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Title: Brood of the Witch-Queen

Author: Sax Rohmer

Release Date: November 3, 2006 [EBook #19706]

Language: English

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BROOD OF THE

WITCH-QUEEN

BY

SAX ROHMER

LONDON

C. ARTHUR PEARSON, LIMITED

HENRIETTA STREET, W.C.

1918

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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.

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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]

[Footnote 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 Pharmacopoeia!"

"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.

\* \* \* \* \*

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