use it; he had come to the wrong market; but—Ferrara was with Lady Lashmore when I met him to-day."

"What of that?"

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

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

"Certainly."

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

"Perfectly."

"Ah!"

A silence fell, of some considerable duration, then:

"Antony Ferrara is a menace to society," said Robert Cairn. "When I meet the reptilian glance of those black eyes of his and reflect upon what the man has attempted—what he has done—my blood boils. It is tragically funny to think that in our new wisdom we have abolished the only laws that could have touched him! He could not have existed in Ancient Chaldea, and would probably have been burnt at the stake even under Charles II.; but in this wise twentieth century he dallies in Regent Street with a prominent society beauty and laughs in the face of a man whom he has attempted to destroy!"

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

"I think I can manage to do so—yes."

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

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

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

CHAPTER X

THE LAUGHTER

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

She greeted Dr. Cairn without cordiality.

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

"Your opinion of what, Dr. Cairn?"

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

Lady Lashmore paled perceptibly.

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

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

Lady Lashmore held a fan before her face.

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

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

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

Dr. Cairn turned his head aside.

"Ah!" he said grimly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, yes!"

"What did you dream?"

"Oh! can I, dare I tell you!—"

"You must."

There was pity in his voice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"There was—something else."

Lady Lashmore's voice had become a tremulous whisper.

"Tell me; don't be afraid."

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

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

Dr. Cairn nodded.

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

Lady Lashmore slightly moved her head.

"The dream was identical?"

"Yes."

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

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

"Which part?"

"The first; that awful cavern—"

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

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

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

Another affirmative nod answered him.

"You proved to be mediumistic?"

It was admitted.

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

He prepared to depart; when—

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

At the door, he turned.

"Be brave," he said—and went out.

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

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

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

Robert Cairn sat down again, watching his father.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Lady Lashmore's brain retains certain memories. They have been received at the

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

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

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

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

"What's his object?" he whispered.

Dr. Cairn shrugged his shoulders.

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

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

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

The telephone bell rang.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The prostrate figure was that of Lady Lashmore, a loose kimono worn over her night-robe. She was white and still and the physician had been engaged in bathing a huge bruise upon her temple.

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

Dr. Cairn stepped closer to the dead man.

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

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

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

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

was to have been replaced to-morrow."

Dr. Cairn turned to his son.

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

The man was shaking pitifully.

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

"When you came in?"

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

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

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

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

"You understand?" he asked. "The spirit of Mirza came to him again, clothed in his wife's body. Lord Lashmore felt the teeth at his throat, awoke instantly and struck out. As he did so, he turned the torch upon her, and recognised—his wife! His heart completed the tragedy, and so—to the laughter of the sorceress—passed the last of

the house of Dhoon."

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

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

"Mr. Ferrara?" began Dr. Cairn.

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

CHAPTER XI

CAIRO

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

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

"I have made it all right at the office, Rob," said Dr. Cairn. "In three weeks or so you will receive instructions at Cairo to write up a series of local articles. Until then, my

boy, complete rest and—don't worry; above all, don't worry. You and I have passed through a saturnalia of horror, and you, less inured to horrors than I, have gone down. I don't wonder."

"Where is Antony Ferrara?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cairn nodded his head absently.

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

Sime stared.

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

"You may doubt the existence of Efreets," continued Cairn, "but neither you nor I can doubt the creative power of thought. If a trained hypnotist, by sheer concentration, can persuade his subject that the latter sits upon the brink of a river

fishing when actually he sits upon a platform in a lecture-room, what result should you expect from a concentration of thousands of native minds upon the idea that an Efreet is visiting Egypt?"

Sime stared in a dull way peculiar to him.

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

"Don't you think—"

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

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

Sime stood up.

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

A fortune-teller from India proffered his services incessantly.

"Imshi! imshi!" growled Sime.

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

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

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

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

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

The Indian spread his hands, palms upward.

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

"And what is told to you?"

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

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

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

The fortune-teller shook his head.

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

"Solomon?" suggested Cairn.

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

"One he overlooked?" jerked Sime.

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

"The Libyan Desert?" suggested Sime.

The man shook, his head, seeking for words.

"The Arabian Desert?"

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

"The Sahara Desert?" proposed Sime.

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

"How did he get there?" asked Cairn.

The Indian shrugged his shoulders.

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

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

"To-night—to-morrow,"—he spoke now almost in a whisper, glancing about him as if apprehensive of being overheard—"he may be here, in Cairo, bringing with him the scorching breath of the desert—the scorpion wind!"

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

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

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

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

"It might be possible to dress for dinner," snapped Sime, "if we shut up talking

nonsense! There's a carnival here to-night; great fun. Suppose we concentrate our brain-waves on another Scotch and soda?"

CHAPTER XII

THE MASK OF SET

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

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

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

Three silken ladies wearing gauzy white yashmaks confronted Cairn and the

speaker. A gleaming of jewelled fingers there was and Cairn found himself half-choked with confetti, which filled his eyes, his nose, his ears, and of which quite a liberal amount found access to his mouth. The three ladies of the yashmak ran screaming from their vengeance-seeking victims, Sime pursuing two, and Cairn hard upon the heels of the third. Amid this scene of riotous carnival all else was forgotten, and only the madness, the infectious madness of the night, claimed his mind. In and out of the strangely attired groups darted his agile quarry, all but captured a score of times, but always eluding him.

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

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

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

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

from the heart of the throng:

"A scorpion! a scorpion!"

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

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

The scorching wind grew momentarily fiercer, and Cairn, entering behind a few straggling revellers, found something ominous and dreadful in its sudden fury. At the threshold, he turned and looked back upon the gaily lighted garden. The paper lamps were thrashing in the wind, many extinguished; others were in flames; a number of electric globes fell from their fastenings amid the palm tops, and burst bomb-like upon the ground. The pleasure garden was now a battlefield, beset with dangers, and he fully appreciated the anxiety of the company to get within doors. Where chrysanthemum and yashmak turban and tarboosh, uraeus and Indian plume had mingled gaily, no soul remained; but yet—he was in error ... someone did remain.

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

Cairn, alone of all the crowd, saw the strange figure, for the reason that Cairn alone

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

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

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

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

Sime stared in his dull fashion.

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

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

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

CHAPTER XIII

THE SCORPION WIND

This sudden and appalling change of weather had sadly affected the mood of the gathering. That part of the carnival planned to take place in the garden was perforce abandoned, together with the firework display. A halfhearted attempt was made at

dancing, but the howling of the wind, and the omnipresent dust, perpetually reminded the pleasure-seekers that Khamsîn raged without—raged with a violence unparalleled in the experience of the oldest residents. This was a full-fledged sand-storm, a terror of the Sahara descended upon Cairo.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A 'tango' is—?"

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

Cairn smiled rather wanly.

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

Sime briskly gave his orders to the bar attendant.

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

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

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

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

Cairn shook his head slowly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cairn nodded.

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

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

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

Sime was watching him intently.

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

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

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

"Are you serious?"

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

"It would have been a shocking scandal."

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

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

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

Sime nodded slowly.

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

"How had he killed her, then?"

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

Sime watched him, but offered no comment.

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

"Existing law?"

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

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

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

"Suggested these—things, to your mind?"

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

"Yes—heart."

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

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

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

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

Both were silent for a while. Then:

"Gracious heavens!"

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

"Look, Sime! look!" he cried.

Sime was not the only man in the bar to hear, and to heed his words. Sime, looking in the direction indicated by Cairn's extended finger, received a vague impression that a grotesque, long-headed figure had appeared momentarily in the doorway opening upon the room where the dancers were; then it was gone again, if it had ever been there, and he was supporting Cairn, who swayed dizzily, and had become ghastly pale. Sime imagined that the heated air had grown suddenly even more heated. Curious eyes were turned upon, his companion, who now sank back into his chair, muttering:

"The Mask, the Mask!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Quite a number have succumbed," said Sime.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cairn stood up rather unsteadily, and with Sime made his way through the moving

crowd to the stairs. The band was still playing, but the cloud of gloom which had settled upon the place, refused to be dissipated.

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

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

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

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

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

Then, in an arabîyeh just driving off, he detected the hideous mask. Hatless as he was, he ran down the steps and threw himself into another. The carriage-controller was in attendance, and Cairn rapidly told him to instruct the driver to follow the arabîyeh which had just left. The man lashed up his horses, turned the carriage, and went galloping on after the retreating figure. Past the Esbekîya Gardens they went, through several narrow streets, and on to the quarter of the Mûski. Time after time he thought he had lost the carriage ahead, but his own driver's knowledge of the tortuous streets enabled him always to overtake it again. They went rocking along lanes so narrow that with outstretched arms one could almost have touched the walls

on either side; past empty shops and unlighted houses. Cairn had not the remotest idea of his whereabouts, save that he was evidently in the district of the bazaars. A right-angled corner was abruptly negotiated—and there, ahead of him, stood the pursued vehicle! The driver was turning his horses around, to return; his fare was disappearing from sight into the black shadows of a narrow alley on the left.

Cairn leaped from the arabîyeh, shouting to the man to wait, and went dashing down the sloping lane after the retreating figure. A sort of blind fury possessed him, but he never paused to analyse it, never asked himself by what right he pursued this man, what wrong the latter had done him. His action was wholly unreasoning; he knew that he wished to overtake the wearer of the mask and to tear it from his head; upon that he acted!

He discovered that despite the tropical heat of the night, he was shuddering with cold, but he disregarded this circumstance, and ran on.

The pursued stopped before an iron-studded door, which was opened instantly; he entered as the runner came up with him. And, before the door could be reclosed, Cairn thrust his way in.

Blackness, utter blackness, was before him. The figure which he had pursued seemed to have been swallowed up. He stumbled on, gropingly, hands outstretched, then fell—fell, as he realised in the moment of falling, down a short flight of stone steps.

Still amid utter blackness, he got upon his feet, shaken but otherwise unhurt by his fall. He turned about, expecting to see some glimmer of light from the stairway, but the blackness was unbroken. Silence and gloom hemmed him in. He stood for a moment, listening intently.

A shaft of light pierced the darkness, as a shutter was thrown open. Through an iron-barred window the light shone; and with the light came a breath of stifling perfume. That perfume carried his imagination back instantly to a room at Oxford,

and he advanced and looked through into the place beyond. He drew a swift breath, clutched the bars, and was silent—stricken speechless.

He looked into a large and lofty room, lighted by several hanging lamps. It had a carpeted divan at one end and was otherwise scantily furnished, in the Eastern manner. A silver incense-burner smoked upon a large praying-carpet, and by it stood the man in the crocodile mask. An Arab girl, fantastically attired, who had evidently just opened the shutters, was now helping him to remove the hideous head-dress.

She presently untied the last of the fastenings and lifted the thing from the man's shoulders, moving away with the gliding step of the Oriental, and leaving him standing there in his short white tunic, bare-legged and sandalled.

The smoke of the incense curled upward and played around the straight, slim figure, drew vaporous lines about the still, ivory face—the handsome, sinister face, sometimes partly veiling the long black eyes and sometimes showing them in all their unnatural brightness. So the man stood, looking towards the barred window.

It was Antony Ferrara!

"Ah, dear Cairn—" the husky musical voice smote upon Cairn's ears as the most hated sound in nature—"you have followed me. Not content with driving me from London, you would also render Cairo—my dear Cairo—untenable for me."

Cairn clutched the bars but was silent.

"How wrong of you, Cairn!" the soft voice mocked. "This attention is so harmful—to you. Do you know, Cairn, the Sudanese formed the extraordinary opinion that I was an efreet, and this strange reputation has followed me right down the Nile. Your father, my dear friend, has studied these odd matters, and he would tell you that there is no power, in Nature, higher than the human will. Actually, Cairn, they have ascribed to me the direction of the Khamsîn, and so many worthy Egyptians have made up their minds that I travel with the storm—or that the storm follows me—that something of the kind has really come to pass! Or is it merely

coincidence, Cairn? Who can say?"

Motionless, immobile, save for a slow smile, Antony Ferrara stood, and Cairn kept his eyes upon the evil face, and with trembling hands clutched the bars.

"It is certainly odd, is it not," resumed the taunting voice, "that Khamsîn, so violent, too, should thus descend upon the Cairene season? I only arrived from the Fayûm this evening, Cairn, and, do you know, they have the pestilence there! I trust the hot wind does not carry it to Cairo; there are so many distinguished European and American visitors here. It would be a thousand pities!"

Cairn released his grip of the bars, raised his clenched fists above his head, and in a voice and with a maniacal fury that were neither his own, cursed the man who stood there mocking him. Then he reeled, fell, and remembered no more.

"All right, old man—you'll do quite nicely now."

It was Sime speaking.

Cairn struggled upright ... and found himself in bed! Sime was seated beside him.

"Don't talk!" said Sime, "you're in hospital! I'll do the talking; you listen. I saw you bolt out of Shepheard's last night—shut up! I followed, but lost you. We got up a search party, and with the aid of the man who had driven you, ran you to earth in a dirty alley behind the mosque of El-Azhar. Four kindly mendicants, who reside upon the steps of the establishment, had been awakened by your blundering in among them. They were holding you—yes, you were raving pretty badly. You are a lucky man, Cairn. You were inoculated before you left home?"

Cairn nodded weakly.

"Saved you. Be all right in a couple of days. That damned Khamsîn has brought a whiff of the plague from somewhere! Curiously enough, over fifty per cent. of the cases spotted so far are people who were at the carnival! Some of them, Cairn—but we won't discuss that now. I was afraid of it, last night. That's why I kept my eye on

you. My boy, you were delirious when you bolted out of the hotel!"

"Was I?" said Cairn wearily, and lay back on the pillow. "Perhaps I was."

CHAPTER XIV

DR. CAIRN ARRIVES

Dr. Bruce Cairn stepped into the boat which was to take him ashore, and as it swung away from the side of the liner sought to divert his thoughts by a contemplation of the weird scene. Amid the smoky flare of many lights, amid rising clouds of dust, a line of laden toilers was crawling ant-like from the lighters into the bowels of the big ship; and a second line, unladen, was descending by another gangway. Above, the jewelled velvet of the sky swept in a glorious arc; beyond, the lights of Port Said broke through the black curtain of the night, and the moving ray from the lighthouse intermittently swept the harbour waters; whilst, amid the indescribable clamour, the grimily picturesque turmoil, so characteristic of the place, the liner took in coal for her run to Rangoon.

Dodging this way and that, rounding the sterns of big ships, and disputing the water-way with lesser craft, the boat made for shore.

The usual delay at the Custom House, the usual soothing of the excited officials in the usual way, and his arabîyeh was jolting Dr. Cairn through the noise and the smell of those rambling streets, a noise and a smell entirely peculiar to this clearing-house of the Near East.

He accepted the room which was offered to him at the hotel, without troubling to inspect it, and having left instructions that he was to be called in time for the early train to Cairo, he swallowed a whisky and soda at the buffet, and wearily ascended the stairs. There were tourists in the hotel, English and American, marked by a gaping wonderment, and loud with plans of sightseeing; but Port Said, nay all Egypt,

had nothing of novelty to offer Dr. Cairn. He was there at great inconvenience; a practitioner of his repute may not easily arrange to quit London at a moment's notice. But the business upon which he was come was imperative. For him the charm of the place had not existence, but somewhere in Egypt his son stood in deadly peril, and Dr. Cairn counted the hours that yet divided them. His soul was up in arms against the man whose evil schemes had led to his presence in Port Said, at a time when many sufferers required his ministrations in Half-Moon Street. He was haunted by a phantom, a ghoul in human shape; Antony Ferrara, the adopted son of his dear friend, the adopted son, who had murdered his adopter, who whilst guiltless in the eyes of the law, was blood-guilty in the eyes of God!

Dr. Cairn switched on the light and seated himself upon the side of the bed, knitting his brows and staring straight before him, with an expression in his clear grey eyes whose significance he would have denied hotly, had any man charged him with it. He was thinking of Antony Ferrara's record; the victims of this fiendish youth (for Antony Ferrara was barely of age) seemed to stand before him with hands stretched out appealingly.

"You alone," they seemed to cry, "know who and what he is! You alone know of our awful wrongs; you alone can avenge them!"

And yet he had hesitated! It had remained for his own flesh and blood to be threatened ere he had taken decisive action. The viper had lain within his reach, and he had neglected to set his heel upon it. Men and women had suffered and had died of its venom; and he had not crushed it. Then Robert, his son, had felt the poison fang, and Dr. Cairn, who had hesitated to act upon the behalf of all humanity, had leapt to arms. He charged himself with a parent's selfishness, and his conscience would hear no defence.

Dimly, the turmoil from the harbour reached him where he sat. He listened dully to the hooting of a syren—that of some vessel coming out of the canal.

His thoughts were evil company, and, with a deep sigh, he rose, crossed the room and threw open the double windows, giving access to the balcony.

Port Said, a panorama of twinkling lights, lay beneath him. The beam from the lighthouse swept the town searchingly like the eye of some pagan god lustful for sacrifice. He imagined that he could hear the shouting of the gangs coaling the liner in the harbour; but the night was full of the remote murmuring inseparable from that gateway of the East. The streets below, white under the moon, looked empty and deserted, and the hotel beneath him gave up no sound to tell of the many birds of passage who sheltered within it. A stunning sense of his loneliness came to him; his physical loneliness was symbolic of that which characterised his place in the world. He, alone, had the knowledge and the power to crush Antony Ferrara. He, alone, could rid the world of the unnatural menace embodied in the person bearing that name.

The town lay beneath his eyes, but now he saw nothing of it; before his mental vision loomed—exclusively—the figure of a slim and strangely handsome young man, having jet black hair, lustreless, a face of uniform ivory hue, long dark eyes wherein lurked lambent fires, and a womanish grace expressed in his whole bearing and emphasised by his long white hands. Upon a finger of the left hand gleamed a strange green stone.

Antony Ferrara! In the eyes of this solitary traveller, who stood looking down upon Port Said, that figure filled the entire landscape of Egypt!

With a weary sigh, Dr. Cairn turned and began to undress. Leaving the windows open, he switched off the light and got into bed. He was very weary, with a weariness rather of the spirit than of the flesh, but it was of that sort which renders sleep all but impossible. Around and about one fixed point his thoughts circled; in vain he endeavoured to forget, for a while, Antony Ferrara and the things connected with him. Sleep was imperative, if he would be in fit condition to cope with the

matters which demanded his attention in Cairo.

Yet sleep defied him. Every trifling sound from the harbour and the canal seemed to rise upon the still air to his room. Through a sort of mist created by the mosquito curtains, he could see the open windows, and look out upon the stars. He found himself studying the heavens with sleepless eyes, and idly working out the constellations visible. Then one very bright star attracted the whole of his attention, and, with the dogged persistency of insomnia, he sought to place it, but could not determine to which group it belonged.

So he lay with his eyes upon the stars until the other veiled lamps of heaven became invisible, and the patch of sky no more than a setting for that one white orb.

In this contemplation he grew restful; his thoughts ceased feverishly to race along that one hateful groove; the bright star seemed to soothe him. As a result of his fixed gazing, it now appeared to have increased in size. This was a common optical delusion, upon which he scarcely speculated at all. He recognised the welcome approach of sleep, and deliberately concentrated his mind upon the globe of light.

Yes, a globe of light indeed—for now it had assumed the dimensions of a lesser moon; and it seemed to rest in the space between the open windows. Then, he thought that it crept still nearer. The realities—the bed, the mosquito curtain, the room—were fading, and grateful slumber approached, and weighed upon his eyes in the form of that dazzling globe. The feeling of contentment was the last impression which he had, ere, with the bright star seemingly suspended just beyond the netting, he slept.

CHAPTER XV

THE WITCH-QUEEN

A man mentally over-tired sleeps either dreamlessly, or dreams with a vividness

greater than that characterising the dreams of normal slumber. Dr. Cairn dreamt a vivid dream.

He dreamt that he was awakened by the sound of a gentle rapping. Opening his eyes, he peered through the cloudy netting. He started up, and wrenched back the curtain. The rapping was repeated; and peering again across the room, he very distinctly perceived a figure upon the balcony by the open window. It was that of a woman who wore the black silk dress and the white yashmak of the Moslem, and who was bending forward looking into the room.

"Who is there?" he called. "What do you want?"

"S—sh!"

The woman raised her hand to her veiled lips, and looked right and left as if fearing to disturb the occupants of the adjacent rooms.

Dr. Cairn reached out for his dressing-gown which lay upon the chair beside the bed, threw it over his shoulders, and stepped out upon the floor. He stooped and put on his slippers, never taking his eyes from the figure at the window. The room was flooded with moonlight.

He began to walk towards the balcony, when the mysterious visitor spoke.

"You are Dr. Cairn?"

The words were spoken in the language of dreams; that is to say, that although he understood them perfectly, he knew that they had not been uttered in the English language, nor in any language known to him; yet, as is the way with one who dreams, he had understood.

"I am he," he said. "Who are you?"

"Make no noise, but follow me quickly. Someone is very ill."

There was sincerity in the appeal, spoken in the softest, most silvern tone which he had ever heard. He stood beside the veiled woman, and met the glance of her dark

eyes with a consciousness of some magnetic force in the glance, which seemed to set his nerves quivering.

"Why do you come to the window? How do you know—"

The visitor raised her hand again to her lips. It was of a gleaming ivory colour, and the long tapered fingers were laden with singular jewellery—exquisite enamel work, which he knew to be Ancient Egyptian, but which did not seem out of place in this dream adventure.

"I was afraid to make any unnecessary disturbance," she replied. "Please do not delay, but come at once."

Dr. Cairn adjusted his dressing-gown, and followed the veiled messenger along the balcony. For a dream city, Port Said appeared remarkably substantial, as it spread out at his feet, its dingy buildings whitened by the moonlight. But his progress was dreamlike, for he seemed to glide past many windows, around the corner of the building, and, without having consciously exerted any physical effort, found his hands grasped by warm jewelled fingers, found himself guided into some darkened room, and then, possessed by that doubting which sometimes comes in dreams, found himself hesitating. The moonlight did not penetrate to the apartment in which he stood, and the darkness about him was impenetrable.

But the clinging fingers did not release their hold, and vaguely aware that he was acting in a manner which might readily be misconstrued, he nevertheless allowed his unseen guide to lead him forward.

Stairs were descended in phantom silence—many stairs. The coolness of the air suggested that they were outside the hotel. But the darkness remained complete. Along what seemed to be a stone-paved passage they advanced mysteriously, and by this time Dr. Cairn was wholly resigned to the strangeness of his dream.

Then, although the place lay in blackest shadow, he saw that they were in the open air, for the starry sky swept above them.

It was a narrow street—at points, the buildings almost met above—wherein, he now found himself. In reality, had he been in possession of his usual faculties, awake, he would have asked himself how this veiled woman had gained admittance to the hotel, and why she had secretly led him out from it. But the dreamer's mental lethargy possessed him, and, with the blind faith of a child, he followed on, until he now began vaguely to consider the personality of his guide.

She seemed to be of no more than average height, but she carried herself with unusual grace, and her progress was marked by a certain hauteur. At the point where a narrow lane crossed that which they were traversing the veiled figure was silhouetted for a moment against the light of the moon, and through the gauze-like fabric, he perceived the outlines of a perfect shape. His vague wonderment, concerned itself now with the ivory, jewel-laden hands. His condition differed from the normal dream state, in that he was not entirely resigned to the anomalous.

Misty doubts were forming, when his dream guide paused before a heavy door of a typical native house which once had been of some consequence, and which faced the entrance to a mosque, indeed lay in the shadow of the minaret. It was opened from within, although she gave no perceptible signal, and its darkness, to Dr. Cairn's dulled perceptions, seemed to swallow them both up. He had an impression of a trap raised, of stone steps descended, of a new darkness almost palpable.

The gloom of the place effected him as a mental blank, and, when a bright light shone out, it seemed to mark the opening of a second dream phase. From where the light came, he knew not, cared not, but it illuminated a perfectly bare room, with a floor of native mud bricks, a plastered wall, and wood-beamed ceiling. A tall sarcophagus stood upright against the wall before him; its lid leant close beside it ... and his black robed guide, her luminous eyes looking straightly over the yashmak, stood rigidly upright-within it!

She raised the jewelled hands, and with a swift movement discarded robe and

yashmak, and stood before him, in the clinging draperies of an ancient queen, wearing the leopard skin and the uraeus, and carrying the flail of royal Egypt!

Her pale face formed a perfect oval; the long almond eyes had an evil beauty which seemed to chill; and the brilliantly red mouth was curved in a smile which must have made any man forget the evil in the eyes. But when we move in a dream world, our emotions become dreamlike too. She placed a sandalled foot upon the mud floor and stepped out of the sarcophagus, advancing towards Dr. Cairn, a vision of such sinful loveliness as he could never have conceived in his waking moments. In that strange dream language, in a tongue not of East nor West, she spoke; and her silvern voice had something of the tone of those Egyptian pipes whose dree fills the nights upon the Upper Nile—the seductive music of remote and splendid wickedness.

"You know me, now?" she whispered.

And in his dream she seemed to be a familiar figure, at once dreadful and worshipful.

A fitful light played through the darkness, and seemed to dance upon a curtain draped behind the sarcophagus, picking out diamond points. The dreamer groped in the mental chaos of his mind, and found a clue to the meaning of this. The diamond points were the eyes of thousands of tarantula spiders with which the curtain was broidered.

The sign of the spider! What did he know of it? Yes! of course; it was the secret mark of Egypt's witch-queen—of the beautiful woman whose name, after her mysterious death, had been erased from all her monuments. A sweet whisper stole to his ears:

"You will befriend him, befriend my son—for my sake."

And in his dream-state he found himself prepared to foreswear all that he held holy—for her sake. She grasped both his hands, and her burning eyes looked closely into his.

"Your reward shall be a great one," she whispered, even more softly.

Came a sudden blank, and Dr. Cairn found himself walking again through the narrow street, led by the veiled woman. His impressions were growing dim; and now she seemed less real than hitherto. The streets were phantom streets, built of shadow stuff, and the stairs which presently he found himself ascending, were unsubstantial, and he seemed rather to float upward; until, with the jewelled fingers held fast in his own, he stood in a darkened apartment, and saw before him an open window, knew that he was once more back in the hotel. A dim light dawned in the blackness of the room and the musical voice breathed in his ear:

"Your reward shall be easily earned. I did but test you. Strike—and strike truly!"

The whisper grew sibilant—serpentine. Dr. Cairn felt the hilt of a dagger thrust into his right hand, and in the dimly-mysterious light looked down at one who lay in a bed close beside him.

At sight of the face of the sleeper—the perfectly-chiselled face, with the long black lashes resting on the ivory cheeks—he forgot all else, forgot the place wherein he stood, forgot his beautiful guide, and only remembered that he held a dagger in his hand, and that Antony Ferrara lay there, sleeping!

"Strike!" came the whisper again.

Dr. Cairn felt a mad exultation boiling up within him. He raised his hand, glanced once more on the face of the sleeper, and nerved himself to plunge the dagger into the heart of this evil thing.

A second more, and the dagger would have been buried to the hilt in the sleeper's breast—when there ensued a deafening, an appalling explosion. A wild red light illuminated the room, the building seemed to rock. Close upon that frightful sound followed a cry so piercing that it seemed to ice the blood in Dr. Cairn's veins.

"Stop, sir, stop! My God! what are you doing!"

A swift blow struck the dagger from his hand and the figure on the bed sprang upright. Swaying dizzily, Dr. Cairn stood there in the darkness, and as the voice of awakened sleepers reached his ears from adjoining rooms, the electric light was switched on, and across the bed, the bed upon which he had thought Antony Ferrara lay, he saw his son, Robert Cairn!

No one else was in the room. But on the carpet at his feet lay an ancient dagger, the hilt covered with beautiful and intricate gold and enamel work.

Rigid with a mutual horror, these two so strangely met stood staring at one another across the room. Everyone in the hotel, it would appear, had been awakened by the explosion, which, as if by the intervention of God, had stayed the hand of Dr. Cairn—had spared him from a deed impossible to contemplate.

There were sounds of running footsteps everywhere; but the origin of the disturbance at that moment had no interest for these two. Robert was the first to break the silence.

"Merciful God, sir!" he whispered huskily, "how did you come to be here? What is the matter? Are you ill?"

Dr. Cairn extended his hands like one groping in darkness.

"Rob, give me a moment, to think, to collect myself. Why am I here? By all that is wonderful, why are you here?"

"I am here to meet you."

"To meet me! I had no idea that you were well enough for the journey, and if you came to meet me, why—"

"That's it, sir! Why did you send me that wireless?"

"I sent no wireless, boy!"

Robert Cairn, with a little colour returning to his pale cheeks, advanced and grasped his father's hand.

"But after I arrived here to meet the boat, sir I received a wireless from the P. and O. due in the morning, to say that you had changed your mind, and come via Brindisi."

Dr. Cairn glanced at the dagger upon the carpet, repressed a shudder, and replied in a voice which he struggled to make firm:

"I did not send that wireless!"

"Then you actually came by the boat which arrived last night?—and to think that I was asleep in the same hotel! What an amazing—"

"Amazing indeed, Rob, and the result of a cunning and well planned scheme." He raised his eyes, looking fixedly at his son. "You understand the scheme; the scheme that could only have germinated in one mind—a scheme to cause me, your father, to—"

His voice failed and again his glance sought the weapon which lay so close to his feet. Partly in order to hide his emotion, he stooped, picked up the dagger, and threw it on the bed.

"For God's sake, sir," groaned Robert, "what were you doing here in my room with—that!"

Dr. Cairn stood straightly upright and replied in an even voice:

"I was here to do murder!"

"Murder!"

"I was under a spell—no need to name its weaver; I thought that a poisonous thing at last lay at my mercy, and by cunning means the primitive evil within me was called up, and braving the laws of God and man, I was about to slay that thing. Thank God!—"

He dropped upon his knees, silently bowed his head for a moment, and then stood up, self-possessed again, as his son had always known him. It had been a strange and awful awakening for Robert Cairn—to find his room illuminated by a lurid light,

and to find his own father standing over him with a knife! But what had moved him even more deeply than the fear of these things, had been the sight of the emotion which had shaken that stern and unemotional man. Now, as he gathered together his scattered wits, he began to perceive that a malignant hand was moving above them, that his father, and himself, were pawns, which had been moved mysteriously to a dreadful end.

A great disturbance had now arisen in the streets below, streams of people it seemed, were pouring towards the harbour; but Dr. Cairn pointed to an armchair.

"Sit down, Rob," he said. "I will tell my story, and you shall tell yours. By comparing notes, we can arrive at some conclusion. Then we must act. This is a fight to a finish, and I begin to doubt if we are strong enough to win."

He took up the dagger and ran a critical glance over it, from the keen point to the enamelled hilt.

"This is unique," he muttered, whilst his son, spellbound, watched him; "the blade is as keen as if tempered but yesterday; yet it was made full five thousand years ago, as the workmanship of the hilt testifies. Rob, we deal with powers more than human! We have to cope with a force which might have awed the greatest Masters which the world has known. It would have called for all the knowledge, and all the power of Apollonius of Tyana to have dealt with—him!"

"Antony Ferrara!"

"Undoubtedly, Rob! it was by the agency of Antony Ferrara that the wireless message was sent to you from the P. and O. It was by the agency of Antony Ferrara that I dreamt a dream to-night. In fact it was no true dream; I was under the influence of—what shall I term it?—hypnotic suggestion. To what extent that malign will was responsible for you and I being placed in rooms communicating by means of a balcony, we probably shall never know; but if this proximity was merely accidental, the enemy did not fail to take advantage of the coincidence. I lay

watching the stars before I slept, and one of them seemed to grow larger as I watched." He began to pace about the room in growing excitement. "Rob, I cannot doubt that a mirror, or a crystal, was actually suspended before my eyes by—someone, who had been watching for the opportunity. I yielded myself to the soothing influence, and thus deliberately—deliberately—placed myself in the power of—Antony Ferrara—"

"You think that he is here, in this hotel?"

"I cannot doubt that he is in the neighbourhood. The influence was too strong to have emanated from a mind at a great distance removed. I will tell you exactly what I dreamt."

He dropped into a cane armchair. Comparative quiet reigned again in the streets below, but a distant clamour told of some untoward happening at the harbour.

Dawn would break ere long, and there was a curious rawness in the atmosphere. Robert Cairn seated himself upon the side of the bed, and watched his father, whilst the latter related those happenings with which we are already acquainted.

"You think, sir," said Robert, at the conclusion of the strange story, "that no part of your experience was real?"

Dr. Cairn held up the antique dagger, glancing at the speaker significantly.

"On the contrary," he replied, "I do know that part of it was dreadfully real. My difficulty is to separate the real from the phantasmal."

Silence fell for a moment. Then:

"It is almost certain," said the younger man, frowning thoughtfully, "that you did not actually leave the hotel, but merely passed from your room to mine by way of the balcony."

Dr. Cairn stood up, walked to the open window, and looked out, then turned and faced his son again.

"I believe I can put that matter to the test," he declared. "In my dream, as I turned into the lane where the house was—the house of the mummy—there was a patch covered with deep mud, where at some time during the evening a quantity of water had been spilt. I stepped upon that patch, or dreamt that I did. We can settle the point."

He sat down on the bed beside his son, and, stooping, pulled off one of his slippers. The night had been full enough of dreadful surprises; but here was yet another, which came to them as Dr. Cairn, with the inverted slipper in his hand, sat looking into his son's eyes.

The sole of the slipper was caked with reddish brown mud.

CHAPTER XVI

LAIR OF THE SPIDERS

"We must find that house, find the sarcophagus—for I no longer doubt that it exists—drag it out, and destroy it."

"Should you know it again, sir?"

"Beyond any possibility of doubt. It is the sarcophagus of a queen."

"What queen?"

"A queen whose tomb the late Sir Michael Ferrara and I sought for many months, but failed to find."

"Is this queen well known in Egyptian history?"

Dr. Cairn stared at him with an odd expression in his eyes.

"Some histories ignore her existence entirely," he said; and, with an evident desire to change the subject, added, "I shall return to my room to dress now. Do you dress also. We cannot afford to sleep whilst the situation of that house remains unknown

to us."

Robert Cairn nodded, and his father stood up, and went out of the room.

Dawn saw the two of them peering from the balcony upon the streets of Port Said, already dotted with moving figures, for the Egyptian is an early riser.

"Have you any clue," asked the younger man, "to the direction in which this place lies?"

"Absolutely none, for the reason that I do not know where my dreaming left off, and reality commenced. Did someone really come to my window, and lead me out through another room, downstairs, and into the street, or did I wander out of my own accord and merely imagine the existence of the guide? In either event, I must have been guided in some way to a back entrance; for had I attempted to leave by the front door of the hotel in that trance-like condition, I should certainly have been detained by the bowwab. Suppose we commence, then, by inquiring if there is such another entrance?"

The hotel staff was already afoot, and their inquiries led to the discovery of an entrance communicating with the native servants' quarters. This could not be reached from the main hall, but there was a narrow staircase to the left of the lift-shaft by which it might be gained. The two stood looking out across the stone-paved courtyard upon which the door opened.

"Beyond doubt," said Dr. Cairn, "I might have come down that staircase and out by this door without arousing a soul, either by passing through my own room, or through any other on that floor."

They crossed the yard, where members of the kitchen staff were busily polishing various cooking utensils, and opened the gate. Dr. Cairn turned to one of the men near by.

"Is this gate bolted at night?" he asked, in Arabic.

The man shook his head, and seemed to be much amused by the question, revealing his white teeth as he assured him that it was not.

A narrow lane ran along behind the hotel, communicating with a maze of streets almost exclusively peopled by natives.

"Rob," said Dr. Cairn slowly, "it begins to dawn upon me that this is the way I came."

He stood looking to right and left, and seemed to be undecided. Then:

"We will try right," he determined.

They set off along the narrow way. Once clear of the hotel wall, high buildings rose upon either side, so that at no time during the day could the sun have penetrated to the winding lane. Suddenly Robert Cairn stopped.

"Look!" he said, and pointed. "The mosque! You spoke of a mosque near to the house?"

Dr. Cairn nodded; his eyes were gleaming, now that he felt himself to be upon the track of this great evil which had shattered his peace.

They advanced until they stood before the door of the mosque—and there in the shadow of a low archway was just such an ancient, iron-studded door as Dr. Cairn remembered! Latticed windows overhung the street above, but no living creature was in sight.

He very gently pressed upon the door, but as he had anticipated it was fastened from within. In the vague light, his face seemed strangely haggard as he turned to his son, raising his eyebrows interrogatively.

"It is just possible that I may be mistaken," he said; "so that I scarcely know what to do."

He stood looking about him in some perplexity.

Adjoining the mosque, was a ruinous house, which clearly had had no occupants for

many years. As Robert Cairn's gaze lighted upon its gaping window-frames and doorless porch, he seized his father by the arm.

"We might hide up there," he suggested, "and watch for anyone entering or leaving the place opposite."

"I have little doubt that this was the scene of my experience," replied Dr. Cairn; "therefore I think we will adopt your plan. Perhaps there is some means of egress at the back. It will be useful if we have to remain on the watch for any considerable time."

They entered the ruined building and, by means of a rickety staircase, gained the floor above. It moved beneath them unsafely, but from the divan which occupied one end of the apartment an uninterrupted view of the door below was obtainable.

"Stay here," said Dr. Cairn, "and watch, whilst I reconnoitre."

He descended the stairs again, to return in a minute or so and announce that another street could be reached through the back of the house. There and then they settled the plan of campaign. One at a time they would go to the hotel for their meals, so that the door would never be unwatched throughout the day. Dr. Cairn determined to make no inquiries respecting the house, as this might put the enemy upon his guard.

"We are in his own country, Rob," he said. "Here, we can trust no one."

Thereupon they commenced their singular and self-imposed task. In turn they went back to the hotel for breakfast, and watched fruitlessly throughout the morning. They lunched in the same way, and throughout the great midday heat sat hidden in the ruined building, mounting guard over that iron-studded door. It was a dreary and monotonous day, long to be remembered by both of them, and when the hour of sunset drew nigh, and their vigil remained unrewarded, they began to doubt the wisdom of their tactics. The street was but little frequented; there was not the slightest chance of their presence being discovered.

It was very quiet, too, so that no one could have approached unheard. At the hotel

they had learnt the cause of the explosion during the night; an accident in the engine-room of a tramp steamer, which had done considerable damage, but caused no bodily injury.

"We may hope to win yet," said Dr. Cairn, in speaking of the incident. "It was the hand of God."

Silence had prevailed between them for a long time, and he was about to propose that his son should go back to dinner, when the rare sound of a footstep below checked the words upon his lips. Both craned their necks to obtain a view of the pedestrian.

An old man stooping beneath the burden of years and resting much of his weight upon a staff, came tottering into sight. The watchers crouched back, breathless with excitement, as the newcomer paused before the iron-studded door, and from beneath his cloak took out a big key.

Inserting it into the lock, he swung open the door; it creaked upon ancient hinges as it opened inward, revealing a glimpse of a stone floor. As the old man entered, Dr. Cairn grasped his son by the wrist.

"Down!" he whispered. "Now is our chance!"

They ran down the rickety stairs, crossed the narrow street, and Robert Cairn cautiously looked in around the door which had been left ajar.

Black against the dim light of another door at the further end of the large and barn-like apartment, showed the stooping figure. Tap, tap, tap! went the stick; and the old man had disappeared around a corner.

"Where can we hide?" whispered Dr. Cairn. "He is evidently making a tour of inspection."

The sound of footsteps mounting to the upper apartments came to their ears. They looked about them right and left, and presently the younger man detected a large

wooden cupboard set in one wall. Opening it, he saw that it contained but one shelf only, near the top.

"When he returns," he said, "we can hide in here until he has gone out."

Dr. Cairn nodded; he was peering about the room intently.

"This is the place I came to, Rob!" he said softly; "but there was a stone stair leading down to some room underneath. We must find it."

The old man could be heard passing from room to room above; then his uneven footsteps sounded on the stair again, and glancing at one another the two stepped into the cupboard, and pulled the door gently inward. A few moments later, the old caretaker—since such appeared to be his office—passed out, slamming the door behind him. At that, they emerged from their hiding-place and began to examine the apartment carefully. It was growing very dark now; indeed with the door shut, it was difficult to detect the outlines of the room. Suddenly a loud cry broke the perfect stillness, seeming to come from somewhere above. Robert Cairn started violently, grasping his father's arm, but the older man smiled.

"You forget that there is a mosque almost opposite," he said. "That is the mueddin!"

His son laughed shortly.

"My nerves are not yet all that they might be," he explained, and bending low began to examine the pavement.

"There must be a trap-door in the floor?" he continued. "Don't you think so?"

His father nodded silently, and upon hands and knees also began to inspect the cracks and crannies between the various stones. In the right-hand corner furthest from the entrance, their quest was rewarded. A stone some three feet square moved slightly when pressure was applied to it, and gave up a sound of hollowness beneath the tread. Dust and litter covered the entire floor, but having cleared the top of this particular stone, a ring was discovered, lying flat in a circular groove cut to receive

it. The blade of a penknife served to raise it from its resting place, and Dr. Cairn, standing astride across the trap, tugged at the ring, and, without great difficulty, raised the stone block from its place.

A square hole was revealed. There were irregular stone steps leading down into the blackness. A piece of candle, stuck in a crude wooden holder, lay upon the topmost. Dr. Cairn, taking a box of matches from his pocket, very quickly lighted the candle, and with it held in his left hand began to descend. His head was not yet below the level of the upper apartment when he paused.

"You have your revolver?" he said.

Robert nodded grimly, and took his revolver from his pocket.

A singular and most disagreeable smell was arising from the trap which they had opened; but ignoring this they descended, and presently stood side by side in a low cellar. Here the odour was almost insupportable; it had in it something menacing, something definitely repellent; and at the foot of the steps they stood hesitating.

Dr. Cairn slowly moved the candle, throwing the light along the floor, where it picked out strips of wood and broken cases, straw packing and kindred litter—until it impinged upon a brightly painted slab. Further, he moved it, and higher, and the end of a sarcophagus came into view. He drew a quick, hissing breath, and bending forward, directed the light into the interior of the ancient coffin. Then, he had need of all his iron nerve to choke down the cry that rose to his lips.

"By God! Look!" whispered his son.

Swathed in white wrappings, Antony Ferrara lay motionless before them.

The seconds passed one by one, until a whole minute was told, and still the two remained inert and the cold light shone fully upon that ivory face.

"Is he dead?"

Robert Cairn spoke huskily, grasping his father's shoulder.

"I think not," was the equally hoarse reply. "He is in the state of trance mentioned in—certain ancient writings; he is absorbing evil force from the sarcophagus of the Witch-Queen...."[A]

[A] Note.—"It seems exceedingly probable that ... the mummy-case (sarcophagus), with its painted presentment of the living person, was the material basis for the preservation of the ... Khu (magical powers) of a fully-equipped Adept."

Collectanea Hermetica. Vol. VIII.

There was a faint rustling sound in the cellar, which seemed to grow louder and more insistent, but Dr. Cairn, apparently, did not notice it, for he turned to his son, and albeit the latter could see him but vaguely, he knew that his face was grimly set.

"It seems like butchery," he said evenly, "but, in the interests of the world, we must not hesitate. A shot might attract attention. Give me your knife."

For a moment, the other scarcely comprehended the full purport of the words. Mechanically he took out his knife, and opened the big blade.

"Good heavens, sir," he gasped breathlessly, "it is too awful!"

"Awful I grant you," replied Dr. Cairn, "but a duty—a duty, boy, and one that we must not shirk. I, alone among living men, know whom, and what, lies there, and my conscience directs me in what I do. His end shall be that which he had planned for you. Give me the knife."

He took the knife from his son's hand. With the light directed upon the still, ivory face, he stepped towards the sarcophagus. As he did so, something dropped from the roof, narrowly missed falling upon his outstretched hand, and with a soft, dull thud dropped upon the mud brick floor. Impelled by some intuition, he suddenly directed the light to the roof above.

Then with a shrill cry which he was wholly unable to repress, Robert Cairn seized his father's arm and began to pull him back towards the stair.

"Quick, sir!" he screamed shrilly, almost hysterically. "My God! my God! be quick!"

The appearance of the roof above had puzzled him for an instant as the light touched it, then in the next had filled his very soul with loathing and horror. For directly above them was moving a black patch, a foot or so in extent ... and it was composed of a dense moving mass of tarantula spiders! A line of the disgusting creatures was mounting the wall and crossing the ceiling, ever swelling the unclean group!

Dr. Cairn did not hesitate to leap for the stair, and as he did so the spiders began to drop. Indeed, they seemed to leap towards the intruders, until the floor all about them and the bottom steps of the stair presented a mass of black, moving insects.

A perfect panic fear seized upon them. At every step spiders crunched beneath their feet. They seem to come from nowhere, to be conjured up out of the darkness, until the whole cellar, the stairs, the very fetid air about them, became black and nauseous with spiders.

Half-way to the top Dr. Cairn turned, snatched out a revolver and began firing down into the cellar in the direction of the sarcophagus.

A hairy, clutching thing ran up his arm, and his son, uttering a groan of horror, struck at it and stained the tweed with its poisonous blood.

They staggered to the head of the steps, and there Dr. Cairn turned and hurled the candle at a monstrous spider that suddenly sprang into view. The candle, still attached to its wooden socket, went bounding down steps that now were literally carpeted with insects.

Tarantulas began to run out from the trap, as if pursuing the intruders, and a faint light showed from below. Then came a crackling sound, and a wisp of smoke floated up.

Dr. Cairn threw open the outer door, and the two panic-stricken men leapt out into the street and away from the spider army. White to the lips they stood leaning

against the wall.

"Was it really—Ferrara?" whispered Robert.

"I hope so!" was the answer.

Dr. Cairn pointed to the closed door. A fan of smoke was creeping from beneath it.

The fire which ensued destroyed, not only the house in which it had broken out, but the two adjoining; and the neighbouring mosque was saved only with the utmost difficulty.

When, in the dawn of the new day, Dr. Cairn looked down into the smoking pit which once had been the home of the spiders, he shook his head and turned to his son.

"If our eyes did not deceive us, Rob," he said, "a just retribution at last has claimed him!"

Pressing a way through the surrounding crowd of natives, they returned to the hotel. The hall porter stopped them as they entered.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "but which is Mr. Robert Cairn?"

Robert Cairn stepped forward.

"A young gentleman left this for you, sir, half an hour ago," said the man—"a very pale gentleman, with black eyes. He said you'd dropped it."

Robert Cairn unwrapped the little parcel. It contained a penknife, the ivory handle charred as if it had been in a furnace. It was his own—which he had handed to his father in that awful cellar at the moment when the first spider had dropped; and a card was enclosed, bearing the pencilled words, "With Antony Ferrara's Compliments."

CHAPTER XVII

THE STORY OF ALI MOHAMMED

Saluting each of the three in turn, the tall Egyptian passed from Dr. Cairn's room. Upon his exit followed a brief but electric silence. Dr. Cairn's face was very stern and Sime, with his hands locked behind him, stood staring out of the window into the palmy garden of the hotel. Robert Cairn looked from one to the other excitedly.

"What did he say, sir?" he cried, addressing his father. "It had something to do with—"

Dr. Cairn turned. Sime did not move.

"It had something to do with the matter which has brought me to Cairo," replied the former—"yes."

"You see," said Robert, "my knowledge of Arabic is nil—"

Sime turned in his heavy fashion, and directed a dull gaze upon the last speaker.

"Ali Mohammed," he explained slowly, "who has just left, had come down from the Fayûm to report a singular matter. He was unaware of its real importance, but it was sufficiently unusual to disturb him, and Ali Mohammed es-Suefi is not easily disturbed."

Dr. Cairn dropped into an armchair, nodding towards Sime.

"Tell him all that we have heard," he said. "We stand together in this affair."

"Well," continued Sime, in his deliberate fashion, "when we struck our camp beside the Pyramid of Méydûm, Ali Mohammed remained behind with a gang of workmen to finish off some comparatively unimportant work. He is an unemotional person. Fear is alien to his composition; it has no meaning for him. But last night something occurred at the camp—or what remained of the camp—which seems to have shaken even Ali Mohammed's iron nerve."

Robert Cairn nodded, watching the speaker intently.

"The entrance to the Méydûm Pyramid—," continued Sime.

"One of the entrances," interrupted Dr. Cairn, smiling slightly.

"There is only one entrance," said Sime dogmatically.

Dr. Cairn waved his hand.

"Go ahead," he said. "We can discuss these archæological details later."

Sime stared dully, but, without further comment, resumed:

"The camp was situated on the slope immediately below the only known entrance to the Méydûm Pyramid; one might say that it lay in the shadow of the building. There are tumuli in the neighbourhood—part of a prehistoric cemetery—and it was work in connection with this which had detained Ali Mohammed in that part of the Fayûm. Last night about ten o'clock he was awakened by an unusual sound, or series of sounds, he reports. He came out of the tent into the moonlight, and looked up at the pyramid. The entrance was a good way above his head, of course, and quite fifty or sixty yards from the point where he was standing, but the moonbeams bathed that side of the building in dazzling light so that he was enabled to see a perfect crowd of bats whirling out of the pyramid."

"Bats!" ejaculated Robert Cairn.

"Yes. There is a small colony of bats in this pyramid, of course; but the bat does not hunt in bands, and the sight of these bats flying out from the place was one which Ali Mohammed had never witnessed before. Their concerted squeaking was very clearly audible. He could not believe that it was this which had awakened him, and which had awakened the ten or twelve workmen who also slept in the camp, for these were now clustering around him, and all looking up at the side of the pyramid.

"Fayûm nights are strangely still. Except for the jackals and the village dogs, and some other sounds to which one grows accustomed, there is nothing—absolutely nothing—audible.

"In this stillness, then, the flapping of the bat regiment made quite a disturbance

overhead. Some of the men were only half awake, but most, of them were badly frightened. And now they began to compare notes, with the result that they determined upon the exact nature of the sound which had aroused them. It seemed almost certain that this had been a dreadful scream—the scream of a woman in the last agony."

He paused, looking from Dr. Cairn to his son, with a singular expression upon his habitually immobile face.

"Go on," said Robert Cairn.

Slowly Sime resumed:

"The bats had begun to disperse in various directions, but the panic which had seized upon the camp does not seem to have dispersed so readily. Ali Mohammed confesses that he himself felt almost afraid—a remarkable admission for a man of his class to make. Picture these fellows, then, standing looking at one another, and very frequently up at the opening in the side of the pyramid. Then the smell began to reach their nostrils—the smell which completed the panic, and which led to the abandonment of the camp—"

"The smell—what kind of smell?" jerked Robert Cairn.

Dr. Cairn turned himself in his chair, looking fully at his son.

"The smell of Hades, boy!" he said grimly, and turned away again.

"Naturally," continued Sime, "I can give you no particulars on the point, but it must have been something very fearful to have affected the Egyptian native! There was no breeze, but it swept down upon them, this poisonous smell, as though borne by a hot wind."

"Was it actually hot?"

"I cannot say. But Ali Mohammed is positive that it came from the opening in the pyramid. It was not apparently in disgust, but in sheer, stark horror, that the whole

crowd of them turned tail and ran. They never stopped and never looked back until they came to Rekka on the railway."

A short silence followed. Then:

"That was last night?" questioned Cairn.

His father nodded.

"The man came in by the first train from Wasta," he said, "and we have not a moment to spare!"

Sime stared at him.

"I don't understand—"

"I have a mission," said Dr. Cairn quietly. "It is to run to earth, to stamp out, as I would stamp out a pestilence, a certain thing—I cannot call it a man—Antony Ferrara. I believe, Sime, that you are at one with me in this matter?"

Sime drummed his fingers upon the table, frowning thoughtfully, and looking from one to the other of his companions under his lowered brows.

"With my own eyes," he said, "I have seen something of this secret drama which has brought you, Dr. Cairn, to Egypt; and, up to a point, I agree with you regarding Antony Ferrara. You have lost all trace of him?"

"Since leaving Port Said," said Dr. Cairn, "I have seen and heard nothing of him; but Lady Lashmore, who was an intimate—and an innocent victim, God help her—of Ferrara in London, after staying at the Semiramis in Cairo for one day, departed. Where did she go?"

"What has Lady Lashmore to do with the matter?" asked Sime.

"If what I fear be true—" replied Dr. Cairn. "But I anticipate. At the moment it is enough for me that, unless my information be at fault, Lady Lashmore yesterday left Cairo by the Luxor train at 8.30."

Robert Cairn looked in a puzzled way at his father.

"What do you suspect, sir?" he said.

"I suspect that she went no further than Wasta," replied Dr. Cairn.

"Still I do not understand," declared Sime.

"You may understand later," was the answer. "We must not waste a moment. You Egyptologists think that Egypt has little or nothing to teach you; the Pyramid of Méydûm lost interest directly you learnt that apparently it contained no treasure. How, little you know what it really contained, Sime! Mariette did not suspect; Sir Gaston Maspero does not suspect! The late Sir Michael Ferrara and I once camped by the Pyramid of Méydûm, as you have camped there, and we made a discovery—"

"Well?" said Sime, with growing interest.

"It is a point upon which my lips are sealed, but—do you believe in black magic?"

"I am not altogether sure that I do—"

"Very well; you are entitled to your opinion. But although you appear to be ignorant of the fact, the Pyramid of Méydûm was formerly one of the strong-holds—the second greatest in all the land of the Nile—of Ancient Egyptian sorcery! I pray heaven I may be wrong, but in the disappearance of Lady Lashmore, and in the story of Ali Mohammed, I see a dreadful possibility. Ring for a time-table. We have not a moment to waste!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BATS

Rekka was a mile behind.

"It will take us fully an hour yet," said Dr. Cairn, "to reach the pyramid, although it appears so near."

Indeed, in the violet dusk, the great mastabah Pyramid of Méydûm seemed already

to loom above them, although it was quite four miles away. The narrow path along which they trotted their donkeys ran through the fertile lowlands of the Fayûm. They had just passed a village, amid an angry chorus from the pariah dogs, and were now following the track along the top of the embankment. Where the green carpet merged ahead into the grey ocean of sand the desert began, and out in that desert, resembling some weird work of Nature rather than anything wrought by the hand of man, stood the gloomy and lonely building ascribed by the Egyptologists to the Pharaoh Sneferu.

Dr. Cairn and his son rode ahead, and Sime, with Ali Mohammed, brought up the rear of the little company.

"I am completely in the dark, sir," said Robert Cairn, "respecting the object of our present journey. What leads you to suppose that we shall find Antony Ferrara here?"

"I scarcely hope to find him here," was the enigmatical reply, "but I am almost certain that he is here. I might have expected it, and I blame myself for not having provided against—this."

"Against what?"

"It is impossible, Rob, for you to understand this matter. Indeed, if I were to publish what I know—not what I imagine, but what I know—about the Pyramid of Méydûm I should not only call down upon myself the ridicule of every Egyptologist in Europe; I should be accounted mad by the whole world."

His son was silent for a time; then:

"According to the guide books," he said, "it is merely an empty tomb."

"It is empty, certainly," replied Dr. Cairn grimly, "or that apartment known as the King's Chamber is now empty. But even the so-called King's Chamber was not empty once; and there is another chamber in the pyramid which is not empty now!"

"If you know of the existence of such a chamber, sir, why have you kept it secret?"

"Because I cannot prove its existence. I do not know how to enter it, but I know it is there; I know what it was formerly used for, and I suspect that last night it was used for that same unholy purpose again—after a lapse of perhaps four thousand years! Even you would doubt me, I believe, if I were to tell you what I know, if I were to hint at what I suspect. But no doubt in your reading you have met with Julian the Apostate?"

"Certainly, I have read of him. He is said to have practised necromancy."

"When he was at Carra in Mesopotamia, he retired to the Temple of the Moon, with a certain sorcerer and some others, and, his nocturnal operations concluded, he left the temple locked, the door sealed, and placed a guard over the gate. He was killed in the war, and never returned to Carra, but when, in the reign of Jovian, the seal was broken and the temple opened, a body was found hanging by its hair—I will spare you the particulars; it was a case of that most awful form of sorcery—anthropomancy!"

An expression of horror had crept over Robert Cairn's face.

"Do you mean, sir, that this pyramid was used for similar purposes?"

"In the past it has been used for many purposes," was the quiet reply. "The exodus of the bats points to the fact that it was again used for one of those purposes last night; the exodus of the bats—and something else."

Sime, who had been listening to this strange conversation, cried out from the rear:

"We cannot reach it before sunset!"

"No," replied Dr. Cairn, turning in his saddle, "but that does not matter. Inside the pyramid, day and night make no difference."

Having crossed a narrow wooden bridge, they turned now fully in the direction of the great ruin, pursuing a path along the opposite bank of the cutting. They rode in silence for some time, Robert Cairn deep in thought.

"I suppose that Antony Ferrara actually visited this place last night," he said suddenly, "although I cannot follow your reasoning. But what leads you to suppose that he is there now?"

"This," answered his father slowly. "The purpose for which I believe him to have come here would detain him at least two days and two nights. I shall say no more about it, because if I am wrong, or if for any reason I am unable to establish my suspicions as facts, you would certainly regard me as a madman if I had confided those suspicions to you."

Mounted upon donkeys, the journey from Rekka to the Pyramid of Méydûm occupies fully an hour and a half, and the glories of the sunset had merged into the violet dusk of Egypt before the party passed the outskirts of the cultivated land and came upon the desert sands. The mountainous pile of granite, its peculiar orange hue a ghastly yellow in the moonlight, now assumed truly monstrous proportions, seeming like a great square tower rising in three stages from its mound of sand to some three hundred and fifty feet above the level of the desert.

There is nothing more awesome in the world than to find one's self at night, far from all fellow-men, in the shadow of one of those edifices raised by unknown hands, by unknown means, to an unknown end; for, despite all the wisdom of our modern inquirers, these stupendous relics remain unsolved riddles set to posterity by a mysterious people.

Neither Sime nor Ali Mohammed were of highly strung temperament, neither subject to those subtle impressions which more delicate organisations receive, as the nostrils receive an exhalation, from such a place as this. But Dr. Cairn and his son, though each in a different way, came now within the aura of this temple of the dead ages.

The great silence of the desert—a silence like no other in the world; the loneliness, which must be experienced to be appreciated, of that dry and tideless ocean; the

traditions which had grown up like fungi about this venerable building; lastly, the knowledge that it was associated in some way with the sorcery, the unholy activity, of Antony Ferrara, combined to chill them with a supernatural dread which called for all their courage to combat.

"What now?" said Sime, descending from his mount.

"We must lead the donkeys up the slope," replied Dr. Cairn, "where those blocks of granite are, and tether them there."

In silence, then, the party commenced the tedious ascent of the mound by the narrow path to the top, until at some hundred and twenty feet above the surrounding plain they found themselves actually under the wall of the mighty building. The donkeys were made fast.

"Sime and I," said Dr. Cairn quietly, "will enter the pyramid."

"But—" interrupted his son.

"Apart from the fatigue of the operation," continued the doctor, "the temperature in the lower part of the pyramid is so tremendous, and the air so bad, that in your present state of health it would be absurd for you to attempt it. Apart from which there is a possibly more important task to be undertaken here, outside."

He turned his eyes upon Sime, who was listening intently, then continued:

"Whilst we are penetrating to the interior by means of the sloping passage on the north side, Ali Mohammed and yourself must mount guard on the south side."

"What for?" said Sime rapidly.

"For the reason," replied Dr. Cairn, "that there is an entrance on to the first stage—"

"But the first stage is nearly seventy feet above us. Even assuming that there were an entrance there—which I doubt—escape by that means would be impossible. No one could climb down the face of the pyramid from above; no one has ever succeeded in climbing up. For the purpose of surveying the pyramid a scaffold had to be erected.

Its sides are quite unscaleable."

"That may be," agreed Dr. Cairn; "but, nevertheless, I have my reasons for placing a guard over the south side. If anything appears upon the stage above, Rob—anything—shoot, and shoot straight!"

He repeated the same instructions to Ali Mohammed, to the evident surprise of the latter.

"I don't understand at all," muttered Sime, "but as I presume you have a good reason for what you do, let it be as you propose. Can you give me any idea respecting what we may hope to find inside this place? I only entered once, and I am not anxious to repeat the experiment. The air is unbreathable, the descent to the level passage below is stiff work, and, apart from the inconvenience of navigating the latter passage, which as you probably know is only sixteen inches high, the climb up the vertical shaft into the tomb is not a particularly safe one. I exclude the possibility of snakes," he added ironically.

"You have also omitted the possibility of Antony Ferrara," said Dr. Cairn.

"Pardon my scepticism, doctor, but I cannot imagine any man voluntarily remaining in that awful place."

"Yet I am greatly mistaken if he is not there!"

"Then he is trapped!" said Sime grimly, examining a Browning pistol which he carried. "Unless—"

He stopped, and an expression, almost of fear, crept over his stoical features.

"That sixteen-inch passage," he muttered—"with Antony Ferrara at the further end!"

"Exactly!" said Dr. Cairn. "But I consider it my duty to the world to proceed. I warn you that you are about to face the greatest peril, probably, which you will ever be called upon to encounter. I do not ask you to do this. I am quite prepared to go alone."

"That remark was wholly unnecessary, doctor," said Sime rather truculently. "Suppose the other two proceed to their post."

"But, sir—" began Robert Cairn.

"You know the way," said the doctor, with an air of finality. "There is not a moment to waste, and although I fear that we are too late, it is just possible we may be in time to prevent a dreadful crime."

The tall Egyptian and Robert Cairn went stumbling off amongst the heaps of rubbish and broken masonry, until an angle of the great wall concealed them from view. Then the two who remained continued the climb yet higher, following the narrow, zigzag path leading up to the entrance of the descending passage. Immediately under the square black hole they stood and glanced at one another.

"We may as well leave our outer garments here," said Sime. "I note that you wear rubber-soled shoes, but I shall remove my boots, as otherwise I should be unable to obtain any foothold."

Dr. Cairn nodded, and without more ado proceeded to strip off his coat, an example which was followed by Sime. It was as he stooped and placed his hat upon the little bundle of clothes at his feet that Dr. Cairn detected something which caused him to stoop yet lower and to peer at that dark object on the ground with a strange intentness.

"What is it?" jerked Sime, glancing back at him.

Dr. Cairn, from a hip pocket, took out an electric lamp, and directed the white ray upon something lying on the splintered fragments of granite.

It was a bat, a fairly large one, and a clot of blood marked the place where its head had been. For the bat was decapitated!

As though anticipating what he should find there, Dr. Cairn flashed the ray of the lamp all about the ground in the vicinity of the entrance to the pyramid. Scores of

dead bats, headless, lay there.

"For God's sake, what does this mean?" whispered Sime, glancing apprehensively into the black entrance beside him.

"It means," answered Cairn, in a low voice, "that my suspicion, almost incredible though it seems, was well founded. Steel yourself against the task that is before you, Sime; we stand upon the borderland of strange horrors."

Sime hesitated to touch any of the dead bats, surveying them with an ill-concealed repugnance.

"What kind of creature," he whispered, "has done this?"

"One of a kind that the world has not known for many ages! The most evil kind of creature conceivable—a man-devil!"

"But what does he want with bats' heads?"

"The Cynonycteris, or pyramid bat, has a leaf-like appendage beside the nose. A gland in this secretes a rare oil. This oil is one of the ingredients of the incense which is never named in the magical writings."

Sime shuddered.

"Here!" said Dr. Cairn, proffering a flask. "This is only the overture! No nerves."

The other nodded shortly, and poured out a peg of brandy.

"Now," said Dr. Cairn, "shall I go ahead?"

"As you like," replied Sime quietly, and again quite master of himself. "Look out for snakes. I will carry the light and you can keep yours handy in case you may need it."

Dr. Cairn drew himself up into the entrance. The passage was less than four feet high, and generations of sand-storms had polished its sloping granite floor so as to render it impossible to descend except by resting one's hands on the roof above and lowering one's self foot by foot.

A passage of this description, descending at a sharp angle for over two hundred feet,

is not particularly easy to negotiate, and progress was slow. Dr. Cairn at every five yards or so would stop, and, with the pocket-lamp which he carried, would examine the sandy floor and the crevices between the huge blocks composing the passage, in quest of those faint tracks which warn the traveller that a serpent has recently passed that way. Then, replacing his lamp, he would proceed. Sime followed in like manner, employing only one hand to support himself, and, with the other, constantly directing the ray of his pocket torch past his companion, and down into the blackness beneath.

Out in the desert the atmosphere had been sufficiently hot, but now with every step it grew hotter and hotter. That indescribable smell, as of a decay begun in remote ages, that rises with the impalpable dust in these mysterious labyrinths of Ancient Egypt which never know the light of day, rose stiflingly; until, at some forty or fifty feet below the level of the sand outside, respiration became difficult, and the two paused, bathed in perspiration and gasping for air.

"Another thirty or forty feet," panted Sime, "and we shall be in the level passage. There is a sort of low, artificial cavern there, you may remember, where, although we cannot stand upright, we can sit and rest for a few moments."

Speech was exhausting, and no further words were exchanged until the bottom of the slope was reached, and the combined lights of the two pocket-lamps showed them that they had reached a tiny chamber irregularly hewn in the living rock. This also was less than four feet high, but its jagged floor being level, they were enabled to pause here for a while.

"Do you notice something unfamiliar in the smell of the place?"

Dr. Cairn was the speaker. Sime nodded, wiping the perspiration from his face the while.

"It was bad enough when I came here before," he said hoarsely. "It is terrible work for a heavy man. But to-night it seems to be reeking. I have smelt nothing like it in

my life."

"Correct," replied Dr. Cairn grimly. "I trust that, once clear of this place, you will never smell it again."

"What is it?"

"It is the incense," was the reply. "Come! The worst of our task is before us yet."

The continuation of the passage now showed as an opening no more than fifteen to seventeen inches high. It was necessary, therefore, to lie prone upon the rubbish of the floor, and to proceed serpent fashion; one could not even employ one's knees, so low was the roof, but was compelled to progress by clutching at the irregularities in the wall, and by digging the elbows into the splintered stones one crawled upon!

For three yards or so they proceeded thus. Then Dr. Cairn lay suddenly still.

"What is it?" whispered Sime.

A threat of panic was in his voice. He dared not conjecture what would happen if either should be overcome in that evil-smelling burrow, deep in the bowels of the ancient building. At that moment it seemed to him, absurdly enough, that the weight of the giant pile rested upon his back, was crushing him, pressing the life out from his body as he lay there prone, with his eyes fixed upon the rubber soles of Dr. Cairn's shoes, directly in front of him.

But softly came a reply:

"Do not speak again! Proceed as quietly as possible, and pray heaven we are not expected!"

Sime understood. With a malignant enemy before them, this hole in the rock through which they crawled was a certain death-trap. He thought of the headless bats and of how he, in crawling out into the shaft ahead, must lay himself open to a similar fate!

Dr. Cairn moved slowly onward. Despite their anxiety to avoid noise, neither he nor his companion could control their heavy breathing. Both were panting for air. The

temperature was now deathly. A candle would scarcely have burnt in the vitiated air; and above that odour of ancient rottenness which all explorers of the monuments of Egypt know, rose that other indescribable odour which seemed to stifle one's very soul.

Dr. Cairn stopped again.

Sime knew, having performed this journey before, that his companion must have reached the end of the passage, that he must be lying peering out into the shaft, for which they were making. He extinguished his lamp.

Again Dr. Cairn moved forward. Stretching out his hand, Sime found only emptiness. He wriggled forward, in turn, rapidly, all the time groping with his fingers. Then:

"Take my hand," came a whisper. "Another two feet, and you can stand upright."

He proceeded, grasped the hand which was extended to him in the impenetrable darkness, and panting, temporarily exhausted, rose upright beside Dr. Cairn, and stretched his cramped limbs.

Side by side they stood, mantled about in such a darkness as cannot be described; in such a silence as dwellers in the busy world cannot conceive; in such an atmosphere of horror that only a man morally and physically brave could have retained his composure.

Dr. Cairn bent to Sime's ear.

"We must have the light for the ascent," he whispered. "Have your pistol ready; I am about to press the button of the lamp."

A shaft of white light shone suddenly up the rocky sides of the pit in which they stood, and lost itself in the gloom of the chamber above.

"On to my shoulders," jerked Sime. "You are lighter than I. Then, as soon as you can reach, place your lamp on the floor above and mount up beside it. I will follow."

Dr. Cairn, taking advantage of the rugged walls, and of the blocks of stone amid which they stood, mounted upon Sime's shoulders.

"Could you carry your revolver in your teeth?" asked the latter. "I think you might hold it by the trigger-guard."

"I proposed to do so," replied Dr. Cairn grimly. "Stand fast!"

Gradually he rose upright upon the other's shoulders; then, placing his foot in a cranny of the rock, and with his left hand grasping a protruding fragment above, he mounted yet higher, all the time holding the lighted lamp in his right hand. Upward he extended his arms, and upward, until he could place the lamp upon the ledge above his head, where its white beam shone across the top of the shaft.

"Mind it does not fall!" panted Sime, craning his head upward to watch these operations.

Dr. Cairn, whose strength and agility were wonderful, twisted around sideways, and succeeded in placing his foot on a ledge of stone on the opposite side of the shaft. Resting his weight upon this, he extended his hand to the lip of the opening, and drew himself up to the top, where he crouched fully in the light of the lamp. Then, wedging his foot into a crevice a little below him, he reached out his hand to Sime. The latter, following much the same course as his companion, seized the extended hand, and soon found himself beside Dr. Cairn.

Impetuously he snatched out his own lamp and shone its beams about the weird apartment in which they found themselves—the so-called King's Chamber of the pyramid. Right and left leapt the searching rays, touching the ends of the wooden beams, which, practically fossilised by long contact with the rock, still survive in that sepulchral place. Above and below and all around he directed the light—upon the litter covering the rock floor, upon the blocks of the higher walls, upon the frowning roof.

They were alone in the King's Chamber!

CHAPTER XIX

ANTHROPOMANCY

"There is no one here!"

Sime looked about the place excitedly.

"Fortunately for us!" answered Dr. Cairn.

He breathed rather heavily yet with his exertions, and, moreover, the air of the chamber was disgusting. But otherwise he was perfectly calm, although his face was pale and bathed in perspiration.

"Make as little noise as possible."

Sime, who, now that the place proved to be empty, began to cast off that dread which had possessed him in the passage-way, found something ominous in the words.

Dr. Cairn, stepping carefully over the rubbish of the floor, advanced to the east corner of the chamber, waving his companion to follow. Side by side they stood there.

"Do you notice that the abominable smell of the incense is more overpowering here than anywhere?"

Sime nodded.

"You are right. What does that mean?"

Dr. Cairn directed the ray of light down behind a little mound of rubbish into a corner of the wall.

"It means," he said, with a subdued expression of excitement, "that we have got to crawl in there!"

Sime stifled an exclamation.

One of the blocks of the bottom tier was missing, a fact which he had not detected before by reason of the presence of the mound of rubbish before the opening.

"Silence again!" whispered Dr. Cairn.

He lay down flat, and, without hesitation, crept into the gap. As his feet disappeared, Sime followed. Here it was possible to crawl upon hands and knees. The passage was formed of square stone blocks. It was but three yards or so in length; then it suddenly turned upward at a tremendous angle of about one in four. Square foot-holds were cut in the lower face. The smell of incense was almost unbearable.

Dr. Cairn bent to Sime's ear.

"Not a word, now," he said. "No light—pistol ready!"

He began to mount. Sime, following, counted the steps. When they had mounted sixty he knew that they must have come close to the top of the original mastabah, and close to the first stage of the pyramid. Despite the shaft beneath, there was little danger of falling, for one could lean back against the wall while seeking for the foothold above.

Dr. Cairn mounted very slowly, fearful of striking his head upon some obstacle. Then on the seventieth step, he found that he could thrust his foot forward and that no obstruction met his knee. They had reached a horizontal passage.

Very softly he whispered back to Sime:

"Take my hand. I have reached the top."

They entered the passage. The heavy, sickly sweet odour almost overpowered them, but, grimly set upon their purpose, they, after one moment of hesitancy, crept on.

A fitful light rose and fell ahead of them. It gleamed upon the polished walls of the corridor in which they now found themselves—that inexplicable light burning in a place which had known no light since the dim ages of the early Pharaohs!

The events of that incredible night had afforded no such emotion as this. This was

the crowning wonder, and, in its dreadful mystery, the crowning terror of Méydûm.

When first that lambent light played upon the walls of the passage both stopped, stricken motionless with fear and amazement. Sime, who would have been prepared to swear that the Méydûm Pyramid contained no apartment other than the King's Chamber, now was past mere wonder, past conjecture. But he could still fear. Dr. Cairn, although he had anticipated this, temporarily also fell a victim to the supernatural character of the phenomenon.

They advanced.

They looked into a square chamber of about the same size as the King's Chamber. In fact, although they did not realise it until later, this second apartment, no doubt was situated directly above the first.

The only light was that of a fire burning in a tripod, and by means of this illumination, which rose and fell in a strange manner, it was possible to perceive the details of the place. But, indeed, at the moment they were not concerned with these; they had eyes only for the black-robed figure beside the tripod.

It was that of a man, who stood with his back towards them, and he chanted monotonously in a tongue unfamiliar to Sime. At certain points in his chant he would raise his arms in such a way that, clad in the black robe, he assumed the appearance of a gigantic bat. Each time that he acted thus the fire in the tripod, as if fanned into new life, would leap up, casting a hellish glare about the place. Then, as the chanter dropped his arms again, the flame would drop also.

A cloud of reddish vapour floated low in the apartment. There were a number of curiously-shaped vessels upon the floor, and against the farther wall, only rendered visible when the flames leapt high, was some motionless white object, apparently hung from the roof.

Dr. Cairn drew a hissing breath and grasped Sime's wrist.

"We are too late!" he said strangely.

He spoke at a moment when his companion, peering through the ruddy gloom of the place, had been endeavouring more clearly to perceive that ominous shape which hung, horrible, in the shadow. He spoke, too, at a moment when the man in the black robe, raised his arms—when, as if obedient to his will, the flames leapt up fitfully.

Although Sime could not be sure of what he saw, the recollection came to him of words recently spoken by Dr. Cairn. He remembered the story of Julian the Apostate, Julian the Emperor—the Necromancer. He remembered what had been found in the Temple of the Moon after Julian's death. He remembered that Lady Lashmore—

And thereupon he experienced such a nausea that but for the fact that Dr. Cairn gripped him he must have fallen.

Tutored in a materialistic school, he could not even now admit that such monstrous things could be. With a necromantic operation taking place before his eyes; with the unholy perfume of the secret incense all but suffocating him; with the dreadful Oracle dully gleaming in the shadows of that temple of evil—his reason would not accept the evidences. Any man of the ancient world—of the middle ages—would have known that he looked upon a professed wizard, upon a magician, who, according to one of the most ancient formulæ known to mankind, was seeking to question the dead respecting the living.

But how many modern men are there capable of realising such a circumstance? How many who would accept the statement that such operations are still performed, not only in the East, but in Europe? How many who, witnessing this mass of Satan, would accept it for verity, would not deny the evidence of their very senses?

He could not believe such an orgie of wickedness possible. A Pagan emperor might have been capable of these things, but to-day—wondrous is our faith in the virtue of "to-day!"

"Am I mad?" he whispered hoarsely, "or—"

A thinly-veiled shape seemed to float out from that still form in the shadows; it assumed definite outlines; it became a woman, beautiful with a beauty that could only be described as awful.

She wore upon her brow the uraeus of Ancient Egyptian royalty; her sole garment was a robe of finest gauze. Like a cloud, like a vision, she floated into the light cast by the tripod.

A voice—a voice which seemed to come from a vast distance, from somewhere outside the mighty granite walls of that unholy place—spoke. The language was unknown to Sime, but the fierce hand-grip upon his wrist grew fiercer. That dead tongue, that language unspoken since the dawn of Christianity, was known to the man who had been the companion of Sir Michael Ferrara.

In upon Sime swept a swift conviction—that one could not witness such a scene as this and live and move again amongst one's fellow-men! In a sort of frenzy, then, he wrenched himself free from the detaining hand, and launched a retort of modern science against the challenge of ancient sorcery.

Raising his Browning pistol, he fired—shot after shot—at that bat-like shape which stood between himself and the tripod!

A thousand frightful echoes filled the chamber with a demon mockery, boomed along those subterranean passages beneath, and bore the conflict of sound into the hidden places of the pyramid which had known not sound for untold generations.

"My God—!"

Vaguely he became aware that Dr. Cairn was seeking to drag him away. Through a cloud of smoke he saw the black-robed figure turn; dream fashion, he saw the pallid, glistening face of Antony Ferrara; the long, evil eyes, alight like the eyes of a serpent, were fixed upon him. He seemed to stand amid a chaos, in a mad world beyond the borders of reason, beyond the dominions of God. But to his stupefied mind one astounding fact found access.

He had fired at least seven shots at the black-robed figure, and it was not humanly possible that all could have gone wide of their mark.

Yet Antony Ferrara lived!

Utter darkness blotted out the evil vision. Then there was a white light ahead; and feeling that he was struggling for sanity, Sime managed to realise that Dr. Cairn, retreating along the passage, was crying to him, in a voice rising almost to a shriek, to run—run for his life—for his salvation!

"You should not have fired!" he seemed to hear.

Unconscious of any contact with the stones—although afterwards he found his knees and shins to be bleeding—he was scrambling down that long, sloping shaft.

He had a vague impression that Dr. Cairn, descending beneath him, sometimes grasped his ankles and placed his feet into the footholes. A continuous roaring sound filled his ears, as if a great ocean were casting its storm waves against the structure around him. The place seemed to rock.

"Down flat!"

Some sense of reality was returning to him. Now he perceived that Dr. Cairn was urging him to crawl back along the short passage by which they had entered from the King's Chamber.

Heedless of hurt, he threw himself down and pressed on.

A blank, like the sleep of exhaustion which follows delirium, came. Then Sime found himself standing in the King's Chamber, Dr. Cairn, who held an electric lamp in his hand, beside him, and half supporting him.

The realities suddenly reasserting themselves,

"I have dropped my pistol!" muttered Sime.

He threw off the supporting arm, and turned to that corner behind the heap of débris where was the opening through which they had entered the Satanic temple.

No opening was visible!

"He has closed it!" cried Dr. Cairn. "There are six stone doors between here and the place above! If he had succeeded in shutting one of them before we—?"

"My God!" whispered Sime. "Let us get out! I am nearly at the end of my tether!"

Fear lends wings, and it was with something like the lightness of a bird that Sime descended the shaft. At the bottom—

"On to my shoulders!" he cried, looking up.

Dr. Cairn lowered himself to the foot of the shaft. "You go first," he said.

He was gasping, as if nearly suffocated, but retained a wonderful self-control. Once over into the Borderland, and bravery assumes a new guise; the courage which can face physical danger undaunted, melts in the fires of the unknown.

Sime, his breath whistling sibilantly between his clenched teeth, hauled himself through the low passage, with incredible speed. The two worked their way arduously, up the long slope. They saw the blue sky above them....

"Something like a huge bat," said Robert Cairn, "crawled out upon the first stage. We both fired—"

Dr. Cairn raised his hand. He lay exhausted at the foot of the mound.

"He had lighted the incense," he replied, "and was reciting the secret ritual. I cannot explain. But your shots were wasted. We came too late—"

"Lady Lashmore—"

"Until the Pyramid of Méydûm is pulled down, stone by stone, the world will never know her fate! Sime and I have looked in at the gate of hell! Only the hand of God plucked us back! Look!"

He pointed to Sime. He lay, pallid, with closed eyes—and his hair was abundantly streaked with white!

CHAPTER XX

THE INCENSE

To Robert Cairn it seemed that the boat-train would never reach Charing Cross. His restlessness was appalling. He perpetually glanced from his father, with whom he shared the compartment, to the flying landscape with its vistas of hop-poles; and Dr. Cairn, although he exhibited less anxiety, was, nevertheless, strung to highest tension.

That dash from Cairo homeward had been something of a fevered dream to both men. To learn, whilst one is searching for a malign and implacable enemy in Egypt, that that enemy, having secretly returned to London, is weaving his evil spells around "some we loved, the loveliest and the best," is to know the meaning of ordeal.

In pursuit of Antony Ferrara—the incarnation of an awful evil—Dr. Cairn had deserted his practice, had left England for Egypt. Now he was hurrying back again; for whilst he had sought in strange and dark places of that land of mystery for Antony Ferrara, the latter had been darkly active in London!

Again and again Robert Cairn read the letter which, surely as a royal command, had recalled them. It was from Myra Duquesne. One line in it had fallen upon them like a bomb, had altered all their plans, had shattered the one fragment of peace remaining to them.

In the eyes of Robert Cairn, the whole universe centred around Myra Duquesne; she was the one being in the world of whom he could not bear to think in conjunction with Antony Ferrara. Now he knew that Antony Ferrara was beside her, was, doubtless at this very moment, directing those Black Arts of which he was master, to the destruction of her mind and body—perhaps of her very soul.

Again he drew the worn envelope from his pocket and read that ominous sentence,

which, when his eyes had first fallen upon it, had blotted out the sunlight of Egypt.

"... And you will be surprised to hear that Antony is back in London ... and is a frequent visitor here. It is quite like old times...."

Raising his haggard eyes, Robert Cairn saw that his father was watching him.

"Keep calm, my boy," urged the doctor; "it can profit us nothing, it can profit Myra nothing, for you to shatter your nerves at a time when real trials are before you. You are inviting another breakdown. Oh! I know it is hard; but for everybody's sake try to keep yourself in hand."

"I am trying, sir," replied Robert hollowly.

Dr. Cairn nodded, drumming his fingers upon his knee.

"We must be diplomatic," he continued. "That James Saunderson proposed to return to London, I had no idea. I thought that Myra would be far outside the Black maelström in Scotland. Had I suspected that Saunderson would come to London, I should have made other arrangements."

"Of course, sir, I know that. But even so we could never have foreseen this."

Dr. Cairn shook his head.

"To think that whilst we have been scouring Egypt from Port Said to Assouan—he has been laughing at us in London!" he said. "Directly after the affair at Méydûm he must have left the country—how, Heaven only knows. That letter is three weeks old, now?"

Robert Cairn nodded. "What may have happened since—what may have happened!"

"You take too gloomy a view. James Saunderson is a Roman guardian. Even Antony Ferrara could make little headway there."

"But Myra says that—Ferrara is—a frequent visitor."

"And Saunderson," replied Dr. Cairn with a grim smile, "is a Scotchman! Rely upon his diplomacy, Rob. Myra will be safe enough."

"God grant that she is!"

At that, silence fell between them, until punctually to time, the train slowed into Charing Cross. Inspired by a common anxiety, Dr. Cairn and his son were first among the passengers to pass the barrier. The car was waiting for them; and within five minutes of the arrival of the train they were whirling through London's traffic to the house of James Saunderson.

It lay in that quaint backwater, remote from motor-bus high-ways—Dulwich Common, and was a rambling red-tiled building which at some time had been a farmhouse. As the big car pulled up at the gate, Saunderson, a large-boned Scotchman, tawny-eyed, and with his grey hair worn long and untidily, came out to meet them. Myra Duquesne stood beside him. A quick blush coloured her face momentarily; then left it pale again.

Indeed, her pallor was alarming. As Robert Cairn, leaping from the car, seized both her hands and looked into her eyes, it seemed to him that the girl had almost an ethereal appearance. Something clutched at his heart, iced his blood; for Myra Duquesne seemed a creature scarcely belonging to the world of humanity—seemed already half a spirit. The light in her sweet eyes was good to see; but her fragility, and a certain transparency of complexion, horrified him.

Yet, he knew that he must hide these fears from her; and turning to Mr. Saunderson, he shook him warmly by the hand, and the party of four passed by the low porch into the house.

In the hall-way Miss Saunderson, a typical Scottish housekeeper, stood beaming welcome; but in the very instant of greeting her, Robert Cairn stopped suddenly as if transfixed.

Dr. Cairn also pulled up just within the door, his nostrils quivering and his clear grey eyes turning right and left—searching the shadows.

Miss Saunderson detected this sudden restraint.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked anxiously.

Myra, standing beside Mr. Saunderson, began to look frightened. But Dr. Cairn, shaking off the incubus which had descended upon him, forced a laugh, and clapping his hand upon Robert's shoulder cried:

"Wake up, my boy! I know it is good to be back in England again, but keep your day-dreaming for after lunch!"

Robert Cairn forced a ghostly smile in return, and the odd incident promised soon to be forgotten.

"How good of you," said Myra as the party entered the dining-room, "to come right from the station to see us. And you must be expected in Half-Moon Street, Dr. Cairn?"

"Of course we came to see you first," replied Robert Cairn significantly.

Myra lowered her face and pursued that subject no further.

No mention was made of Antony Ferrara, and neither Dr. Cairn nor his son cared to broach the subject. The lunch passed off, then, without any reference to the very matter which had brought them there that day.

It was not until nearly an hour later that Dr. Cairn and his son found themselves alone for a moment. Then, with a furtive glance about him, the doctor spoke of that which had occupied his mind, to the exclusion of all else, since first they had entered the house of James Saunderson.

"You noticed it, Rob?" he whispered.

"My God! it nearly choked me!"

Dr. Cairn nodded grimly.

"It is all over the house," he continued, "in every room that I have entered. They are used to it, and evidently do not notice it, but coming in from the clean air, it is—"

"Abominable, unclean—unholy!"

"We know it," continued Dr. Cairn softly—"that smell of unholiness; we have good reason to know it. It heralded the death of Sir Michael Ferrara. It heralded the death of—another."

"With a just God in heaven, can such things be?"

"It is the secret incense of Ancient Egypt," whispered Dr. Cairn, glancing towards the open door; "it is the odour of that Black Magic which, by all natural law, should be buried and lost for ever in the tombs of the ancient wizards. Only two living men within my knowledge know the use and the hidden meaning of that perfume; only one living man has ever dared to make it—to use it...."

"Antony Ferrara—"

"We knew he was here, boy; now we know that he is using his powers here. Something tells me that we come to the end of the fight. May victory be with the just."

CHAPTER XXI

THE MAGICIAN

Half-Moon Street was bathed in tropical sunlight. Dr. Cairn, with his hands behind him, stood looking out of the window. He turned to his son, who leant against a corner of the bookcase in the shadows of the big room.

"Hot enough for Egypt, Rob," he said.

Robert Cairn nodded.

"Antony Ferrara," he replied, "seemingly travels his own atmosphere with him. I first became acquainted with his hellish activities during a phenomenal thunderstorm. In Egypt his movements apparently corresponded with those of the Khamsîn. Now,"—he waved his hand vaguely towards the window—"this is Egypt in London."

"Egypt is in London, indeed," muttered Dr. Cairn. "Jermyn has decided that our fears are well-founded."

"You mean, sir, that the will—?"

"Antony Ferrara would have an almost unassailable case in the event of—of Myra—"

"You mean that her share of the legacy would fall to that fiend, if she—"

"If she died? Exactly."

Robert Cairn began to stride up and down the room, clenching and unclenching his fists. He was a shadow of his former self, but now his cheeks were flushed and his eyes feverishly bright.

"Before Heaven!" he cried suddenly, "the situation is becoming unbearable. A thing more deadly than the Plague is abroad here in London. Apart from the personal aspect of the matter—of which I dare not think!—what do we know of Ferrara's activities? His record is damnable. To our certain knowledge his victims are many. If the murder of his adoptive father, Sir Michael, was actually the first of his crimes, we know of three other poor souls who beyond any shadow of doubt were launched into eternity by the Black Arts of this ghastly villain—"

"We do, Rob," replied Dr. Cairn sternly.

"He has made attempts upon you; he has made attempts upon me. We owe our survival"—he pointed to a row of books upon a corner shelf—"to the knowledge which you have accumulated in half a life-time of research. In the face of science, in the face of modern scepticism, in the face of our belief in a benign God, this creature, Antony Ferrara, has proved himself conclusively to be—"

"He is what the benighted ancients called a magician," interrupted Dr. Cairn quietly. "He is what was known in the Middle Ages as a wizard. What that means, exactly, few modern thinkers know; but I know, and one day others will know. Meanwhile

his shadow lies upon a certain house."

Robert Cairn shook his clenched fists in the air. In some men the gesture had seemed melodramatic; in him it was the expression of a soul's agony.

"But, sir!" he cried—"are we to wait, inert, helpless? Whatever he is, he has a human body and there are bullets, there are knives, there are a hundred drugs in the British Pharmacopœia!"

"Quite so," answered Dr. Cairn, watching his son closely, and, by his own collected manner, endeavouring to check the other's growing excitement. "I am prepared at any personal risk to crush Antony Ferrara as I would crush a scorpion; but where is he?"

Robert Cairn groaned, dropping into the big red-leathern armchair, and burying his face in his hands.

"Our position is maddening," continued the elder man. "We know that Antony Ferrara visits Mr. Saunderson's house; we know that he is laughing at our vain attempts to trap him. Crowning comedy of all, Saunderson does not know the truth; he is not the type of man who could ever understand; in fact we dare not tell him—and we dare not tell Myra. The result is that those whom we would protect, unwittingly are working against us, and against themselves."

"That perfume!" burst out Robert Cairn; "that hell's incense which loads the atmosphere of Saunderson's house! To think that we know what it means—that we know what it means!"

"Perhaps I know even better than you do, Rob. The occult uses of perfume are not understood nowadays; but you, from experience, know that certain perfumes have occult uses. At the Pyramid of Méydûm in Egypt, Antony Ferrara dared—and the just God did not strike him dead—to make a certain incense. It was often made in the remote past, and a portion of it, probably in a jar hermetically sealed, had come into his possession. I once detected its dreadful odour in his rooms in London. Had

you asked me prior to that occasion if any of the hellish stuff had survived to the present day, I should most emphatically have said no; I should have been wrong. Ferrara had some. He used it all—and went to the Méydûm pyramid to renew his stock."

Robert Cairn was listening intently.

"All this brings me back to a point which I have touched upon before, sir," he said: "To my certain knowledge, the late Sir Michael and yourself have delved into the black mysteries of Egypt more deeply than any men of the present century. Yet Antony Ferrara, little more than a boy, has mastered secrets which you, after years of research, have failed to grasp. What does this mean, sir?"

Dr. Cairn, again locking his hands behind him, stared out of the window.

"He is not an ordinary mortal," continued his son. "He is supernormal—and supernaturally wicked. You have admitted—indeed it was evident—that he is merely the adopted son of the late Sir Michael. Now that we have entered upon the final struggle—for I feel that this is so—I will ask you again: Who is Antony Ferrara?"

Dr. Cairn spun around upon the speaker; his grey eyes were very bright.

"There is one little obstacle," he answered, "which has deterred me from telling you what you have asked so often. Although—and you have had dreadful opportunities to peer behind the veil—you will find it hard to believe, I hope very shortly to be able to answer that question, and to tell you who Antony Ferrara really is."

Robert Cairn beat his fist upon the arm of the chair.

"I sometimes wonder," he said, "that either of us has remained sane. Oh! what does it mean? What can we do? What can we do?"

"We must watch, Rob. To enlist the services of Saunderson, would be almost impossible; he lives in his orchid houses; they are his world. In matters of ordinary

life I can trust him above most men, but in this—"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Could we suggest to him a reason—any reason but the real one—why he should refuse to receive Ferrara?"

"It might destroy our last chance."

"But sir," cried Robert wildly, "it amounts to this: we are using Myra as a lure!"

"In order to save her, Rob—simply in order to save her," retorted Dr. Cairn sternly.

"How ill she looks," groaned the other; "how pale and worn. There are great shadows under her eyes—oh! I cannot bear to think about her!"

"When was he last there?"

"Apparently some ten days ago. You may depend upon him to be aware of our return! He will not come there again, sir. But there are other ways in which he might reach her—does he not command a whole shadow army! And Mr. Saunderson is entirely unsuspicious—and Myra thinks of the fiend as a brother! Yet—she has never once spoken of him. I wonder...."

Dr. Cairn sat deep in reflection. Suddenly he took out his watch.

"Go around now," he said—"you will be in time for lunch—and remain there until I come. From to-day onward, although actually your health does not permit of the strain, we must watch, watch night and day."

CHAPTER XXII

MYRA

Myra Duquesne came under an arch of roses to the wooden seat where Robert Cairn awaited her. In her plain white linen frock, with the sun in her hair and her eyes looking unnaturally large, owing to the pallor of her beautiful face, she seemed to

the man who rose to greet her an ethereal creature, but lightly linked to the flesh and blood world.

An impulse, which had possessed him often enough before, but which hitherto he had suppressed, suddenly possessed him anew, set his heart beating, and filled his veins with fire. As a soft blush spread over the girl's pale cheeks, and, with a sort of timidity, she held out her hand, he leapt to his feet, threw his arms around her, and kissed her; kissed her eyes, her hair, her lips!

There was a moment of frightened hesitancy ... and then she had resigned herself to this sort of savage tenderness which was better in its very brutality than any caress she had ever known, which thrilled her with a glorious joy such as, she realised now, she had dreamt of and lacked, and wanted; which was a harbourage to which she came, blushing, confused—but glad, conquered, and happy in the thrall of that exquisite slavery.

"Myra," he whispered, "Myra! have I frightened you? Will you forgive me?—"

She nodded her head quickly and nestled upon his shoulder.

"I could wait no longer," he murmured in her ear. "Words seemed unnecessary; I just wanted you; you are everything in the world; and,"—he concluded simply—"I took you."

She whispered his name, very softly. What a serenity there is in such a moment, what a glow of secure happiness, of immunity from the pains and sorrows of the world!

Robert Cairn, his arms about this girl, who, from his early boyhood, had been his ideal of womanhood, of love, and of all that love meant, forgot those things which had shaken his life and brought him to the threshold of death, forgot those evidences of illness which marred the once glorious beauty of the girl, forgot the black menace of the future, forgot the wizard enemy whose hand was stretched over that house and that garden—and was merely happy.

But this paroxysm of gladness—which Eliphas Lévi, last of the Adepts, has so marvellously analysed in one of his works—is of short duration, as are all joys. It is needless to recount, here, the broken sentences (punctuated with those first kisses which sweeten the memory of old age) that now passed for conversation, and which lovers have believed to be conversation since the world began. As dusk creeps over a glorious landscape, so the shadow of Antony Ferrara crept over the happiness of these two.

Gradually that shadow fell between them and the sun; the grim thing which loomed big in the lives of them both, refused any longer to be ignored. Robert Cairn, his arm about the girl's waist, broached the hated subject.

"When did you last see—Ferrara?"

Myra looked up suddenly.

"Over a week—nearly a fortnight, ago—"

"Ah!"

Cairn noted that the girl spoke of Ferrara with an odd sort of restraint for which he was at a loss to account. Myra had always regarded her guardian's adopted son in the light of a brother; therefore her present attitude was all the more singular.

"You did not expect him to return to England so soon?" he asked.

"I had no idea that he was in England," said Myra, "until he walked in here one day. I was glad to see him—then."

"And should you not be glad to see him now?" inquired Cairn eagerly.

Myra, her head lowered, deliberately pressed out a crease in her white skirt.

"One day, last week," she replied slowly, "he—came here, and—acted strangely—"

"In what way?" jerked Cairn.

"He pointed out to me that actually we—he and I—were in no way related."

"Well?"

"You know how I have always liked Antony? I have always thought of him as my brother."

Again she hesitated, and a troubled expression crept over her pale face. Cairn raised his arm and clasped it about her shoulders.

"Tell me all about it," he whispered reassuringly.

"Well," continued Myra in evident confusion, "his behaviour became—embarrassing; and suddenly—he asked me if I could ever love him, not as a brother, but—"

"I understand!" said Cairn grimly. "And you replied?"

"For some time I could not reply at all: I was so surprised, and so—horrified. I cannot explain how I felt about it, but it seemed horrible—it seemed horrible!—"

"But of course, you told him?"

"I told him that I could never be fond of him in any different way—that I could never think of it. And although I endeavoured to avoid hurting his feelings, he—took it very badly. He said, in such a queer, choking voice, that he was going away—"

"Away!—from England?"

"Yes; and—he made a strange request."

"What was it?"

"In the circumstances—you see—I felt sorry for him—I did not like to refuse him; it was only a trifling thing. He asked for a lock of my hair!"

"A lock of your hair! And you—"

"I told you that I did not like to refuse—and I let him snip off a tiny piece, with a pair of pocket scissors which he had. Are you angry?"

"Of course not! You—were almost brought up together. You—?"

"Then—" she paused—"he seemed to change. Suddenly, I found myself afraid—dreadfully afraid—"

"Of Ferrara?"

"Not of Antony, exactly. But what is the good of my trying to explain! A most awful dread seized me. His face was no longer the face that I have always known; something—"

Her voice trembled, and she seemed disposed to leave the sentence unfinished; then:

"Something evil—sinister, had come into it."

"And since then," said Cairn, "you have not seen him?"

"He has not been here since then—no."

Cairn, his hands resting upon the girl's shoulders, leant back in the seat, and looked into her troubled eyes with a kind of sad scrutiny.

"You have not been fretting about him?"

Myra shook her head.

"Yet you look as though something were troubling you. This house"—he indicated the low-lying garden with a certain irritation—"is not healthily situated. This place lies in a valley; look at the rank grass—and there are mosquitoes everywhere. You do not look well, Myra."

The girl smiled—a little wistful smile.

"But I was so tired of Scotland," she said. "You do not know how I looked forward to London again. I must admit, though, that I was in better health there; I was quite ashamed of my dairy-maid appearance."

"You have nothing to amuse you here," said Cairn tenderly; "no company, for Mr. Saunderson only lives for his orchids."

"They are very fascinating," said Myra dreamily, "I, too, have felt their glamour. I am the only member of the household whom he allows amongst his orchids—"

"Perhaps you spend too much time there," interrupted Cairn; "that superheated, artificial atmosphere—"

Myra shook her head playfully, patting his arm.

"There is nothing in the world the matter with me," she said, almost in her old bright manner—"now that you are back—"

"I do not approve of orchids," jerked Cairn doggedly. "They are parodies of what a flower should be. Place an Odontoglossum beside a rose, and what a distorted unholy thing it looks!"

"Unholy?" laughed Myra.

"Unholy,—yes!—they are products of feverish swamps and deathly jungles. I hate orchids. The atmosphere of an orchid-house cannot possibly be clean and healthy. One might as well spend one's time in a bacteriological laboratory!"

Myra shook her head with affected seriousness.

"You must not let Mr. Saunderson hear you," she said. "His orchids are his children. Their very mystery enthrals him—and really it is most fascinating. To look at one of those shapeless bulbs, and to speculate upon what kind of bloom it will produce, is almost as thrilling as reading a sensational novel! He has one growing now—it will bloom some time this week—about which he is frantically excited."

"Where did he get it?" asked Cairn without interest.

"He bought it from a man who had almost certainly stolen it! There were six bulbs in the parcel; only two have lived and one of these is much more advanced than the other; it is so high—"

She held out her hand, indicating a height of some three feet from the ground.

"It has not flowered yet?"

"No. But the buds—huge, smooth, egg-shaped things—seem on the point of bursting at any moment. We call it the 'Mystery,' and it is my special care. Mr.

Saunderson has shown me how to attend to its simple needs, and if it proves to be a new species—which is almost certain—he is going to exhibit it, and name it after me! Shall you be proud of having an orchid named after—"

"After my wife?" Cairn concluded, seizing her hands. "I could never be more proud of you than I am already...."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE FACE IN THE ORCHID-HOUSE

Dr. Cairn walked to the window, with its old-fashioned leaded panes. A lamp stood by the bedside, and he had tilted the shade so that it shone upon the pale face of the patient—Myra Duquesne.

Two days had wrought a dreadful change in her. She lay with closed eyes, and sunken face upon which ominous shadows played. Her respiration was imperceptible. The reputation of Dr. Bruce Cairn was a well deserved one, but this case puzzled him. He knew that Myra Duquesne was dying before his eyes; he could still see the agonised face of his son, Robert, who at that moment was waiting, filled with intolerable suspense, downstairs in Mr. Saunderson's study; but, withal, he was helpless. He looked out from the rose-entwined casement across the shrubbery, to where the moonlight glittered among the trees.

Those were the orchid-houses; and with his back to the bed, Dr. Cairn stood for long, thoughtfully watching the distant gleams of reflected light. Craig Fenton and Sir Elwin Groves, with whom he had been consulting, were but just gone. The nature of Myra Duquesne's illness had utterly puzzled them, and they had left, mystified.

Downstairs, Robert Cairn was pacing the study, wondering if his reason would survive this final blow which threatened. He knew, and his father knew, that a

sinister something underlay this strange illness—an illness which had commenced on the day that Antony Ferrara had last visited the house.

The evening was insufferably hot; not a breeze stirred in the leaves; and despite open windows, the air of the room was heavy and lifeless. A faint perfume, having a sort of sweetness, but which yet was unutterably revolting, made itself perceptible to the nostrils. Apparently it had pervaded the house by slow degrees. The occupants were so used to it that they did not notice it at all.

Dr. Cairn had busied himself that evening in the sick-room, burning some pungent preparation, to the amazement of the nurse and of the consultants. Now the biting fumes of his pastilles had all been wafted out of the window and the faint sweet smell was as noticeable as ever.

Not a sound broke the silence of the house; and when the nurse quietly opened the door and entered, Dr. Cairn was still standing staring thoughtfully out of the window in the direction of the orchid-houses. He turned, and walking back to the bedside, bent over the patient.

Her face was like a white mask; she was quite unconscious; and so far as he could see showed no change either for better or worse. But her pulse was slightly more feeble and the doctor suppressed a groan of despair; for this mysterious progressive weakness could only have one end. All his experience told him that unless something could be done—and every expedient thus far attempted had proved futile—Myra Duquesne would die about dawn.

He turned on his heel, and strode from the room, whispering a few words of instruction to the nurse. Descending the stairs, he passed the closed study door, not daring to think of his son who waited within, and entered the dining-room. A single lamp burnt there, and the gaunt figure of Mr. Saunderson was outlined dimly where he sat in the window seat. Crombie, the gardener, stood by the table.

"Now, Crombie," said Dr. Cairn, quietly, closing the door behind him, "what is this

story about the orchid-houses, and why did you not mention it before?"

The man stared persistently into the shadows of the room, avoiding Dr. Cairn's glance.

"Since he has had the courage to own up," interrupted Mr. Saunderson, "I have overlooked the matter: but he was afraid to speak before, because he had no business to be in the orchid-houses." His voice grew suddenly fierce—"He knows it well enough!"

"I know, sir, that you don't want me to interfere with the orchids," replied the man, "but I only ventured in because I thought I saw a light moving there—"

"Rubbish!" snapped Mr. Saunderson.

"Pardon me, Saunderson," said Dr. Cairn, "but a matter of more importance than the welfare of all the orchids in the world is under consideration now."

Saunderson coughed dryly.

"You are right, Cairn," he said. "I shouldn't have lost my temper for such a trifle, at a time like this. Tell your own tale, Crombie; I won't interrupt."

"It was last night then," continued the man. "I was standing at the door of my cottage smoking a pipe before turning in, when I saw a faint light moving over by the orchid-houses—"

"Reflection of the moon," muttered Saunderson. "I am sorry. Go on, Crombie!"

"I knew that some of the orchids were very valuable, and I thought there would not be time to call you; also I did not want to worry you, knowing you had worry enough already. So I knocked out my pipe and put it in my pocket, and went through the shrubbery. I saw the light again—it seemed to be moving from the first house into the second. I couldn't see what it was."

"Was it like a candle, or a pocket-lamp?" jerked Dr. Cairn.

"Nothing like that, sir; a softer light, more like a glow-worm; but much brighter. I

went around and tried the door, and it was locked. Then I remembered the door at the other end, and I cut round by the path between the houses and the wall, so that I had no chance to see the light again, until I got to the other door. I found this unlocked. There was a close kind of smell in there, sir, and the air was very hot—"

"Naturally, it was hot," interrupted Saunderson.

"I mean much hotter than it should have been. It was like an oven, and the smell was stifling—"

"What smell?" asked Dr. Cairn. "Can you describe it?"

"Excuse me, sir, but I seem to notice it here in this room to-night, and I think I noticed it about the place before—never so strong as in the orchid-houses."

"Go on!" said Dr. Cairn.

"I went through the first house, and saw nothing. The shadow of the wall prevented the moonlight from shining in there. But just as I was about to enter the middle house, I thought I saw—a face."

"What do you mean you thought you saw?" snapped Mr. Saunderson.

"I mean, sir, that it was so horrible and so strange that I could not believe it was real—which is one of the reasons why I did not speak before. It reminded me of the face of a gentleman I have seen here—Mr. Ferrara—"

Dr. Cairn stifled an exclamation.

"But in other ways it was quite unlike the gentleman. In some ways it was more like the face of a woman—a very bad woman. It had a sort of bluish light on it, but where it could have come from, I don't know. It seemed to be smiling, and two bright eyes looked straight out at me."

Crombie stopped, raising his hand to his head confusedly.

"I could see nothing but just this face—low down as if the person it belonged to was crouching on the floor; and there was a tall plant of some kind just beside it—"

"Well," said Dr. Cairn, "go on! What did you do?"

"I turned to run!" confessed the man. "If you had seen that horrible face, you would understand how frightened I was. Then when I got to the door, I looked back."

"I hope you had closed the door behind you," snapped Saunderson.

"Never mind that, never mind that!" interrupted Dr. Cairn.

"I had closed the door behind me—yes, sir—but just as I was going to open it again, I took a quick glance back, and the face had gone! I came out, and I was walking over the lawn, wondering whether I should tell you, when it occurred to me that I hadn't noticed whether the key had been left in or not."

"Did you go back to see?" asked Dr. Cairn.

"I didn't want to," admitted Crombie, "but I did—and—"

"Well?"

"The door was locked, sir!"

"So you concluded that your imagination had been playing you tricks," said Saunderson grimly. "In my opinion you were right."

Dr. Cairn dropped into an armchair.

"All right, Crombie; that will do."

Crombie, with a mumbled "Good-night, gentlemen," turned and left the room.

"Why are you worrying about this matter," inquired Saunderson, when the door had closed, "at a time like the present?"

"Never mind," replied Dr. Cairn wearily. "I must return to Half-Moon Street, now, but I shall be back within an hour."

With no other word to Saunderson, he stood up and walked out to the hall. He rapped at the study door, and it was instantly opened by Robert Cairn. No spoken word was necessary; the burning question could be read in his too-bright eyes. Dr.

Cairn laid his hand upon his son's shoulder.

"I won't excite false hopes, Rob," he said huskily. "I am going back to the house, and I want you to come with me."

Robert Cairn turned his head aside, groaning aloud, but his father grasped him by the arm, and together they left that house of shadows, entered the car which waited at the gate, and without exchanging a word en route, came to Half-Moon Street.

CHAPTER XXIV

FLOWERING OF THE LOTUS

Dr. Cairn led the way into the library, switching on the reading-lamp upon the large table. His son stood just within the doorway, his arms folded and his chin upon his breast.

The doctor sat down at the table, watching the other.

Suddenly Robert spoke:

"Is it possible, sir, is it possible—" his voice was barely audible—"that her illness can in any way be due to the orchids?"

Dr. Cairn frowned thoughtfully.

"What do you mean, exactly?" he asked.

"Orchids are mysterious things. They come from places where there are strange and dreadful diseases. Is it not possible that they may convey—"

"Some sort of contagion?" concluded Dr. Cairn. "It is a point that I have seen raised, certainly. But nothing of the sort has ever been established. I have heard something, to-night, though, which—"

"What have you heard, sir?" asked his son eagerly, stepping forward to the table.

"Never mind at the moment, Rob; let me think."

He rested his elbow upon the table, and his chin in his hand. His professional instincts had told him that unless something could be done—something which the highest medical skill in London had thus far been unable to devise—Myra Duquesne had but four hours to live. Somewhere in his mind a memory lurked, evasive, taunting him. This wild suggestion of his son's, that the girl's illness might be due in some way to her contact with the orchids, was in part responsible for this confused memory, but it seemed to be associated, too, with the story of Crombie the gardener—and with Antony Ferrara. He felt that somewhere in the darkness surrounding him there was a speck of light, if he could but turn in the right direction to see it. So, whilst Robert Cairn walked restlessly about the big room, the doctor sat with his chin resting in the palm of his hand, seeking to concentrate his mind upon that vague memory, which defied him, whilst the hand of the library clock crept from twelve towards one; whilst he knew that the faint life in Myra Duquesne was slowly ebbing away in response to some mysterious condition, utterly outside his experience.

Distant clocks chimed One! Three hours only!

Robert Cairn began to beat his fist into the palm of his left hand convulsively. Yet his father did not stir, but sat there, a black-shadowed wrinkle between his brows....

"By God!"

The doctor sprang to his feet, and with feverish haste began to fumble amongst a bunch of keys.

"What is it, sir! What is it?"

The doctor unlocked the drawer of the big table, and drew out a thick manuscript written in small and exquisitely neat characters. He placed it under the lamp, and rapidly began to turn the pages.

"It is hope, Rob!" he said with quiet self-possession.

Robert Cairn came round the table, and leant over his father's shoulder.

"Sir Michael Ferrara's writing!"

"His unpublished book, Rob. We were to have completed it, together, but death claimed him, and in view of the contents, I—perhaps superstitiously—decided to suppress it.... Ah!"

He placed the point of his finger upon a carefully drawn sketch, designed to illustrate the text. It was evidently a careful copy from the Ancient Egyptian. It represented a row of priestesses, each having her hair plaited in a thick queue, standing before a priest armed with a pair of scissors. In the centre of the drawing was an altar, upon which stood vases of flowers; and upon the right ranked a row of mummies, corresponding in number with the priestesses upon the left.

"By God!" repeated Dr. Cairn, "we were both wrong, we were both wrong!"

"What do you mean, sir? for Heaven's sake, what do you mean?"

"This drawing," replied Dr. Cairn, "was copied from the wall of a certain tomb—now reclosed. Since we knew that the tomb was that of one of the greatest wizards who ever lived in Egypt, we knew also that the inscription had some magical significance. We knew that the flowers represented here, were a species of the extinct sacred Lotus. All our researches did not avail us to discover for what purpose or by what means these flowers were cultivated. Nor could we determine the meaning of the cutting off,"—he ran his fingers over the sketch—"of the priestesses' hair by the high priest of the goddess—"

"What goddess, sir?"

"A goddess, Rob, of which Egyptology knows nothing!—a mystical religion the existence of which has been vaguely suspected by a living French savant ... but this is no time—"

Dr. Cairn closed the manuscript, replaced it and relocked the drawer. He glanced at the clock.

"A quarter past one," he said. "Come, Rob!"

Without hesitation, his son followed him from the house. The car was waiting, and shortly they were speeding through the deserted streets, back to the house where death in a strange guise was beckoning to Myra Duquesne. As the car started—

"Do you know," asked Dr. Cairn, "if Saunderson has bought any orchids—quite recently, I mean?"

"Yes," replied his son dully; "he bought a small parcel only a fortnight ago."

"A fortnight!" cried Dr. Cairn excitedly—"you are sure of that? You mean that the purchase was made since Ferrara—"

"Ceased to visit the house? Yes. Why!—it must have been the very day after!"

Dr. Cairn clearly was labouring under tremendous excitement.

"Where did he buy these orchids?" he asked, evenly.

"From someone who came to the house—someone he had never dealt with before."

The doctor, his hands resting upon his knees, was rapidly drumming with his fingers.

"And—did he cultivate them?"

"Two only proved successful. One is on the point of blooming—if it is not blooming already. He calls it the 'Mystery.'"

At that, the doctor's excitement overcame him. Suddenly leaning out of the window, he shouted to the chauffeur:

"Quicker! Quicker! Never mind risks. Keep on top speed!"

"What is it, sir?" cried his son. "Heavens! what is it?"

"Did you say that it might have bloomed, Rob?"

"Myra"—Robert Cairn swallowed noisily—"told me three days ago that it was expected to bloom before the end of the week."

"What is it like?"

"A thing four feet high, with huge egg-shaped buds."

"Merciful God grant that we are in time," whispered Dr. Cairn. "I could believe once more in the justice of Heaven, if the great knowledge of Sir Michael Ferrara should prove to be the weapon to destroy the fiend whom we raised!—he and I—may we be forgiven!'"

Robert Cairn's excitement was dreadful.

"Can you tell me nothing?" he cried. "What do you hope? What do you fear?"

"Don't ask me, Rob," replied his father; "you will know within five minutes."

The car indeed was leaping along the dark suburban roads at a speed little below that of an express train. Corners the chauffeur negotiated in racing fashion, so that at times two wheels thrashed the empty air; and once or twice the big car swung round as upon a pivot only to recover again in response to the skilled tactics of the driver.

They roared down the sloping narrow lane to the gate of Mr. Saunderson's house with a noise like the coming of a great storm, and were nearly hurled from their seats when the brakes were applied, and the car brought to a standstill.

Dr. Cairn leapt out, pushed open the gate and ran up to the house, his son closely following. There was a light in the hall and Miss Saunderson who had expected them, and had heard their stormy approach, already held the door open. In the hall—

"Wait here one moment," said Dr. Cairn.

Ignoring Saunderson, who had come out from the library, he ran upstairs. A minute later, his face very pale, he came running down again.

"She is worse?" began Saunderson, "but—"

"Give me the key of the orchid-house!" said Dr. Cairn tersely.

"Orchid-house!—"

"Don't hesitate. Don't waste a second. Give me the key."

Saunderson's expression showed that he thought Dr. Cairn to be mad, but nevertheless he plunged his hand into his pocket and pulled out a key-ring. Dr. Cairn snatched it in a flash.

"Which key?" he snapped.

"The Chubb, but—"

"Follow me, Rob!"

Down the hall he raced, his son beside him, and Mr. Saunderson following more slowly. Out into the garden he went and over the lawn towards the shrubbery.

The orchid-houses lay in dense shadow; but the doctor almost threw himself against the door.

"Strike a match!" he panted. Then—"Never mind—I have it!"

The door flew open with a bang. A sickly perfume swept out to them.

"Matches! matches, Rob! this way!"

They went stumbling in. Robert Cairn took out a box of matches—and struck one. His father was further along, in the centre building.

"Your knife, boy—quick! quick!"

As the dim light crept along the aisle between the orchids, Robert Cairn saw his father's horror-stricken face ... and saw a vivid green plant growing in a sort of tub, before which the doctor stood. Four huge, smooth, egg-shaped buds grew upon the leafless stems; two of them were on the point of opening, and one already showed a delicious, rosy flush about its apex.

Dr. Cairn grasped the knife which Robert tremblingly offered him. The match went out. There was a sound of hacking, a soft swishing, and a dull thud upon the tiled floor.

As another match fluttered into brief life, the mysterious orchid, severed just above the soil, fell from the tub. Dr. Cairn stamped the swelling buds under his feet. A

profusion of colourless sap was pouring out upon the floor.

Above the intoxicating odour of the place, a smell like that of blood made itself perceptible.

The second match went out.

"Another—"

Dr. Cairn's voice rose barely above a whisper. With fingers quivering, Robert Cairn managed to light a third match. His father, from a second tub, tore out a smaller plant and ground its soft tentacles beneath his feet. The place smelt like an operating theatre. The doctor swayed dizzily as the third match became extinguished, clutching at his son for support.

"Her life was in it, boy!" he whispered. "She would have died in the hour that it bloomed! The priestesses—were consecrated to this.... Let me get into the air—"

Mr. Saunderson, silent with amazement, met them.

"Don't speak," said Dr. Cairn to him. "Look at the dead stems of your 'Mystery.' You will find a thread of bright hair in the heart of each!..."

Dr. Cairn opened the door of the sick-room and beckoned to his son, who, haggard, trembling, waited upon the landing.

"Come in, boy," he said softly—"and thank God!"

Robert Cairn, on tiptoe, entered. Myra Duquesne, pathetically pale but with that dreadful, ominous shadow gone from her face, turned her wistful eyes towards the door; and their wistfulness became gladness.

"Rob!" she sighed—and stretched out her arms.

CHAPTER XXV

CAIRN MEETS FERRARA

Not the least of the trials which Robert Cairn experienced during the time that he and his father were warring with their supernaturally equipped opponent was that of preserving silence upon this matter which loomed so large in his mind, and which already had changed the course of his life.

Sometimes he met men who knew Ferrara, but who knew him only as a man about town of somewhat evil reputation. Yet even to these he dared not confide what he knew of the true Ferrara; undoubtedly they would have deemed him mad had he spoken of the knowledge and of the deeds of this uncanny, this fiendish being. How would they have listened to him had he sought to tell them of the den of spiders in Port Said; of the bats of Méydûm; of the secret incense and of how it was made; of the numberless murders and atrocities, wrought by means not human, which stood to the account of this adopted son of the late Sir Michael Ferrara?

So, excepting his father, he had no confidant; for above all it was necessary to keep the truth from Myra Duquesne—from Myra around whom his world circled, but who yet thought of the dreadful being who wielded the sorcery of forgotten ages, as a brother. Whilst Myra lay ill—not yet recovered from the ghastly attack made upon her life by the man whom she trusted—whilst, having plentiful evidence of his presence in London, Dr. Cairn and himself vainly sought for Antony Ferrara; whilst any night might bring some unholy visitant to his rooms, obedient to the will of this modern wizard; whilst these fears, anxieties, doubts, and surmises danced, impish, through his brain, it was all but impossible to pursue with success, his vocation of journalism. Yet for many reasons it was necessary that he should do so, and so he was employed upon a series of articles which were the outcome of his recent visit to Egypt—his editor having given him that work as being less exacting than that which properly falls to the lot of the Fleet Street copy-hunter.

He left his rooms about three o'clock in the afternoon, in order to seek, in the British Museum library, a reference which he lacked. The day was an exceedingly warm

one, and he derived some little satisfaction from the fact that, at his present work, he was not called upon to endue the armour of respectability. Pipe in mouth, he made his way across the Strand towards Bloomsbury.

As he walked up the steps, crossed the hall-way, and passed in beneath the dome of the reading-room, he wondered if, amid those mountains of erudition surrounding him, there was any wisdom so strange, and so awful, as that of Antony Ferrara.

He soon found the information for which he was looking, and having copied it into his notebook, he left the reading-room. Then, as he was recrossing the hall near the foot of the principal staircase, he paused. He found himself possessed by a sudden desire to visit the Egyptian Rooms, upstairs. He had several times inspected the exhibits in those apartments, but never since his return from the land to whose ancient civilisation they bore witness.

Cairn was not pressed for time in these days, therefore he turned and passed slowly up the stairs.

There were but few visitors to the grove of mummies that afternoon. When he entered the first room he found a small group of tourists passing idly from case to case; but on entering the second, he saw that he had the apartment to himself. He remembered that his father had mentioned on one occasion that there was a ring in this room which had belonged to the Witch-Queen. Robert Cairn wondered in which of the cases it was exhibited, and by what means he should be enabled to recognise it.

Bending over a case containing scarabs and other amulets, many set in rings, he began to read the inscriptions upon the little tickets placed beneath some of them; but none answered to the description, neither the ticketed nor the unticketed. A second case he examined with like results. But on passing to a third, in an angle near the door, his gaze immediately lighted upon a gold ring set with a strange green stone, engraved in a peculiar way. It bore no ticket, yet as Robert Cairn eagerly bent

over it, he knew, beyond the possibility of doubt, that this was the ring of the Witch-Queen.

Where had he seen it, or its duplicate?

With his eyes fixed upon the gleaming stone, he sought to remember. That he had seen this ring before, or one exactly like it, he knew, but strangely enough he was unable to determine where and upon what occasion. So, his hands resting upon the case, he leant, peering down at the singular gem. And as he stood thus, frowning in the effort of recollection, a dull white hand, having long tapered fingers, glided across the glass until it rested directly beneath his eyes. Upon one of the slim fingers was an exact replica of the ring in the case!

Robert Cairn leapt back with a stifled exclamation.

Antony Ferrara stood before him!

"The Museum ring is a copy, dear Cairn," came the huskily musical, hateful voice; "the one upon my finger is the real one."

Cairn realised in his own person, the literal meaning of the overworked phrase, "frozen with amazement." Before him stood the most dangerous man in Europe; a man who had done murder and worse; a man only in name, a demon in nature. His long black eyes half-closed, his perfectly chiselled ivory face expressionless, and his blood-red lips parted in a mirthless smile, Antony Ferrara watched Cairn—Cairn whom he had sought to murder by means of hellish art.

Despite the heat of the day, he wore a heavy overcoat, lined with white fox fur. In his right hand—for his left still rested upon the case—he held a soft hat. With an easy nonchalance, he stood regarding the man who had sworn to kill him, and the latter made no move, uttered no word. Stark amazement held him inert.

"I knew that you were in the Museum, Cairn," Ferrara continued, still having his basilisk eyes fixed upon the other from beneath the drooping lids, "and I called to you to join me here."

Still Cairn did not move, did not speak.

"You have acted very harshly towards me in the past, dear Cairn; but because my philosophy consists in an admirable blending of that practised in Sybaris with that advocated by the excellent Zeno; because whilst I am prepared to make my home in a Diogenes' tub, I, nevertheless, can enjoy the fragrance of a rose, the flavour of a peach—"

The husky voice seemed to be hypnotising Cairn; it was a siren's voice, thralling him.

"Because," continued Ferrara evenly, "in common with all humanity I am compound of man and woman, I can resent the enmity which drives me from shore to shore, but being myself a connoisseur of the red lips and laughing eyes of maidenhood—I am thinking, more particularly of Myra—I can forgive you, dear Cairn—"

Then Cairn recovered himself.

"You white-faced cur!" he snarled through clenched teeth; his knuckles whitened as he stepped around the case. "You dare to stand there mocking me—"

Ferrara again placed the case between himself and his enemy.

"Pause, my dear Cairn," he said, without emotion. "What would you do? Be discreet, dear Cairn; reflect that I have only to call an attendant in order to have you pitched ignominiously into the street."

"Before God! I will throttle the life from you!" said Cairn, in a voice savagely hoarse.

He sprang again towards Ferrara. Again the latter dodged around the case with an agility which defied the heavier man.

"Your temperament is so painfully Celtic, Cairn," he protested mockingly. "I perceive quite clearly that you will not discuss this matter judicially. Must I then call for the attendant?"

Cairn clenched his fists convulsively. Through all the tumult of his rage, the fact had penetrated—that he was helpless. He could not attack Ferrara in that place; he could not detain him against his will. For Ferrara had only to claim official protection to bring about the complete discomfiture of his assailant. Across the case containing the duplicate ring, he glared at this incarnate fiend, whom the law, which he had secretly outraged, now served to protect. Ferrara spoke again in his huskily musical voice.

"I regret that you will not be reasonable, Cairn. There is so much that I should like to say to you; there are so many things of interest which I could tell you. Do you know in some respects I am peculiarly gifted, Cairn? At times I can recollect, quite distinctly, particulars of former incarnations. Do you see that priestess lying there, just through the doorway? I can quite distinctly remember having met her when she was a girl; she was beautiful, Cairn. And I can even recall how, one night beside the Nile—but I see that you are growing impatient! If you will not avail yourself of this opportunity, I must bid you good-day—"

He turned and walked towards the door. Cairn leapt after him; but Ferrara, suddenly beginning to run, reached the end of the Egyptian Room and darted out on to the landing, before his pursuer had time to realise what he was about.

At the moment that Ferrara turned the corner ahead of him, Cairn saw something drop. Coming to the end of the room, he stooped and picked up this object, which was a plaited silk cord about three feet in length. He did not pause to examine it more closely, but thrust it into his pocket and raced down the steps after the retreating figure of Ferrara. At the foot, a constable held out his arm, detaining him. Cairn stopped in surprise.

"I must ask you for your name and address," said the constable, gruffly.

"For Heaven's sake! what for?"

"A gentleman has complained—"

"My good man!" exclaimed Cairn, and proffered his card—"it is—it is a practical joke on his part. I know him well—"

The constable looked at the card and from the card, suspiciously, back to Cairn. Apparently the appearance of the latter reassured him—or he may have formed a better opinion of Cairn, from the fact that half-a-crown had quickly changed hands.

"All right, sir," he said, "it is no affair of mine; he did not charge you with anything—he only asked me to prevent you from following him."

"Quite so," snapped Cairn irritably, and dashed off along the gallery in the hope of overtaking Ferrara.

But, as he had feared, Ferrara had made good use of his ruse to escape. He was nowhere to be seen; and Cairn was left to wonder with what object he had risked the encounter in the Egyptian Room—for that it had been deliberate, and not accidental, he quite clearly perceived.

He walked down the steps of the Museum, deep in reflection. The thought that he and his father for months had been seeking the fiend Ferrara, that they were sworn to kill him as they would kill a mad dog; and that he, Robert Cairn, had stood face to face with Ferrara, had spoken with him; and had let him go free, unscathed, was maddening. Yet, in the circumstances, how could he have acted otherwise?

With no recollection of having traversed the intervening streets, he found himself walking under the archway leading to the court in which his chambers were situated; in the far corner, shadowed by the tall plane tree, where the worn iron railings of the steps and the small panes of glass in the solicitor's window on the ground floor called up memories of Charles Dickens, he paused, filled with a sort of wonderment. It seemed strange to him that such an air of peace could prevail, anywhere, whilst Antony Ferrara lived and remained at large.

He ran up the stairs to the second landing, opened the door, and entered his chambers. He was oppressed to-day with a memory, the memory of certain

gruesome happenings whereof these rooms had been the scene. Knowing the powers of Antony Ferrara he often doubted the wisdom of living there alone, but he was persuaded that to allow these fears to make headway, would be to yield a point to the enemy. Yet there were nights when he found himself sleepless, listening for sounds which had seemed to arouse him; imagining sinister whispers in his room—and imagining that he could detect the dreadful odour of the secret incense.

Seating himself by the open window, he took out from his pocket the silken cord which Ferrara had dropped in the Museum, and examined it curiously. His examination of the thing did not serve to enlighten him respecting its character. It was merely a piece of silken cord, very closely and curiously plaited. He threw it down on the table, determined to show it to Dr. Cairn at the earliest opportunity. He was conscious of a sort of repugnance; and prompted by this, he carefully washed his hands as though the cord had been some unclean thing. Then, he sat down to work, only to realise immediately, that work was impossible until he had confided in somebody his encounter with Ferrara.

Lifting the telephone receiver, he called up Dr. Cairn, but his father was not at home.

He replaced the receiver, and sat staring vaguely at his open notebook.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE IVORY HAND

For close upon an hour Robert Cairn sat at his writing-table, endeavouring to puzzle out a solution to the mystery of Ferrara's motive. His reflections served only to confuse his mind.

A tangible clue lay upon the table before him—the silken cord. But it was a clue of such a nature that, whatever deductions an expert detective might have based upon

it, Robert Cairn could base none. Dusk was not far off, and he knew that his nerves were not what they had been before those events which had led to his Egyptian journey. He was back in his own chamber—scene of one gruesome outrage in Ferrara's unholy campaign; for darkness is the ally of crime, and it had always been in the darkness that Ferrara's activities had most fearfully manifested themselves.

What was that?

Cairn ran to the window, and, leaning out, looked down into the court below. He could have sworn that a voice—a voice possessing a strange music, a husky music, wholly hateful—had called him by name. But at the moment the court was deserted, for it was already past the hour at which members of the legal fraternity desert their business premises to hasten homewards. Shadows were creeping under the quaint old archways; shadows were draping the ancient walls. And there was something in the aspect of the place which reminded him of a quadrangle at Oxford, across which, upon a certain fateful evening, he and another had watched the red light rising and falling in Antony Ferrara's rooms.

Clearly his imagination was playing him tricks; and against this he knew full well that he must guard himself. The light in his rooms was growing dim, but instinctively his gaze sought out and found the mysterious silken cord amid the litter on the table. He contemplated the telephone, but since he had left a message for his father, he knew that the latter would ring him up directly he returned.

Work, he thought, should be the likeliest antidote to the poisonous thoughts which oppressed his mind, and again he seated himself at the table and opened his notes before him. The silken rope lay close to his left hand, but he did not touch it. He was about to switch on the reading lamp, for it was now too dark to write, when his mind wandered off along another channel of reflection. He found himself picturing Myra as she had looked the last time that he had seen her.

She was seated in Mr. Saunderson's garden, still pale from her dreadful illness, but

beautiful—more beautiful in the eyes of Robert Cairn than any other woman in the world. The breeze was blowing her rebellious curls across her eyes—eyes bright with a happiness which he loved to see.

Her cheeks were paler than they were wont to be, and the sweet lips had lost something of their firmness. She wore a short cloak, and a wide-brimmed hat, unfashionable, but becoming. No one but Myra could successfully have worn that hat, he thought.

Wrapt in such lover-like memories, he forgot that he had sat down to write—forgot that he held a pen in his hand—and that this same hand had been outstretched to ignite the lamp.

When he ultimately awoke again to the hard facts of his lonely environment, he also awoke to a singular circumstance; he made the acquaintance of a strange phenomenon.

He had been writing unconsciously!

And this was what he had written:

"Robert Cairn—renounce your pursuit of me, and renounce Myra; or to-night—" The sentence was unfinished.

Momentarily, he stared at the words, endeavouring to persuade himself that he had written them consciously, in idle mood. But some voice within gave him the lie; so that with a suppressed groan he muttered aloud:

"It has begun!"

Almost as he spoke there came a sound, from the passage outside, that led him to slide his hand across the table—and to seize his revolver.

The visible presence of the little weapon reassured him; and, as a further sedative, he resorted to tobacco, filled and lighted his pipe, and leant back in the chair, blowing smoke rings towards the closed door.

He listened intently—and heard the sound again.

It was a soft hiss!

And now, he thought he could detect another noise—as of some creature dragging its body along the floor.

"A lizard!" he thought; and a memory of the basilisk eyes of Antony Ferrara came to him.

Both the sounds seemed to come slowly nearer and nearer—the dragging thing being evidently responsible for the hissing; until Cairn decided that the creature must be immediately outside the door.

Revolver in hand, he leapt across the room, and threw the door open.

The red carpet, to right and left, was innocent of reptiles!

Perhaps the creaking of the revolving chair, as he had prepared to quit it, had frightened the thing. With the idea before him, he systematically searched all the rooms into which it might have gone.

His search was unavailing; the mysterious reptile was not to be found.

Returning again to the study he seated himself behind the table, facing the door—which he left ajar.

Ten minutes passed in silence—only broken by the dim murmur of the distant traffic.

He had almost persuaded himself that his imagination—quickened by the atmosphere of mystery and horror wherein he had recently moved—was responsible for the hiss, when a new sound came to confute his reasoning.

The people occupying the chambers below were moving about so that their footsteps were faintly audible; but, above these dim footsteps, a rustling—vague, indefinite, demonstrated itself. As in the case of the hiss, it proceeded from the passage.

A light burnt inside the outer door, and this, as Cairn knew, must cast a shadow

before any thing—or person—approaching the room.

Sssf! ssf!—came, like the rustle of light draperies.

The nervous suspense was almost unbearable. He waited.

What was creeping, slowly, cautiously, towards the open door?

Cairn toyed with the trigger of his revolver.

"The arts of the West shall try conclusions with those of the East," he said.

A shadow!...

Inch upon inch it grew—creeping across the door, until it covered all the threshold visible.

Someone was about to appear.

He raised the revolver.

The shadow moved along.

Cairn saw the tail of it creep past the door, until no shadow was there!

The shadow had come—and gone ... but there was no substance!

"I am going mad!"

The words forced themselves to his lips. He rested his chin upon his hands and clenched his teeth grimly. Did the horrors of insanity stare him in the face!

From that recent illness in London—when his nervous system had collapsed, utterly—despite his stay in Egypt he had never fully recovered. "A month will see you fit again," his father had said; but?—perhaps he had been wrong—perchance the affection had been deeper than he had suspected; and now this endless carnival of supernatural happenings had strained the weakened cells, so that he was become as a man in a delirium!

Where did reality end and phantasy begin? Was it all merely subjective?

He had read of such aberrations.

And now he sat wondering if he were the victim of a like affliction—and while he wondered he stared at the rope of silk. That was real.

Logic came to his rescue. If he had seen and heard strange things, so, too, had Sime in Egypt—so had his father, both in Egypt and in London! Inexplicable things were happening around him; and all could not be mad!

"I'm getting morbid again," he told himself; "the tricks of our damnable Ferrara are getting on my nerves. Just what he desires and intends!"

This latter reflection spurred him to new activity; and, pocketing the revolver, he switched off the light in the study and looked out of the window.

Glancing across the court, he thought that he saw a man standing below, peering upward. With his hands resting upon the window ledge, Cairn looked long and steadily.

There certainly was someone standing in the shadow of the tall plane tree—but whether man or woman he could not determine.

The unknown remaining in the same position, apparently watching, Cairn ran downstairs, and, passing out into the Court, walked rapidly across to the tree. There he paused in some surprise; there was no one visible by the tree and the whole court was quite deserted.

"Must have slipped off through the archway," he concluded; and, walking back, he remounted the stair and entered his chambers again.

Feeling a renewed curiosity regarding the silken rope which had so strangely come into his possession, he sat down at the table, and mastering his distaste for the thing, took it in his hands and examined it closely by the light of the lamp.

He was seated with his back to the windows, facing the door, so that no one could possibly have entered the room unseen by him. It was as he bent down to scrutinise the curious plaiting, that he felt a sensation stealing over him, as though someone

were standing very close to his chair.

Grimly determined to resist any hypnotic tricks that might be practised against him, and well assured that there could be no person actually present in the chambers, he sat back, resting his revolver on his knee. Prompted by he knew not what, he slipped the silk cord into the table drawer and turned the key upon it.

As he did so a hand crept over his shoulder—followed by a bare arm of the hue of old ivory—a woman's arm!

Transfixed he sat, his eyes fastened upon the ring of dull metal, bearing a green stone inscribed with a complex figure vaguely resembling a spider, which adorned the index finger.

A faint perfume stole to his nostrils—that of the secret incense; and the ring was the ring of the Witch-Queen!

In this incredible moment he relaxed that iron control of his mind, which, alone, had saved him before. Even as he realised it, and strove to recover himself, he knew that it was too late; he knew that he was lost!

Gloom ... blackness, unrelieved by any speck of light; murmuring, subdued, all around; the murmuring of a concourse of people. The darkness was odorous with a heavy perfume.

A voice came—followed by complete silence.

Again the voice sounded, chanting sweetly.

A response followed in deep male voices.

The response was taken up all around—what time a tiny speck grew, in the gloom—and grew, until it took form; and out of the darkness, the shape of a white-robed woman appeared—high up—far away.

Wherever the ray that illumined her figure emanated from, it did not perceptibly dispel the Stygian gloom all about her. She was bathed in dazzling light, but framed

in impenetrable darkness.

Her dull gold hair was encircled by a band of white metal—like silver, bearing in front a round, burnished disk, that shone like a minor sun. Above the disk projected an ornament having the shape of a spider.

The intense light picked out every detail vividly. Neck and shoulders were bare—and the gleaming ivory arms were uplifted—the long slender fingers held aloft a golden casket covered with dim figures, almost undiscernible at that distance.

A glittering zone of the same white metal confined the snowy draperies. Her bare feet peeped out from beneath the flowing robe.

Above, below, and around her was—Memphian darkness!

Silence—the perfume was stifling.... A voice, seeming to come from a great distance, cried:—"On your knees to the Book of Thoth! on your knees to the Wisdom Queen, who is deathless, being unborn, who is dead though living, whose beauty is for all men—that all men may die...."

The whole invisible concourse took up the chant, and the light faded, until only the speck on the disk below the spider was visible.

Then that, too, vanished.

A bell was ringing furiously. Its din grew louder and louder; it became insupportable. Cairn threw out his arms and staggered up like a man intoxicated. He grasped at the table-lamp only just in time to prevent it overturning.

The ringing was that of his telephone bell. He had been unconscious, then—under some spell!

He unhooked the receiver—and heard his father's voice.

"That you, Rob?" asked the doctor anxiously.

"Yes, sir," replied Cairn, eagerly, and he opened the drawer and slid his hand in for the silken cord.

"There is something you have to tell me?"

Cairn, without preamble, plunged excitedly into an account of his meeting with Ferrara. "The silk cord," he concluded, "I have in my hand at the present moment, and—"

"Hold on a moment!" came Dr. Cairn's voice, rather grimly.

Followed a short interval; then—

"Hullo, Rob! Listen to this, from to-night's paper: 'A curious discovery was made by an attendant in one of the rooms, of the Indian Section of the British Museum late this evening. A case had been opened in some way, and, although it contained more valuable objects, the only item which the thief had abstracted was a Thug's strangling-cord from Kundélee (district of Nursingpore).'"

"But, I don't understand—"

"Ferrara meant you to find that cord, boy! Remember, he is unacquainted with your chambers and he requires a focus for his damnable forces! He knows well that you will have the thing somewhere near to you, and probably he knows something of its awful history! You are in danger! Keep a fast hold upon yourself. I shall be with you in less than half-an-hour!"

CHAPTER XXVII

THE THUG'S CORD

As Robert Cairn hung up the receiver and found himself cut off again from the outer world, he realised, with terror beyond his control, how in this quiet backwater, so near to the main stream, he yet was far from human companionship.

He recalled a night when, amid such a silence as this which now prevailed about him, he had been made the subject of an uncanny demonstration; how his sanity, his life, had been attacked; how he had fled from the crowding horrors which had been

massed against him by his supernaturally endowed enemy.

There was something very terrifying in the quietude of the court—a quietude which to others might have spelt peace, but which, to Robert Cairn, spelled menace. That Ferrara's device was aimed at his freedom, that his design was intended to lead to the detention of his enemy whilst he directed his activities in other directions, seemed plausible, if inadequate. The carefully planned incident at the Museum whereby the constable had become possessed of Cairn's card; the distinct possibility that a detective might knock upon his door at any moment—with the inevitable result of his detention pending inquiries—formed a chain which had seemed complete, save that Antony Ferrara, was the schemer. For another to have compassed so much, would have been a notable victory; for Ferrara, such a victory would be trivial.

What then, did it mean? His father had told him, and the uncanny events of the evening stood evidence of Dr. Cairn's wisdom. The mysterious and evil force which Antony Ferrara controlled was being focussed upon him!

Slight sounds from time to time disturbed the silence and to these he listened attentively. He longed for the arrival of his father—for the strong, calm counsel of the one man in England fitted to cope with the Hell Thing which had uprisen in their midst. That he had already been subjected to some kind of hypnotic influence, he was unable to doubt; and having once been subjected to this influence, he might at any moment (it Was a terrible reflection) fall a victim to it again.

Cairn directed all the energies of his mind to resistance; ill-defined reflection must at all costs be avoided, for the brain vaguely employed he knew to be more susceptible to attack than that directed in a well-ordered channel.

Clocks were chiming the hour—he did not know what hour, nor did he seek to learn. He felt that he was at rapier play with a skilled antagonist, and that to glance aside, however momentarily, was to lay himself open to a fatal thrust.

He had not moved from the table, so that only the reading lamp upon it was lighted,

and much of the room lay in half shadow. The silken cord, coiled snake-like, was close to his left hand; the revolver was close to his right. The muffled roar of traffic—diminished, since the hour grew late—reached his ears as he sat. But nothing disturbed the stillness of the court, and nothing disturbed the stillness of the room.

The notes which he had made in the afternoon at the Museum, were still spread open before him, and he suddenly closed the book, fearful of anything calculated to distract him from the mood of tense resistance. His life, and more than his life, depended upon his successfully opposing the insidious forces which beyond doubt, invisibly surrounded that lighted table.

There is a courage which is not physical, nor is it entirely moral; a courage often lacking in the most intrepid soldier. And this was the kind of courage which Robert Cairn now called up to his aid. The occult inquirer can face, unmoved, horrors which would turn the brain of many a man who wears the V.C.; on the other hand it is questionable if the possessor of this peculiar type of bravery could face a bayonet charge. Pluck of the physical sort, Cairn had in plenty; pluck of that more subtle kind he was acquiring from growing intimacy with the terrors of the Borderland.

"Who's there?"

He spoke the words aloud, and the eerie sound of his own voice added a new dread to the enveloping shadows.

His revolver grasped in his hand, he stood up, but slowly and cautiously, in order that his own movements might not prevent him from hearing any repetition of that which had occasioned his alarm. And what had occasioned this alarm?

Either he was become again a victim of the strange trickery which already had borne him, though not physically, from Fleet Street to the secret temple of Méydûm, or with his material senses he had detected a soft rapping upon the door of his room.

He knew that his outer door was closed; he knew that there was no one else in his

chambers; yet he had heard a sound as of knuckles beating upon the panels of the door—the closed door of the room in which he sat!

Standing upright, he turned deliberately, and faced in that direction.

The light pouring out from beneath the shade of the table-lamp scarcely touched upon the door at all. Only the edges of the lower panels were clearly perceptible; the upper part of the door was masked in greenish shadow.

Intent, tensely strung, he stood; then advanced in the direction of the switch in order to light the lamp fixed above the mantel-piece and to illuminate the whole of the room. One step forward he took, then ... the soft rapping was repeated.

"Who's there?"

This time he cried the words loudly, and acquired some new assurance from the imperative note in his own voice. He ran to the switch and pressed it down. The lamp did not light!

"The filament has burnt out," he muttered.

Terror grew upon him—a terror akin to that which children experience in the darkness. But he yet had a fair mastery of his emotions; when—not suddenly, as is the way of a failing electric lamp—but slowly, uncannily, unnaturally, the table-lamp became extinguished!

Darkness.... Cairn turned towards the window. This was a moonless night, and little enough illumination entered the room from the court.

Three resounding raps were struck upon the door.

At that, terror had no darker meaning for Cairn; he had plumbed its ultimate deeps; and now, like a diver, he arose again to the surface.

Heedless of the darkness, of the seemingly supernatural means by which it had been occasioned, he threw open the door and thrust his revolver out into the corridor.

For terrors, he had been prepared—for some gruesome shape such as we read of in

The Magus. But there was nothing. Instinctively he had looked straight ahead of him, as one looks who expects to encounter a human enemy. But the hall-way was empty. A dim light, finding access over the door from the stair, prevailed there, yet, it was sufficient to have revealed the presence of anyone or anything, had anyone or anything been present.

Cairn stepped out from the room and was about to walk to the outer door. The idea of flight was strong upon him, for no man can fight the invisible; when, on a level with his eyes—flat against the wall, as though someone crouched there—he saw two white hands!

They were slim hands, like the hands of a woman, and, upon one of the tapered fingers, there dully gleamed a green stone.

A peal of laughter came chokingly from his lips; he knew that his reason was tottering. For these two white hands which now moved along the wall, as though they were sidling to the room which Cairn had just quitted, were attached to no visible body; just two ivory hands were there ... and nothing more!

That he was in deadly peril, Cairn realised fully. His complete subjection by the will-force of Ferrara had been interrupted by the ringing of the telephone bell But now, the attack had been renewed!

The hands vanished.

Too well he remembered the ghastly details attendant upon the death of Sir Michael Ferrara to doubt that these slim hands were directed upon murderous business.

A soft swishing sound reached him. Something upon the writing-table had been moved.

The strangling cord!

Whilst speaking to his father he had taken it out from the drawer, and when he quitted the room it had lain upon the blotting-pad.

He stepped back towards the outer door.

Something fluttered past his face, and he turned in a mad panic. The dreadful, bodiless hands groped in the darkness between himself and the exit!

Vaguely it came home to him that the menace might be avoidable. He was bathed in icy perspiration.

He dropped the revolver into his pocket, and placed his hands upon his throat. Then he began to grope his way towards the closed door of his bedroom.

Lowering his left hand, he began to feel for the doorknob. As he did so, he saw—and knew the crowning horror of the night—that he had made a false move. In retiring he had thrown away his last, his only, chance.

The phantom hands, a yard apart and holding the silken cord stretched tightly between them, were approaching him swiftly!

He lowered his head, and charged along the passage, with a wild cry.

The cord, stretched taut, struck him under the chin.

Back he reeled.

The cord was about his throat!

"God!" he choked, and thrust up his hands.

Madly, he strove to pluck the deadly silken thing from his neck. It was useless. A grip of steel was drawing it tightly—and ever more tightly—about him....

Despair touched him, and almost he resigned himself. Then,

"Rob! Rob! open the door!"

Dr. Cairn was outside.

A new strength came—and he knew that it was the last atom left to him. To remove the rope was humanly impossible. He dropped his cramped hands, bent his body by a mighty physical effort, and hurled himself forward upon the door.

The latch, now, was just above his head.

He stretched up ... and was plucked back. But the fingers of his right hand grasped the knob convulsively.

Even as that superhuman force jerked him back, he turned the knob—and fell.

All his weight hung upon the fingers which were locked about that brass disk in a grip which even the powers of Darkness could not relax.

The door swung open, and Cairn swung back with it.

He collapsed, an inert heap, upon the floor. Dr. Cairn leapt in over him.

When he reopened his eyes, he lay in bed, and his father was bathing his inflamed throat.

"All right, boy! There's no damage done, thank God...."

"The hands!—"

"I quite understand. But I saw no hands but your own, Rob; and if it had come to an inquest I could not even have raised my voice against a verdict of suicide!"

"But I—opened the door!"

"They would have said that you repented your awful act, too late. Although it is almost impossible for a man to strangle himself under such conditions, there is no jury in England who would have believed that Antony Ferrara had done the deed."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE HIGH PRIEST, HORTOTEF

The breakfast-room of Dr. Cairn's house in Half-Moon Street presented a cheery appearance, and this despite the gloom of the morning; for thunderous clouds hung low in the sky, and there were distant mutterings ominous of a brewing storm.

Robert Cairn stood looking out of the window. He was thinking of an afternoon at

Oxford, when, to such an accompaniment as this, he had witnessed the first scene in the drama of evil wherein the man called Antony Ferrara sustained the leading rôle.

That the denouément was at any moment to be anticipated, his reason told him; and some instinct that was not of his reason forewarned him, too, that he and his father, Dr. Cairn, were now upon the eve of that final, decisive struggle which should determine the triumph of good over evil—or of evil over good. Already the doctor's house was invested by the uncanny forces marshalled by Antony Ferrara against them. The distinguished patients, who daily flocked to the consulting-room of the celebrated specialist, who witnessed his perfect self-possession and took comfort from his confidence, knowing it for the confidence of strength, little suspected that a greater ill than any flesh is heir to, assailed the doctor to whom they came for healing.

A menace, dreadful and unnatural, hung over that home as now the thunder clouds hung over it. This well-ordered household, so modern, so typical of twentieth century culture and refinement, presented none of the appearances of a beleaguered garrison; yet the house of Dr. Cairn in Half-Moon Street, was nothing less than an invested fortress.

A peal of distant thunder boomed from the direction of Hyde Park. Robert Cairn looked up at the lowering sky as if seeking a portent. To his eyes it seemed that a livid face, malignant with the malignancy of a devil, looked down out of the clouds.

Myra Duquesne came into the breakfast-room.

He turned to greet her, and, in his capacity of accepted lover, was about to kiss the tempting lips, when he hesitated—and contented himself with kissing her hand. A sudden sense of the proprieties had assailed him; he reflected that the presence of the girl beneath the same roof as himself—although dictated by imperative need—might be open to misconstruction by the prudish. Dr. Cairn had decided that for the present Myra Duquesne must dwell beneath his own roof, as, in feudal days, the Baron at

first hint of an approaching enemy formerly was, accustomed to call within the walls of the castle, those whom it was his duty to protect. Unknown to the world, a tremendous battle raged in London, the outer works were in the possession of the enemy—and he was now before their very gates.

Myra, though still pale from her recent illness, already was recovering some of the freshness of her beauty, and in her simple morning dress, as she busied herself about the breakfast table, she was a sweet picture enough, and good to look upon. Robert Cairn stood beside her, looking into her eyes, and she smiled up at him with a happy contentment, which filled him with a new longing. But:

"Did you dream again, last night?" he asked, in a voice which he strove to make matter-of-fact.

Myra nodded—and her face momentarily clouded over.

"The same dream?"

"Yes," she said in a troubled way; "at least—in some respects—"

Dr. Cairn came in, glancing at his watch.

"Good morning!" he cried, cheerily. "I have actually overslept myself."

They took their seats at the table.

"Myra has been dreaming again, sir," said Robert Cairn slowly.

The doctor, serviette in hand, glanced up with an inquiry in his grey eyes.

"We must not overlook any possible weapon," he replied. "Give us particulars of your dream, Myra."

As Marston entered silently with the morning fare, and, having placed the dishes upon the table, as silently withdrew, Myra began:

"I seemed to stand again in the barn-like building which I have described to you before. Through the rafters of the roof I could see the cracks in the tiling, and the moonlight shone through, forming light and irregular patches upon the floor. A sort

of door, like that of a stable, with a heavy bar across, was dimly perceptible at the further end of the place. The only furniture was a large deal table and a wooden chair of a very common kind. Upon the table, stood a lamp—"

"What kind of lamp?" jerked Dr. Cairn.

"A silver lamp"—she hesitated, looking from Robert to his father—"one that I have seen in—Antony's rooms. Its shaded light shone upon a closed iron box. I immediately recognised this box. You know that I described to you a dream which—terrified me on the previous night?"

Dr. Cairn nodded, frowning darkly.

"Repeat your account of the former dream," he said. "I regard it as important."

"In my former dream," the girl resumed—and her voice had an odd, far-away quality—"the scene was the same, except that the light of the lamp was shining down upon the leaves of an open book—a very, very old book, written in strange characters. These characters appeared to dance before my eyes—almost as though they lived."

She shuddered slightly; then:

"The same iron box, but open, stood upon the table, and a number of other, smaller, boxes, around it. Each of these boxes was of a different material. Some were wooden; one, I think, was of ivory; one was of silver—and one, of some dull metal, which might have been gold. In the chair, by the table, Antony was sitting. His eyes were fixed upon me, with such a strange expression that I awoke, trembling frightfully—"

Dr. Cairn nodded again.

"And last night?" he prompted.

"Last night," continued Myra, with a note of trouble in her sweet voice—"at four points around this table, stood four smaller lamps and upon the floor were rows of

characters apparently traced in luminous paint. They flickered up and then grew dim, then flickered up again, in a sort of phosphorescent way. They extended from lamp to lamp, so as entirely to surround the table and the chair.

"In the chair Antony Ferrara was sitting. He held a wand in his right hand—a wand with several copper rings about it; his left hand rested upon the iron box. In my dream, although I could see this all very clearly, I seemed to see it from a distance; yet, at the same time, I stood apparently close by the tables—I cannot explain. But I could hear nothing; only by the movements of his lips, could I tell that he was speaking—or chanting."

She looked across at Dr. Cairn as if fearful to proceed, but presently continued:

"Suddenly, I saw a frightful shape appear on the far side of the circle; that is to say, the table was between me and this shape. It was just like a grey cloud having the vague outlines of a man, but with two eyes of red fire glaring out from it—horribly—oh! horribly! It extended its shadowy arms as if saluting Antony. He turned and seemed to question it. Then with a look of ferocious anger—oh! it was frightful! he dismissed the shape, and began to walk up and down beside the table, but never beyond the lighted circle, shaking his fists in the air, and, to judge by the movements of his lips, uttering most awful imprecations. He looked gaunt and ill. I dreamt no more, but awoke conscious of a sensation as though some dead weight, which had been pressing upon me had been suddenly removed."

Dr. Cairn glanced across at his son significantly, but the subject was not renewed throughout breakfast.

Breakfast concluded:

"Come into the library, Rob," said Dr. Cairn, "I have half-an-hour to spare, and there are some matters to be discussed."

He led the way into the library with its orderly rows of obscure works, its store of forgotten wisdom, and pointed to the red leathern armchair. As Robert Cairn seated

himself and looked across at his father, who sat at the big writing-table, that scene reminded him of many dangers met and overcome in the past; for the library at Half-Moon Street was associated in his mind with some of the blackest pages in the history of Antony Ferrara.

"Do you understand the position, Rob?" asked the doctor, abruptly.

"I think so, sir. This I take it is his last card; this outrageous, ungodly Thing which he has loosed upon us."

Dr. Cairn nodded grimly.

"The exact frontier," he said, "dividing what we may term hypnotism from what we know as sorcery, has yet to be determined; and to which territory the doctrine of Elemental Spirits belongs, it would be purposeless at the moment to discuss. We may note, however, remembering with whom we are dealing, that the one-hundred-and-eighth chapter of the Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead, is entitled 'The Chapter of Knowing the Spirits of the West.' Forgetting, pro tem., that we dwell in the twentieth century, and looking at the situation from the point of view, say, of Eliphas Lévi, Cornelius Agrippa, or the Abbé de Villars—the man whom we know as Antony Ferrara, is directing against this house, and those within it, a type of elemental spirit, known as a Salamander!"

Robert Cairn smiled slightly.

"Ah!" said the doctor, with an answering smile in which there was little mirth, "we are accustomed to laugh at this mediæval terminology; but by what other can we speak of the activities of Ferrara?"

"Sometimes I think that we are the victims of a common madness," said his son, raising his hand to his head in a manner almost pathetic.

"We are the victims of a common enemy," replied his father sternly. "He employs weapons which, often enough, in this enlightened age of ours, have condemned poor souls, as sane as you or I, to the madhouse! Why, in God's name," he cried with a

sudden excitement, "does science persistently ignore all those laws which cannot be examined in the laboratory! Will the day never come when some true man of science shall endeavour to explain the movements of a table upon which a ring of hands has been placed? Will no exact scientist condescend to examine the properties of a planchette? Will no one do for the phenomena termed thought-forms, what Newton did for that of the falling apple? Ah! Rob, in some respects, this is a darker age than those which bear the stigma of darkness."

Silence fell for a few moments between them; then:

"One thing is certain," said Robert Cairn, deliberately, "we are in danger!"

"In the greatest danger!"

"Antony Ferrara, realising that we are bent upon his destruction, is making a final, stupendous effort to compass ours. I know that you have placed certain seals upon the windows of this house, and that after dusk these windows are never opened. I know that imprints, strangely like the imprints of fiery hands, may be seen at this moment upon the casements of Myra's room, your room, my room, and elsewhere. I know that Myra's dreams are not ordinary, meaningless dreams. I have had other evidence. I don't want to analyse these things; I confess that my mind is not capable of the task. I do not even want to know the meaning of it all; at the present moment, I only want to know one thing: Who is Antony Ferrara?"

Dr. Cairn stood up, and turning, faced his son.

"The time has come," he said, "when that question, which you have asked me so many times before, shall be answered. I will tell you all I know, and leave you to form your own opinion. For ere we go any further, I assure you that I do not know for certain who he is!"

"You have said so before, sir. Will you explain what you mean?"

"When his adoptive father, Sir Michael Ferrara," resumed the doctor, beginning to pace up and down the library—"when Sir Michael and I were in Egypt, in the winter

of 1893, we conducted certain inquiries in the Fayûm. We camped for over three months beside the Méydûm Pyramid. The object of our inquiries was to discover the tomb of a certain queen. I will not trouble you with the details, which could be of no interest to anyone but an Egyptologist, I will merely say that apart from the name and titles by which she is known to the ordinary student, this queen is also known to certain inquirers as the Witch-Queen. She was not an Egyptian, but an Asiatic. In short, she was the last high priestess of a cult which became extinct at her death. Her secret mark—I am not referring to a cartouche or anything of that kind—was a spider; it was the mark of the religion or cult which she practised. The high priest of the principal Temple of Ra, during the reign of the Pharaoh who was this queen's husband, was one Hortotef. This was his official position, but secretly he was also the high-priest of the sinister creed to which I have referred. The temple of this religion—a religion allied to Black Magic—was the Pyramid of Méydûm.

"So much we knew—or Ferrara knew, and imparted to me—but for any corroborative evidence of this cult's existence we searched in vain. We explored the interior of the pyramid foot by foot, inch by inch—and found nothing. We knew that there was some other apartment in the pyramid, but in spite of our soundings, measurements and laborious excavations, we did not come upon the entrance to it. The tomb of the queen we failed to discover, also, and therefore concluded that her mummy was buried in the secret chamber of the pyramid. We had abandoned our quest in despair, when, excavating in one of the neighbouring mounds, we made a discovery."

He opened a box of cigars, selected one, and pushed the box towards his son. Robert shook his head, almost impatiently, but Dr. Cairn lighted the cigar ere resuming:

"Directed, as I now believe, by a malignant will, we blundered upon the tomb of the high priest—"

"You found his mummy?"

"We found his mummy—yes. But owing to the carelessness—and the fear—of the native labourers it was exposed to the sun and crumpled—was lost. I would a similar fate had attended the other one which we found!"

"What, another mummy?"

"We discovered"—Dr. Cairn spoke very deliberately—"a certain papyrus. The translation of this is contained"—he rested the point of his finger upon the writing-table—"in the unpublished book of Sir Michael Ferrara, which lies here. That book, Rob, will never be published now! Furthermore, we discovered the mummy of a child—"

"A child."

"A boy. Not daring to trust the natives, we removed it secretly at night to our own tent. Before we commenced the task of unwrapping it, Sir Michael—the most brilliant scholar of his age—had proceeded so far in deciphering the papyrus, that he determined to complete his reading before we proceeded further. It contained directions for performing a certain process. This process had reference to the mummy of the child."

"Do I understand—?"

"Already, you are discrediting the story! Ah! I can see it! but let me finish. Unaided, we performed this process upon the embalmed body of the child. Then, in accordance with the directions of that dead magician—that accursed, malignant being, who thus had sought to secure for himself a new tenure of evil life—we laid the mummy, treated in a certain fashion, in the King's Chamber of the Méydûm Pyramid. It remained there for thirty days; from moon to moon—"

"You guarded the entrance?"

"You may assume what you like, Rob; but I could swear before any jury, that no one entered the pyramid throughout that time. Yet since we were only human, we may have been deceived in this. I have only to add, that when at the rising of the new

moon in the ancient Sothic month of Panoi, we again entered the chamber, a living baby, some six months old, perfectly healthy, solemnly blinked up at the lights which we held in our trembling hands!"

Dr. Cairn reseated himself at the table, and turned the chair so that he faced his son. With the smouldering cigar between his teeth, he sat, a slight smile upon his lips.

Now it was Robert's turn to rise and begin feverishly to pace the floor.

"You mean, sir, that this infant—which lay in the pyramid—was—adopted by Sir Michael?"

"Was adopted, yes. Sir Michael engaged nurses for him, reared him here in England, educating him as an Englishman, sent him to a public school, sent him to—"

"To Oxford! Antony Ferrara! What! Do you seriously tell me that this is the history of Antony Ferrara?"

"On my word of honour, boy, that is all I know of Antony Ferrara. Is it not enough?"

"Merciful God! it is incredible," groaned Robert Cairn.

"From the time that he attained to manhood," said Dr. Cairn evenly, "this adopted son of my poor old friend has passed from crime to crime. By means which are beyond my comprehension, and which alone serve to confirm his supernatural origin, he has acquired—knowledge. According to the Ancient Egyptian beliefs the Khu (or magical powers) of a fully-equipped Adept, at the death of the body, could enter into anything prepared for its reception. According to these ancient beliefs, then, the Khu of the high priest Hortotef entered into the body of this infant who was his son, and whose mother was the Witch-Queen; and to-day in this modern London, a wizard of Ancient Egypt, armed with the lost lore of that magical land, walks amongst us! What that lore is worth, it would be profitless for us to discuss, but that he possesses it—all of it—I know, beyond doubt. The most ancient and most powerful magical book which has ever existed was the Book of Thoth."

He walked across to a distant shelf, selected a volume, opened it at a particular page, and placed it on his son's knees.

"Read there!" he said, pointing.

The words seemed to dance before the younger man's eyes, and this is what he read:

"To read two pages, enables you to enchant the heavens, the earth, the abyss, the mountains, and the sea; you shall know what the birds of the sky and the crawling things are saying ... and when the second page is read, if you are in the world of ghosts, you will grow again in the shape you were on earth...."

"Heavens!" whispered Robert Cairn, "is this the writing of a madman? or can such things possibly be!" He read on:

"This book is in the middle of the river at Koptos, in an iron box—"

"An iron box," he muttered—"an iron box."

"So you recognise the iron box?" jerked Dr. Cairn.

His son read on:

"In the iron box, is a bronze box; in the bronze box, is a sycamore box; in the sycamore box, is an ivory and ebony box; in the ivory and ebony box, is a silver box; in the silver box, is a golden box; and in that is the book. It is twisted all round with snakes, and scorpions, and all the other crawling things...."

"The man who holds the Book of Thoth," said Dr. Cairn, breaking the silence, "holds a power which should only belong to God. The creature who is known to the world as Antony Ferrara, holds that book—do you doubt it?—therefore you know now, as I have known long enough, with what manner of enemy we are fighting. You know that, this time, it is a fight to the death—"

He stopped abruptly, staring out of the window.

A man with a large photographic camera, standing upon the opposite pavement, was busily engaged in focussing the house!

"What is this?" muttered Robert Cairn, also stepping to the window.

"It is a link between sorcery and science!" replied the doctor. "You remember Ferrara's photographic gallery at Oxford?—the Zenana, you used to call it!—You remember having seen in his collection photographs of persons who afterwards came to violent ends?"

"I begin to understand!"

"Thus far, his endeavours to concentrate the whole of the evil forces at his command upon this house have had but poor results: having merely caused Myra to dream strange dreams—clairvoyant dreams, instructive dreams, more useful to us than to the enemy; and having resulted in certain marks upon the outside of the house adjoining the windows—windows which I have sealed in a particular manner. You understand?"

"By means of photographs he—concentrates, in some way, malignant forces upon certain points—"

"He focusses his will—yes! The man who can really control his will, Rob, is supreme, below the Godhead. Ferrara can almost do this now. Before he has become wholly proficient—"

"I understand, sir," snapped his son grimly.

"He is barely of age, boy," Dr. Cairn said, almost in a whisper. "In another year, he would menace the world. Where are you going?"

He grasped his son's arm as Robert started for the door.

"That man yonder—"

"Diplomacy, Rob!—Guile against guile. Let the man do his work, which he does in all innocence; then follow him. Learn where his studio is situated, and, from that point, proceed to learn—"

"The situation of Ferrara's hiding-place?" cried his son, excitedly. "I understand! Of

course; you are right, sir."

"I will leave the inquiry in your hands, Rob. Unfortunately other duties call me."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE WIZARD'S DEN

Robert Cairn entered a photographer's shop in Baker Street.

"You recently arranged to do views of some houses in the West End for a gentleman?" he said to the girl in charge.

"That is so," she replied, after a moment's hesitation. "We did pictures of the house of some celebrated specialist—for a magazine article they were intended. Do you wish us to do something similar?"

"Not at the moment," replied Robert Cairn, smiling slightly. "I merely want the address of your client."

"I do not know that I can give you that," replied the girl doubtfully, "but he will be here about eleven o'clock for proofs, if you wish to see him."

"I wonder if I can confide in you," said Robert Cairn, looking the girl frankly in the eyes.

She seemed rather confused.

"I hope there is nothing wrong," she murmured.

"You have nothing to fear," he replied, "but unfortunately there is something wrong, which, however, I cannot explain. Will you promise me not to tell your client—I do not ask his name—that I have been here, or have been making any inquiries respecting him?"

"I think I can promise that," she replied.

"I am much indebted to you."

Robert Cairn hastily left the shop, and began to look about him for a likely hiding-place from whence, unobserved, he might watch the photographer's. An antique furniture dealer's, some little distance along on the opposite side, attracted his attention. He glanced at his watch. It was half-past ten.

If, upon the pretence of examining some of the stock, he could linger in the furniture shop for half-an-hour, he would be enabled to get upon the track of Ferrara!

His mind made up, he walked along and entered the shop. For the next half-an-hour, he passed from item to item of the collection displayed there, surveying each in the leisurely manner of a connoisseur; but always he kept a watch, through the window, upon the photographer's establishment beyond.

Promptly at eleven o'clock a taxi cab drew up at the door, and from it a slim man alighted. He wore, despite the heat of the morning, an overcoat of some woolly material; and in his gait, as he crossed the pavement to enter the shop, there was something revoltingly effeminate; a sort of cat-like grace which had been noticeable in a woman, but which in a man was unnatural, and for some obscure reason, sinister.

It was Antony Ferrara!

Even at that distance and in that brief time, Robert Cairn could see the ivory face, the abnormal, red lips, and the long black eyes of this arch fiend, this monster masquerading as a man. He had much ado to restrain his rising passion; but, knowing that all depended upon his cool action, he waited until Ferrara had entered the photographer's. With a word of apology to the furniture dealer, he passed quickly into Baker Street. Everything rested, now, upon his securing a cab before Ferrara came out again. Ferrara's cabman, evidently, was waiting for him.

A taxi driver fortunately hailed Cairn at the very moment that he gained the pavement; and Cairn, concealing himself behind the vehicle, gave the man rapid instructions:

"You see that taxi outside the photographer's?" he said.

The man nodded.

"Wait until someone comes out of the shop and is driven off in it; then follow. Do not lose sight of the cab for a moment. When it draws up, and wherever it draws up, drive right past it. Don't attract attention by stopping. You understand?"

"Quite, sir," said the man, smiling slightly. And Cairn entered the cab.

The cabman drew up at a point some little distance beyond, from whence he could watch. Two minutes later Ferrara came out and was driven off. The pursuit commenced.

His cab, ahead, proceeded to Westminster Bridge, across to the south side of the river, and by way of that commercial thoroughfare at the back of St. Thomas' Hospital, emerged at Vauxhall. Thence the pursuit led to Stockwell, Herne Hill, and yet onward towards Dulwich.

It suddenly occurred to Robert Cairn that Ferrara was making in the direction of Mr. Saunderson's house at Dulwich Common; the house in which Myra had had her mysterious illness, in which she had remained until it had become evident that her safety depended upon her never being left alone for one moment.

"What can be his object?" muttered Cairn.

He wondered if Ferrara, for some inscrutable reason, was about to call upon Mr. Saunderson. But when the cab ahead, having passed the park, continued on past the lane in which the house was situated, he began to search for some other solution to the problem of Ferrara's destination.

Suddenly he saw that the cab ahead had stopped. The driver of his own cab without slackening speed, pursued his way. Cairn crouched down upon the floor, fearful of being observed. No house was visible to right nor left, merely open fields; and he knew that it would be impossible for him to delay in such a spot without attracting

attention.

Ferrara's cab passed:

"Keep on till I tell you to stop!" cried Cairn.

He dropped the speaking-tube, and, turning, looked out through the little window at the back.

Ferrara had dismissed his cab; he saw him entering a gate and crossing a field on the right of the road. Cairn turned again and took up the tube.

"Stop at the first house we come to!" he directed. "Hurry!"

Presently a deserted-looking building was reached, a large straggling house which obviously had no tenant. Here the man pulled up and Cairn leapt out. As he did so, he heard Ferrara's cab driving back by the way it had come.

"Here," he said, and gave the man half a sovereign, "wait for me."

He started back along the road at a run. Even had he suspected that he was followed, Ferrara could not have seen him. But when Cairn came up level with the gate through which Ferrara had gone, he slowed down and crept cautiously forward.

Ferrara, who by this time had reached the other side of the field, was in the act of entering a barn-like building which evidently at some time had formed a portion of a farm. As the distant figure, opening one of the big doors, disappeared within:

"The place of which Myra has been dreaming!" muttered Cairn.

Certainly, viewed from that point, it seemed to answer, externally, to the girl's description. The roof was of moss-grown red tiles, and Cairn could imagine how the moonlight would readily find access through the chinks which beyond doubt existed in the weather-worn structure. He had little doubt that this was the place dreamt of, or seen clairvoyantly, by Myra, that this was the place to which Ferrara had retreated in order to conduct his nefarious operations.

It was eminently suited to the purpose, being entirely surrounded by unoccupied

land. For what ostensible purpose Ferrara has leased it, he could not conjecture, nor did he concern himself with the matter. The purpose for which actually he had leased the place was sufficiently evident to the man who had suffered so much at the hands of this modern sorcerer.

To approach closer would have been indiscreet; this he knew; and he was sufficiently diplomatic to resist the temptation to obtain a nearer view of the place. He knew that everything depended upon secrecy. Antony Ferrara must not suspect that his black laboratory was known. Cairn decided to return to Half-Moon Street without delay, fully satisfied with the result of his investigation.

He walked rapidly back to where the cab waited, gave the man his father's address, and, in three-quarters of an hour, was back in Half-Moon Street.

Dr. Cairn had not yet dismissed the last of his patients; Myra, accompanied by Miss Saunderson, was out shopping; and Robert found himself compelled to possess his soul in patience. He paced restlessly up and down the library, sometimes taking a book at random, scanning its pages with unseeing eyes, and replacing it without having formed the slightest impression of its contents. He tried to smoke; but his pipe was constantly going out, and he had littered the hearth untidily with burnt matches, when Dr. Cairn suddenly opened the library door, and entered.

"Well?" he said eagerly.

Robert Cairn leapt forward.

"I have tracked him, sir!" he cried. "My God! while Myra was at Saunderson's, she was almost next door to the beast! His den is in a field no more than a thousand yards from the garden wall—from Saunderson's orchid-houses!"

"He is daring," muttered Dr. Cairn, "but his selection of that site served two purposes. The spot was suitable in many ways; and we were least likely to look for him next-door, as it were. It was a move characteristic of the accomplished criminal."

Robert Cairn nodded.

"It is the place of which Myra dreamt, sir. I have not the slightest doubt about that. What we have to find out is at what times of the day and night he goes there—"

"I doubt," interrupted Dr. Cairn, "if he often visits the place during the day. As you know, he has abandoned his rooms in Piccadilly, but I have no doubt, knowing his sybaritic habits, that he has some other palatial place in town. I have been making inquiries in several directions, especially in—certain directions—"

He paused, raising his eyebrows, significantly.

"Additions to the Zenana!" inquired Robert.

Dr. Cairn nodded his head grimly.

"Exactly," he replied. "There is not a scrap of evidence upon which, legally, he could be convicted; but since his return from Egypt, Rob, he has added other victims to the list!"

"The fiend!" cried the younger man, "the unnatural fiend!"

"Unnatural is the word; he is literally unnatural; but many women find him irresistible; he is typical of the unholy brood to which he belongs. The evil beauty of the Witch-Queen sent many a soul to perdition; the evil beauty of her son has zealously carried on the work."

"What must we do?"

"I doubt if we can do anything to-day. Obviously the early morning is the most suitable time to visit his den at Dulwich Common."

"But the new photographs of the house? There will be another attempt upon us to-night."

"Yes, there will be another attempt upon us, to-night," said the doctor wearily. "This is the year 1914; yet, here in Half-Moon Street, when dusk falls, we shall be submitted to an attack of a kind to which mankind probably has not been submitted

for many ages. We shall be called upon to dabble in the despised magical art; we shall be called upon to place certain seals upon our doors and windows; to protect ourselves against an enemy, who, like Eros, laughs at locks and bars."

"Is it possible for him to succeed?"

"Quite possible, Rob, in spite of all our precautions. I feel in my very bones that to-night he will put forth a supreme effort."

A bell rang.

"I think," continued the doctor, "that this is Myra. She must get all the sleep she can, during the afternoon; for to-night I have determined that she, and you, and I, must not think of sleep, but must remain together, here in the library. We must not lose sight of one another—you understand?"

"I am glad that you have proposed it!" cried Robert Cairn eagerly, "I, too, feel that we have come to a critical moment in the contest."

"To-night," continued the doctor, "I shall be prepared to take certain steps. My preparations will occupy me throughout the rest of to-day."

CHAPTER XXX

THE ELEMENTAL

At dusk that evening, Dr. Cairn, his son, and Myra Duquesne met together in the library. The girl looked rather pale.

An odour of incense pervaded the house, coming from the doctor's study, wherein he had locked himself early in the evening, issuing instructions that he was not to be disturbed. The exact nature of the preparations which he had been making, Robert Cairn was unable to conjecture; and some instinct warned him that his father would not welcome any inquiry upon the matter. He realised that Dr. Cairn proposed to fight Antony Ferrara with his own weapons, and now, when something in the very

air of the house seemed to warn them of a tremendous attack impending, that the doctor, much against his will, was entering the arena in the character of a practical magician—a character new to him, and obviously abhorrent.

At half-past ten, the servants all retired in accordance With Dr. Cairn's orders. From where he stood by the tall mantel-piece, Robert Cairn could watch Myra Duquesne, a dainty picture in her simple evening-gown, where she sat reading in a distant corner, her delicate beauty forming a strong contrast to the background of sombre volumes. Dr. Cairn sat by the big table, smoking, and apparently listening. A strange device which he had adopted every evening for the past week, he had adopted again to-night—there were little white seals, bearing a curious figure, consisting in interlaced triangles, upon the insides of every window in the house, upon the doors, and even upon the fire-grates.

Robert Cairn at another time might have thought his father mad, childish, thus to play at wizardry; but he had had experiences which had taught him to recognise that upon such seemingly trivial matters, great issues might turn, that in the strange land over the Border, there were stranger laws—laws which he could but dimly understand. There he acknowledged the superior wisdom of Dr. Cairn; and did not question it.

At eleven o'clock a comparative quiet had come upon Half-Moon Street. The sound of the traffic had gradually subsided, until it seemed to him that the house stood, not in the busy West End of London, but isolated, apart from its neighbours; it seemed to him an abode, marked out and separated from the other abodes of man, a house enveloped in an impalpable cloud, a cloud of evil, summoned up and directed by the wizard hand of Antony Ferrara, son of the Witch-Queen.

Although Myra pretended to read, and Dr. Cairn, from his fixed expression, might have been supposed to be pre-occupied, in point of fact they were all waiting, with nerves at highest tension, for the opening of the attack. In what form it would

come—whether it would be vague moanings and tappings upon the windows, such as they had already experienced, whether it would be a phantasmal storm, a clap of phenomenal thunder—they could not conjecture, if the enemy would attack suddenly, or if his menace would grow, threatening from afar off, and then gradually penetrating into the heart of the garrison.

It came, then, suddenly and dramatically.

Dropping her book, Myra uttered a piercing scream, and with eyes glaring madly, fell forward on the carpet, unconscious!

Robert Cairn leapt to his feet with clenched fists. His father stood up so rapidly as to overset his chair, which fell crashingly upon the floor.

Together they turned and looked in the direction in which the girl had been looking. They fixed their eyes upon the drapery of the library window—which was drawn together. The whole window was luminous as though a bright light shone outside, but luminous, as though that light were the light of some unholy fire!

Involuntarily they both stepped back, and Robert Cairn clutched his father's arm convulsively.

The curtains seemed to be rendered transparent, as if some powerful ray were directed upon them; the window appeared through them as a rectangular blue patch. Only two lamps were burning in the library, that in the corner by which Myra had been reading, and the green shaded lamp upon the table. The best end of the room by the window, then, was in shadow, against which this unnatural light shone brilliantly.

"My God!" whispered Robert Cairn—"that's Half-Moon Street—outside. There can be no light—"

He broke off, for now he perceived the Thing which had occasioned the girl's scream of horror.

In the middle of the rectangular patch of light, a grey shape, but partially opaque, moved—shifting, luminous clouds about it—was taking form, growing momentarily more substantial!

It had some remote semblance of a man; but its unique characteristic was its awful greyness. It had the greyness of a rain cloud, yet rather that of a column of smoke. And from the centre of the dimly defined head, two eyes—balls of living fire—glared out into the room!

Heat was beating into the library from the window—physical heat, as though a furnace door had been opened ... and the shape, ever growing more palpable, was moving forward towards them—approaching—the heat every instant growing greater.

It was impossible to look at those two eyes of fire; it was almost impossible to move. Indeed Robert Cairn was transfixed in such horror as, in all his dealings with the monstrous Ferrara, he had never known before. But his father, shaking off the dread which possessed him also, leapt at one bound to the library table.

Robert Cairn vaguely perceived that a small group of objects, looking like balls of wax, lay there. Dr. Cairn had evidently been preparing them in the locked study. Now he took them all up in his left hand, and confronted the Thing—which seemed to be growing into the room—for it did not advance in the ordinary sense of the word.

One by one he threw the white pellets into that vapoury greyness. As they touched the curtain, they hissed as if they had been thrown into a fire; they melted; and upon the transparency of the drapings, as upon a sheet of gauze, showed faint streaks, where, melting, they trickled down the tapestry.

As he cast each pellet from his hand, Dr. Cairn took a step forward, and cried out certain words in a loud voice—words which Robert Cairn knew he had never heard uttered before, words in a language which some instinct told him to be Ancient

Egyptian.

Their effect was to force that dreadful shape gradually to disperse, as a cloud of smoke might disperse when the fire which occasions it is extinguished slowly. Seven pellets in all he threw towards the window—and the seventh struck the curtains, now once more visible in their proper form.

The Fire Elemental had been vanquished!

Robert Cairn clutched his hair in a sort of frenzy. He glared at the draped window, feeling that he was making a supreme effort to retain his sanity. Had it ever looked otherwise? Had the tapestry ever faded before him, becoming visible in a great light which had shone through it from behind? Had the Thing, a Thing unnameable, indescribable, stood there?

He read his answer upon the tapestry.

Whitening streaks showed where the pellets, melting, had trickled down the curtain!

"Lift Myra on the settee!"

It was Dr. Cairn speaking, calmly, but in a strained voice.

Robert Cairn, as if emerging from a mist, turned to the recumbent white form upon the carpet. Then, with a great cry, he leapt forward and raised the girl's head.

"Myra!" he groaned. "Myra, speak to me."

"Control yourself, boy," rapped Dr. Cairn, sternly; "she cannot speak until you have revived her! She has swooned—nothing worse."

"And—"

"We have conquered!"

CHAPTER XXXI

THE BOOK OF THOTH

The mists of early morning still floated over the fields, when these two, set upon strange business, walked through the damp grass to the door of the barn, where-from radiated the deathly waves which on the previous night had reached them, or almost reached them, in the library at Half-Moon Street.

The big double doors were padlocked, but for this they had come provided. Ten minutes work upon the padlock sufficed—and Dr. Cairn swung wide the doors.

A suffocating smell—the smell of that incense with which they had too often come in contact, was wafted out to them. There was a dim light inside the place, and without hesitation both entered.

A deal table and chair constituted the sole furniture of the interior. A part of the floor was roughly boarded, and a brief examination of the boarding sufficed to discover the hiding place in which Antony Ferrara kept the utensils of his awful art.

Dr. Cairn lifted out two heavy boards; and in a recess below lay a number of singular objects. There were four antique lamps of most peculiar design; there was a larger silver lamp, which both of them had seen before in various apartments occupied by Antony Ferrara. There were a number of other things which Robert Cairn could not have described, had he been called upon to do so, for the reason that he had seen nothing like them before, and had no idea of their nature or purpose.

But, conspicuous amongst this curious hoard, was a square iron box of workmanship dissimilar from any workmanship known to Robert Cairn. Its lid was covered with a sort of scroll work, and he was about to reach down, in order to lift it out, when:

"Do not touch it!" cried the doctor—"for God's sake, do not touch it!"

Robert Cairn started back, as though he had seen a snake. Turning to his father, he saw that the latter was pulling on a pair of white gloves. As he fixed his eyes upon these in astonishment, he perceived that they were smeared all over with some white preparation.

"Stand aside, boy," said the doctor—and for once his voice shook slightly. "Do not

look again until I call to you. Turn your head aside!"

Silent with amazement, Robert Cairn obeyed. He heard his father lift out the iron box. He heard him open it, for he had already perceived that it was not locked. Then quite distinctly, he heard him close it again, and replace it in the cache.

"Do not turn, boy!" came a hoarse whisper.

He did not turn, but waited, his heart beating painfully, for what should happen next.

"Stand aside from the door," came the order, "and when I have gone out, do not look after me. I will call to you when it is finished."

He obeyed, without demur.

His father passed him, and he heard him walking through the damp grass outside the door of the barn. There followed an intolerable interval. From some place, not very distant, he could hear Dr. Cairn moving, hear the chink of glass upon glass, as though he were pouring out something from a stoppered bottle. Then a faint acrid smell was wafted to his nostrils, perceptible even above the heavy odour of the incense from the barn.

"Relock the door!" came the cry.

Robert Cairn reclosed the door, snapped the padlock fast, and began to fumble with the skeleton keys with which they had come provided. He discovered that to reclose the padlock was quite as difficult as to open it. His hands were trembling too; he was all anxiety to see what had taken place behind him. So that when at last a sharp click told of the task accomplished, he turned in a flash and saw his father placing tufts of grass upon a charred patch from which a faint haze of smoke still arose. He walked over and joined him.

"What have you done, sir?"

"I have robbed him of his armour," replied the doctor, grimly. His face was very pale, his eyes were very bright. "I have destroyed the Book of Thoth!"

"Then, he will be unable—"

"He will still be able to summon his dreadful servant, Rob. Having summoned him once, he can summon him again, but—"

"Well, sir?"

"He cannot control him."

"Good God!"

That night brought no repetition of the uncanny attack; and in the grey half light before the dawn, Dr. Cairn and his son, themselves like two phantoms, again crept across the field to the barn.

The padlock hung loose in the ring.

"Stay where you are, Rob!" cautioned the doctor.

He gently pushed the door open—wider—wider—and looked in. There was an overpowering odour of burning flesh. He turned to Robert, and spoke in a steady voice.

"The brood of the Witch-Queen is extinct!" he said.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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