

The Gloved Hand eBook

The Gloved Hand

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Page 1

ILLUSTRATIONS

Sparks fell upon the shoulders of the two white figures (page 9)

"I'm lawyer enough to know," He said, "That A question like that is not permissible"

"Oh, master receive me!"

"I knew that I was lost"

CHAPTER I

THE FALLING STAR

I was genuinely tired when I got back to the office, that Wednesday afternoon, for it had been a trying day—the last of the series of trying days which had marked the progress of the Minturn case; and my feeling of depression was increased by the fact that our victory had not been nearly so complete as I had hoped it would be. Besides, there was the heat; always, during the past ten days, there had been the heat, unprecedented for June, with the thermometer climbing higher and higher and breaking a new record every day.

As I threw off coat and hat and dropped into the chair before my desk, I could see the heat-waves quivering up past the open windows from the fiery street below. I turned away and closed my eyes, and tried to evoke a vision of white surf falling upon the beach, of tall trees swaying in the breeze, of a brook dropping gently between green banks.

"Fountains that frisk and sprinkle
The moss they overspill;
Pools that the breezes crinkle,"...

and then I stopped, for the door had opened. I unclosed my eyes to see the office-boy gazing at me in astonishment. He was a well-trained boy, and recovered himself in an instant.

"Your mail, sir," he said, laid it at my elbow, and went out.

I turned to the letters with an interest the reverse of lively. The words of Henley's ballade were still running through my head—



"Vale-lily and periwinkle;
Wet stone-crop on the sill;
The look of leaves a-twinkle
With windlets,"...

Again I stopped, for again the door opened, and again the office-boy appeared.

"Mr. Godfrey, sir," he said, and close upon the words, Jim Godfrey entered, looking as fresh and cool and invigorating as the fountains and brooks and pools I had been thinking of.

"How do you do it, Godfrey?" I asked, as he sat down.

"Do what?"

"Keep so fit."

"By getting a good sleep every night. Do you?"

I groaned as I thought of the inferno I called my bedroom.

"I haven't really slept for a week," I said.

"Well, you're going to sleep to-night. That's the reason I'm here. I saw you in court this afternoon—one glance was enough."

"Yes," I assented; "one glance would be. But what's the proposition?"

"I'm staying at a little place I've leased for the summer up on the far edge of the Bronx. I'm going to take you up with me to-night and I'm going to keep you there till Monday. That will give you five nights' sleep and four days' rest. Don't you think you deserve it?"

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"Yes," I agreed with conviction, "I do;" and I cast my mind rapidly over the affairs of the office. With the Minturn case ended, there was really no reason why I should not take a few days off.

"You'll come, then?" said Godfrey, who had been following my thoughts. "Don't be afraid," he added, seeing that I still hesitated. "You won't find it dull."

I looked at him, for he was smiling slightly and his eyes were very bright.

"Won't I?"

"No," he said, "for I've discovered certain phenomena in the neighbourhood which I think will interest you."

When Godfrey spoke in that tone, he could mean only one thing, and my last vestige of hesitation vanished.

"All right," I said; "I'll come."

"Good. I'll call for you at the Marathon about ten-thirty. That's the earliest I can get away," and in another moment he was gone.

So was my fatigue, and I turned with a zest to my letters and to the arrangements necessary for a three days' absence. Then I went up to my rooms, put a few things into a suit-case, got into fresh clothes, mounted to the Astor roof-garden for dinner, and a little after ten was back again at the Marathon. I had Higgins bring my luggage down, and sat down in the entrance-porch to wait for Godfrey.

Just across the street gleamed the lights of the police-station where he and I had had more than one adventure. For Godfrey was the principal police reporter of the *Record*; it was to him that journal owed those brilliant and glowing columns in which the latest mystery was described and dissected in a way which was a joy alike to the intellect and to the artistic instinct. For the editorial policy of the *Record*, for its attitude toward politics, Wall Street, the trusts, "society," I had only aversion and disgust; but whenever the town was shaken with a great criminal mystery, I never missed an issue.

Godfrey and I had been thrown together first in the Holladay case, and that was the beginning of a friendship which had strengthened with the years. Then came his brilliant work in solving the Marathon mystery, in which I had also become involved. I had appealed to him for help in connection with that affair at Elizabeth; and he had cleared up the remarkable circumstances surrounding the death of my friend, Philip Vantine, in the affair of the Boule cabinet. So I had come to turn to him instinctively whenever I found myself confronting one of those intricate problems which every lawyer has sometimes to untangle.

Reciprocally, Godfrey sometimes sought my assistance; but, of course, it was only with a very few of his cases that I had any personal connection. The others I had to be content to follow, as the general public did, in the columns of the Record, certain that it would be the first to reach the goal. Godfrey had a peculiar advantage over the other police reporters in that he had himself, years before, been a member of the detective force, and had very carefully fostered and extended the friendships made at that time. He was looked on rather as an insider, and he was always scrupulously careful to give the members of the force every bit of credit they deserved—sometimes considerably more than they deserved.

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In consequence, he had the entree at times when other reporters were rigorously barred.

It was nearly eleven o'clock before Godfrey arrived that evening, but I was neither surprised nor impatient. I knew how many and unexpected were the demands upon his time; and I always found a lively interest in watching the comings and goings at the station across the way—where, alas, the entrances far exceeded the exits! But finally, a car swung in from the Avenue at a speed that drew my eyes, and I saw that Godfrey was driving it.

“Jump in,” he said, pushing out his clutch and pausing at the curb; and as I grabbed my suit-case and sprang to the seat beside him, he let the clutch in again and we were off. “No time to lose,” he added, as he changed into high, and turned up Seventh Avenue.

At the park, he turned westward to the Circle, and then northward again out Amsterdam Avenue. There was little traffic, and we were soon skimming along at a speed which made me watch the cross-streets fearfully. In a few minutes we were across the Harlem and running northward along the uninteresting streets beyond. At this moment, it occurred to me that Godfrey was behaving singularly as though he were hastening to keep an appointment; but I judged it best not to distract his attention from the street before us, and restrained the question which rose to my lips.

At last, the built-up portion of the town was left behind; we passed little houses in little yards, then meadows and gardens and strips of woodland, with a house only here and there. We were no longer on a paved street, but on a macadam road—a road apparently little used, for our lamps, sending long streamers of light ahead of us, disclosed far empty stretches, without vehicle of any kind. There was no moon, and the stars were half-obsured by a haze of cloud, while along the horizon to the west, I caught the occasional glow of distant lightning.

And then the sky was suddenly blotted out, and I saw that we were running along an avenue of lofty trees. The road at the left was bordered by a high stone wall, evidently the boundary of an important estate. We were soon past this, and I felt the speed of the car slacken.

“Hold tight!” said Godfrey, turned sharply through an open gateway, and brought the car to a stop. Then, snatching out his watch, he leaned forward and held it in the glare of the side-lamp. “Five minutes to twelve,” he said. “We can just make it. Come on, Lester.”

He sprang from the car, and I followed, realising that this was no time for questions.

“This way,” he said, and held out a hand to me, or I should have lost him in the darkness. We were in a grove of lofty trees, and at the foot of one of these, Godfrey



paused. "Up with, you," he added; "and don't lose any time," and he placed my hand upon the rung of a ladder.

Too amazed to open my lips, I obeyed. The ladder was a long one, and, as I went up and up, I could feel Godfrey mounting after me. I am not expert at climbing ladders, even by daylight, and my progress was not rapid enough to suit my companion, for he kept urging me on. But at last, with a breath of relief, I felt that I had reached the top.



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"What now?" I asked.

"Do you see that big straight limb running out to your right?"

"Yes," I said, for my eyes were growing accustomed to the darkness.

"Sit down on it, and hold on to the ladder."

I did so somewhat gingerly, and in a minute Godfrey was beside me.

"Now," he said, in a voice low and tense with excitement, "look out, straight ahead. And remember to hold on to the ladder."

I could see the hazy mist of the open sky, and from the fitful light along the horizon, I knew that we were looking toward the west. Below me was a mass of confused shadows, which I took for clumps of shrubbery.

Then I felt Godfrey's hand close upon my arm.

"Look!" he said.

For an instant, I saw nothing; then my eyes caught what seemed to be a new star in the heavens; a star bright, sharp, steel blue—

"Why, it's moving!" I cried.

He answered with a pressure of the fingers.

The star was indeed moving; not rising, not drifting with the breeze, but descending, descending slowly, slowly.... I watched it with parted lips, leaning forward, my eyes straining at that falling light.

"Falling" is not the word; nor is "drifting." It did not fall and it did not drift. It deliberately descended, in a straight line, at a regular speed, calmly and evenly, as though animated by some definite purpose. Lower and lower it sank; then it seemed to pause, to hover in the air, and the next instant it burst into a shower of sparks and vanished.

And those sparks fell upon the shoulders of two white-robed figures, standing apparently in space, their arms rigidly extended, their faces raised toward the heavens.

CHAPTER II

A STRANGE NEIGHBOUR

Mechanically I followed Godfrey down the ladder, and, guided by the flaring lights, made my way back to the car. I climbed silently into my seat, while Godfrey started the motor. Then we rolled slowly up the driveway, and stopped before the door of a house standing deep among the trees.

“Wait for me here a minute,” Godfrey said, and, when I had got out, handed me my suitcase, and then drove the car on past the house, no doubt to its garage.

He was soon back, opened the house-door, switched on the lights, and waved me in.

“Here we are,” he said. “I’ll show you your room,” and he led the way up the stairs, opening a door in the hall at the top. “This is it,” he added, and switched on the lights here also. “The bath-room is right at the end of the hall. Wash up, if you need to, and then come down, and we will have a good-night smoke.”

It was a pleasant room, with the simplest of furniture. The night-breeze ruffled the curtains at the windows, and filled the room with the cool odour of the woods—how different it was from the odour of dirty asphalt! But I was in no mood to linger there—I wanted an explanation of that strange light and of those two white-robed figures. So I paused only to open my grip, change into a lounging-coat, and brush off the dust of the journey. Then I hastened downstairs.

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Godfrey met me at the stair-foot, and led the way into what was evidently a lounging-room. A tray containing some cold meat, bread and butter, cheese, and a few other things, stood on a side-table, and to this Godfrey added two bottles of Bass.

"No doubt you're hungry after the ride," he said. "I know I am," and he opened the bottles. "Help yourself," and he proceeded to make himself a sandwich. "You see, I live the simple life out here. I've got an old couple to look after the place—Mr. and Mrs. Hargis. Mrs. Hargis is an excellent cook—but to ask her to stay awake till midnight would be fiendish cruelty. So she leaves me a lunch in the ice-box, and goes quietly off to bed. I'll give you some berries for breakfast such as you don't often get in New York—and the cream—wait till you try it! Have a cigar?"

"No," I said, sitting down very content with the world, "I've got my pipe," and I proceeded to fill up.

Godfrey took down his own pipe from the mantelshelf and sat down opposite me. A moment later, two puffs of smoke circled toward the ceiling.

"Now," I said, looking at him, "go ahead and tell me about it."

Godfrey watched a smoke-ring whirl and break before he answered.

"About ten days ago," he began, "just at midnight, I happened to glance out of my bedroom window, as I was turning in, and caught a glimpse of a queer light apparently sinking into the tree-tops. I thought nothing of it; but two nights later, at exactly the same time, I saw it again. I watched for it the next night, and again saw it—just for an instant, you understand, as it formed high in the air and started downward. The next night I was up a tree and saw more of it; but it was not until night before last that I found the place from which the whole spectacle could be seen. The trees are pretty thick all around here, and I doubt if there is any other place from which those two figures would be visible."

"Then there *were* two figures!" I said, for I had begun to think that my eyes had deceived me.

"There certainly were."

"Standing in space?"

"Oh, no; standing on a very substantial roof."

"But what is it all about?" I questioned. "Why should that light descend every midnight? What *is* the light, anyway?"

“That’s what I’ve brought you out here to find out. You’ve got four clear days ahead of you—and I’ll be at your disposal from midnight on, if you happen to need me.”

“But you must have some sort of idea about it,” I persisted. “At least you know whose roof those figures were standing on.”

“Yes, I know that. The roof belongs to a man named Worthington Vaughan. Ever hear of him?”

I shook my head.

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"Neither had I," said Godfrey, "up to the time I took this place. Even yet, I don't know very much. He's the last of an old family, who made their money in real estate, and are supposed to have kept most of it. He's a widower with one daughter. His wife died about ten years ago, and since then he has been a sort of recluse, and has the reputation of being queer. He has been abroad a good deal, and it is only during the last year that he has lived continuously at this place next door, which is called Elmhurst. That's about all I've been able to find out. He certainly lives a retired life, for his place has a twelve-foot wall around it, and no visitors need apply."

"How do you know?"

"I tried to make a neighbourly call yesterday, and wasn't admitted. Mr. Vaughan was engaged. Getting ready for his regular midnight hocus-pocus, perhaps!"

I took a meditative puff or two.

"Is it hocus-pocus, Godfrey?" I asked, at last. "If it is, it's a mighty artistic piece of work."

"And if it isn't hocus-pocus, what is it?" Godfrey retorted. "A spiritual manifestation?"

I confess I had no answer ready. Ideas which seem reasonable enough when put dimly to oneself, become absurd sometimes when definitely clothed with words.

"There are just two possibilities," Godfrey went on. "Either it's hocus-pocus, or it isn't. If it is, it is done for some purpose. Two men don't go out on a roof every night at midnight and fire off a Roman candle and wave their arms around, just for the fun of the thing."

"It wasn't a Roman candle," I pointed out. "A Roman candle is visible when it's going up, and bursts and vanishes at the top of its flight. That light didn't behave that way at all. It formed high in the air, remained there stationary for a moment, gradually grew brighter, and then started to descend. It didn't fall, it came down slowly, and at an even rate of speed. And it didn't drift away before the breeze, as it would have done if it had been merely floating in the air. It descended in a straight line. It gave me the impression of moving as though a will actuated it—as though it had a distinct purpose. There was something uncanny about it!"

Godfrey nodded thoughtful agreement.

"I have felt that," he said, "and I admit that the behaviour of the light is extraordinary. But that doesn't prove it supernatural. I don't believe in the supernatural. Especially I don't believe that any two mortals could arrange with the heavenly powers to make a demonstration like that every night at midnight for their benefit. That's *too* absurd!"

"It is absurd," I assented, "and yet it isn't much more absurd than to suppose that two men would go out on the roof every night to watch a Roman candle, as you call it, come down. Unless, of course, they're lunatics."

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"No," said Godfrey, "I don't believe they're lunatics—at least, not both of them. I have a sort of theory about it; but it's a pretty thin one, and I want you to do a little investigating on your own account before I tell you what it is. It's time we went to bed. Don't get up in the morning till you're ready to. Probably I'll not see you till night; I have some work to do that will take me off early. But Mrs. Hargis will make you comfortable, and I'll be back in time to join you in another look at the Roman candle!"

He uttered the last words jestingly, but I could see that the jest was a surface one, and that, at heart, he was deeply serious. Evidently, the strange star had impressed him even more than it had me—though perhaps in a different manner.

I found that it had impressed me deeply enough, for I dreamed about it that night—dreamed, and woke, only to fall asleep and dream and wake again. I do not remember that I saw any more in the dream than I had seen with my waking eyes, but each time I awoke trembling with apprehension and bathed in perspiration. As I lay there the second time, staring up into the darkness and telling myself I was a fool, there came a sudden rush of wind among the trees outside; then a vivid flash of lightning and an instant rending crash of thunder, and then a steady downpour of rain. I could guess how the gasping city welcomed it, and I lay for a long time listening to it, as it dripped from the leaves and beat against the house. A delightful coolness filled the room, an odour fresh and clean; and when, at last, with nerves quieted, I fell asleep again, it was not to awaken until the sun was bright against my curtains.

CHAPTER III

THE DRAMA IN THE GARDEN

I glanced at my watch, as soon as I was out of bed, and saw that it was after ten o'clock. All the sleep I had lost during the hot nights of the previous week had been crowded into the last nine hours; I felt like a new man, and when, half an hour later, I ran downstairs, it was with such an appetite for breakfast as I had not known for a long time.

There was no one in the hall, and I stepped out through the open door to the porch beyond, and stood looking about me. The house was built in the midst of a grove of beautiful old trees, some distance back from the road, of which I could catch only a glimpse. It was a small house, a story and a half in height, evidently designed only as a summer residence.

"Good morning, sir," said a voice behind me, and I turned to find a pleasant-faced, grey-haired woman standing in the doorway.

"Good morning," I responded. "I suppose you are Mrs. Hargis?"

"Yes, sir; and your breakfast's ready."

“Has Mr. Godfrey gone?”

“Yes, sir; he left about an hour ago. He was afraid his machine would waken you.”

“It didn’t,” I said, as I followed her back along the hall. “Nothing short of an earthquake would have wakened me. Ah, this is fine!”

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She had shown me into a pleasant room, where a little table was set near an open window. It made quite a picture, with its white cloth and shining dishes and plate of yellow butter, and bowl of crimson berries, and—but I didn't linger to admire it. I don't know when I have enjoyed breakfast so much. Mrs. Hargis, after bringing in the eggs and bacon and setting a little pot of steaming coffee at my elbow, sensibly left me alone to the enjoyment of it. Ever since that morning, I have realised that, to start the day exactly right, a man should breakfast by himself, amid just such surroundings, leisurely and without distraction. A copy of the morning's *Record* was lying on the table, but I did not even open it. I did not care what had happened in the world the day before!

At last, ineffably content, I stepped out upon the driveway at the side of the house, and strolled away among the trees. At the end of a few minutes, I came to the high stone wall which bounded the estate of the mysterious Worthington Vaughan, and suddenly the wish came to me to see what lay behind it. Without much difficulty, I found the tree with the ladder against it, which we had mounted the night before. It was a long ladder, even in the daytime, but at last I reached the top, and settled myself on the limb against which it rested. Assuring myself that the leaves hid me from any chance observer, I looked down into the grounds beyond the wall.

There was not much to see. The grounds were extensive and had evidently been laid out with care, but there was an air of neglect about them, as though the attention they received was careless and inadequate. The shrubbery was too dense, grass was invading the walks, here and there a tree showed a dead limb or a broken one. Near the house was a wide lawn, designed, perhaps, as a tennis-court or croquet-ground, with rustic seats under the trees at the edge.

About the house itself was a screen of magnificent elms, which doubtless gave the place its name, and which shut the house in completely. All I could see of it was one corner of the roof. This, however, stood out clear against the sky, and it was here, evidently, that the mysterious midnight figures had been stationed. As I looked at it, I realised the truth of Godfrey's remark that probably from no other point of vantage but just this would they be visible.

It did not take me many minutes to exhaust the interest of this empty prospect, more especially since my perch was anything but comfortable, and I was just about to descend, when two white-robed figures appeared at the edge of the open space near the house and walked slowly across it. I settled back into my place with a tightening of interest which made me forget its discomfort, for that these were the two star-worshippers I did not doubt.

The distance was so great that their faces were the merest blurs; but I could see that one leaned heavily upon the arm of the other, as much, or so it seemed to me, for moral as for physical support. I could see, too, that the hair of the feebler man was white, while that of his companion was jet black. The younger man's face appeared so dark

that I suspected he wore a beard, and his figure was erect and vigorous, in the prime of life, virile and full of power.

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He certainly dominated the older man. I watched them attentively, as they paced back and forth, and the dependence of the one upon the other was very manifest. Both heads were bent as though in earnest talk, and for perhaps half an hour they walked slowly up and down. Then, at a sign of fatigue from the older figure, the other led him to a garden-bench, where both sat down.

The elder man, I told myself, was no doubt Worthington Vaughan. Small wonder he was considered queer if he dressed habitually in a white robe and worshipped the stars at midnight! There was something monkish about the habits which he and his companion wore, and the thought flashed into my mind that perhaps they were members of some religious order, or some Oriental cult or priesthood. And both of them, I added to myself, must be a little mad!

As I watched, the discussion gradually grew more animated, and the younger man, springing to his feet, paced excitedly up and down, touching his forehead with his fingers from time to time, and raising his hands to heaven, as though calling it as a witness to his words. At last the other made a sign of assent, got to his feet, bent his head reverently as to a spiritual superior and walked slowly away toward the house. The younger man stood gazing after him until he passed from sight, then resumed his rapid pacing up and down, evidently deeply moved.

At last from the direction of the house came the flutter of a white robe. For a moment, I thought it was the old man returning; then as it emerged fully from among the trees, I saw that it was a woman—a young woman, I guessed, from her slimness, and from the mass of dark hair which framed her face. And then I remembered that Godfrey had told me that Worthington Vaughan had a daughter.

The man was at her side in an instant, held out his hand, and said something, which caused her to shrink away. She half-turned, as though to flee, but the other laid his hand upon her arm, speaking earnestly, and, after a moment, she permitted him to lead her to a seat. He remained standing before her, sometimes raising his hands to heaven, sometimes pointing toward the house, sometimes bending close above her, and from time to time making that peculiar gesture of touching his fingers to his forehead, whose meaning I could not guess. But I could guess at the torrent of passionate words which poured from his lips, and at the eager light which was in his eyes!

The woman sat quite still, with bowed head, listening, but making no sign either of consent or refusal. Gradually, the man grew more confident, and at last stooped to take her hand, but she drew it quickly away, and, raising her head, said something slowly and with emphasis. He shook his head savagely, then, after a rapid turn up and down, seemed to agree, bowed low to her, and went rapidly away toward the house. The woman sat for some time where he had left her, her face in her hands; then, with a

gesture of weariness and discouragement, crossed the lawn and disappeared among the trees.

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For a long time I sat there motionless, my eyes on the spot where she had disappeared, trying to understand. What was the meaning of the scene? What was it the younger man had urged so passionately upon her, but at which she had rebelled? What was it for which he had pled so earnestly? The obvious answer was that he pled for her love, that he had urged her to become his wife; but the answer did not satisfy me. His attitude had been passionate enough, but it had scarcely been lover-like. It had more of admonition, of warning, even of threat, than of entreaty in it. It was not the attitude of a lover to his mistress, but of a master to his pupil.

And what had been the answer, wrung from her finally by his insistence—the answer to which he had at first violently dissented, and then reluctantly agreed?

No doubt, if these people had been garbed in the clothes of every day, I should have felt at the outset that all this was none of my business, and have crept down the ladder and gone away. But their strange dress gave to the scene an air at once unreal and theatrical, and not for an instant had I felt myself an intruder. It was as though I were looking at the rehearsal of a drama designed for the public gaze and enacted upon a stage; or, more properly, a pantomime, dim and figurative, but most impressive. Might it not, indeed, be a rehearsal of some sort—private theatricals—make-believe? But that scene at midnight—that could not be make-believe! No, nor was this scene in the garden. It was in earnest—in deadliest earnest; there was about it something sinister and threatening; and it was the realisation of this—the realisation that there was something here not right, something demanding scrutiny—which kept me chained to my uncomfortable perch, minute after minute.

But nothing further happened, and I realised, at last, that if I was to escape an agonising cramp in the leg, I must get down. I put my feet on the ladder, and then paused for a last look about the grounds. My eye was caught by a flutter of white among the trees. Someone was walking along one of the paths; in a moment, straining forward, I saw it was the woman, and that she was approaching the wall.

And then, as she came nearer, I saw that she was not a woman at all, but a girl—a girl of eighteen or twenty, to whom the flowing robes gave, at a distance, the effect of age. I caught only a glimpse of her face before it was hidden by a clump of shrubbery, but that glimpse told me that it was a face to set the pulses leaping. I strained still farther forward, waiting until she should come into sight again....

Along the path she came, with the sunlight about her, kissing her hair, her lips, her cheeks—and the next instant her eyes were staring upwards into mine.

I could not move. I could only stare down at her. I saw the hot colour sweep across her face; I saw her hand go to her bosom; I saw her turn to flee. Then, to my amazement, she stopped, as though arrested by a sudden thought, turned toward me again, and raised her eyes deliberately to mine.



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For fully a minute she stood there, her gaze searching and intent, as though she would read my soul; then her face hardened with sudden resolution. Again she put her hand to her bosom, turned hastily toward the wall, and disappeared behind it.

The next instant, something white came flying over it, and fell on the grass beneath my tree. Staring down at it, I saw it was a letter.

CHAPTER IV

ENTER FREDDIE SWAIN

I fell, rather than climbed, down the ladder, snatched the white missile from the grass, and saw that it was, indeed, a sealed and addressed envelope. I had somehow expected that address to include either Godfrey's name or mine; but it did neither. The envelope bore these words:

Mr. Frederic Swain,
1010 Fifth Avenue,
New York City.

If not at this address,
please try the Calumet Club.

I sat down on the lowest rung of the ladder, whistling softly to myself. For Freddie Swain's address was no longer 1010 Fifth Avenue, nor was he to be found in the luxurious rooms of the Calumet Club. In fact, it was nearly a year since he had entered either place. For some eight hours of every week-day, he laboured in the law offices of Royce & Lester; he slept in a little room on the top floor of the Marathon; three hours of every evening, Saturdays, Sundays and holidays excepted, were spent at the law school of the University of New York; and the remaining hours of the twenty-four in haunts much less conspicuous and expensive than the Calumet Club.

For Freddie Swain had taken one of these toboggan slides down the hill of fortune which sometimes happen to the most deserving. His father, old General Orlando Swain, had, all his life, put up a pompous front and was supposed to have inherited a fortune from somewhere; but, when he died, this edifice was found to be all facade and no foundation, and Freddie inherited nothing but debts. He had been expensively educated for a career as an Ornament of Society, but he found that career cut short, for Society suddenly ceased to find him ornamental. I suppose there were too many marriageable daughters about!

I am bound to say that he took the blow well. Instead of attempting to cling to the skirts of Society as a vendor of champagne or an organiser of fetes champetres, he—to use his own words—decided to cut the whole show.

Our firm had been named as the administrators of the Swain estate, and when the storm was over and we were sitting among the ruins, Freddie expressed the intention of going to work.

“What will you do?” Mr. Royce inquired. “Ever had any training in making money?”

“No, only in spending it,” retorted Freddie, easily. “But I can learn. I was thinking of studying law. That’s a good trade, isn’t it?”

“Splendid!” assented Mr. Royce, warmly. “And there are always so many openings. You see, nobody studies law—lawyers are as scarce as hen’s teeth.”

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"Just the same, I think I'll have a try at it," said Freddie, sturdily. "There's always room at the top, you know," he added, with a grin. "I can go to the night-school at the University, and I ought to be able to earn enough to live on, as a clerk or something. I know how to read and write."

"That will help, of course," agreed Mr. Royce. "But I'm afraid that, right at first, anyway, you can scarcely hope to live in the style to which you have been accustomed."

Freddie turned on him with fire in his eyes.

"Look here," he said, "suppose you give me a job. I'll do my work and earn my wages—try me and see."

There was something in his face that touched me, and I glanced at Mr. Royce. I saw that his gruffness was merely a mantle to cloak his real feelings; and the result was that Freddie Swain was set to work as a copying-clerk at a salary of fifteen dollars a week. He applied himself to his work with an energy that surprised me, and I learned that he was taking the night-course at the University, as he had planned. Finally, one night, I met him as I was turning in to my rooms at the Marathon, and found that he had rented a cubby-hole on the top floor of the building. After that, I saw him occasionally, and when six months had passed, was forced to acknowledge that he was thoroughly in earnest. I happened to remark to Mr. Royce one day that Swain seemed to be making good.

"Yes," my partner agreed; "I didn't think he had it in him. He had a rude awakening from his dream of affluence, and it seems to have done him good."

But, somehow, I had fancied that it was from more than a dream of affluence he had been awakened; and now, as I sat staring at this letter, I began to understand dimly what the other dream had been.

The first thing was to get the letter into his hands, for I was certain that it was a cry for help. I glanced at my watch and saw that it was nearly half past twelve. Swain, I knew, would be at lunch, and was not due at the office until one o'clock. Slipping the letter into my pocket, I turned back to the house, and found Mrs. Hargis standing on the front porch.

"I declare, I thought you was lost, Mr. Lester," she said. "I was just going to send William to look for you. Ain't you 'most starved?"

"Scarcely starved, Mrs. Hargis," I said, "but with a very creditable appetite, when you consider that I ate breakfast only two hours ago."

"Well, come right in," she said. "Your lunch is ready."

"I suppose there's a telephone somewhere about?" I asked, as I followed her through the hall.

"Yes, sir, in here," and she opened the door into a little room fitted up as a study. "It's here Mr. Godfrey works sometimes."

"Thank you," I said, "I've got to call up the office. I won't be but a minute."

I found Godfrey's number stamped on the cover of the telephone book, and then called the office. As I had guessed, Swain was not yet back from lunch, and I left word for him to call me as soon as he came in. Then I made my way to the dining-room, where Mrs. Hargis was awaiting me.

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"How does one get out here from New York, Mrs. Hargis?" I asked, as I sat down. "That is, if one doesn't happen to own a motor car?"

"Why, very easily, sir. Take the Third Avenue elevated to the end of the line, and then the trolley. It runs along Dryden Road, just two blocks over."

"Where does one get off?"

"At Prospect Street, sir."

"And what is this place called?"

"This is the old Bennett place, sir."

"Thank you. And let me tell you, Mrs. Hargis," I added, "that I have never tasted a better salad."

Her kindly old face flushed with pleasure.

"It's nice of you to say that, sir," she said. "We have our own garden, and William takes a great pride in it."

"I must go and see it," I said. "I've always fancied I'd like to potter around in a garden. I must see if Mr. Godfrey won't let me in on this."

"He spends an hour in it every morning. Sometimes he can hardly tear himself away. I certainly do like Mr. Godfrey."

"So do I," I agreed heartily. "He's a splendid fellow—one of the nicest, squarest men I ever met—and a friend worth having."

"He's all of that, sir," she agreed, and stood for a moment, clasping and unclasping her hands nervously, as though there was something else she wished to say. But she evidently thought better of it. "There's the bell, sir," she added. "Please ring if there's anything else you want," and she left me to myself.

I had pushed back my chair and was filling my pipe when the telephone rang. It was Swain.

"Swain," I said, "this is Mr. Lester. I'm at a place up here in the Bronx, and I want you to come up right away."

"Very good, sir," said Swain. "How do I get there?"

“Take the Third Avenue elevated to the end of the line, and then the trolley which runs along Dryden Road. Get off at Prospect Street, walk two blocks west and ask for the old Bennett place. I’ll have an eye out for you.”

“All right, sir,” said Swain, again. “Do you want me to bring some papers, or anything?”

“No; just come as quickly as you can,” I answered, and hung up.

I figured that, even at the best, it would take Swain an hour and a half to make the journey, and I strolled out under the trees again. Then the thought came to me that I might as well make a little exploration of the neighbourhood, and I sauntered out to the road. Along it for some distance ran the high wall which bounded Elmhurst, and I saw that the wall had been further fortified by ugly pieces of broken glass set in cement along its top.

I could see a break in the wall, about midway of its length, and, walking past, discovered that this was where the gates were set—heavy gates of wrought iron, very tall, and surmounted by sharp spikes. The whole length of the wall was, I judged, considerably over a city block, but there was no other opening in it.

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At the farther end, it was bounded by a crossroad, and, turning along this, I found that the wall extended nearly the same distance in this direction. There was an opening about midway—a small opening, closed by a heavy, iron-banded door—the servants' entrance, I told myself. The grounds of a row of houses facing the road beyond ran up to the wall at the back, and I could not follow it without attracting notice, but I could see that there was no break in it. I was almost certain that the wall which closed the estate on Godfrey's side was also unbroken. There were, then, only the two entrances.

I walked back again to the front, and paused for a glance through the gates. But there was nothing to be seen. The driveway parted and curved away out of sight in either direction, and a dense mass of shrubbery opposite the gate shut off any view of the grounds. Even of the house, there was nothing to be seen except the chimneys and one gable. Evidently, Mr. Vaughan was fond of privacy, and had spared no pains to secure it.

Opposite the Vaughan place, a strip of woodland ran back from the road. It was dense with undergrowth, and, I reflected, would form an admirable hiding-place. The road itself seemed little travelled, and I judged that the main artery of traffic was the road along which the trolley ran, two blocks away.

I returned to my starting point, and assured myself that the wall on that side was indeed without a break. Some vines had started up it here and there, but, for the most part, it loomed grey and bleak, crowned along its whole length by that threatening line of broken glass. I judged it to be twelve feet high, so that, even without the glass, it would be impossible for anyone to get over it without assistance. As I stood there looking at it, resenting the threat of that broken glass, and pondering the infirmity of character which such a threat revealed, it suddenly struck me that the upper part of the wall differed slightly from the lower part. It was a little lighter in colour, a little newer in appearance; and, examining the wall more closely, I discovered that originally it had been only eight or nine feet high, and that the upper part had been added at a later date—and last of all, of course, the broken glass!

As I turned back, at last, toward the house, I saw someone coming up the drive. In a moment, I recognised Swain, and quickened my steps.

"You made good time," I said.

"Yes, sir; I was fortunate in catching an express and not having to wait for the trolley."

"We'd better go into the house," I added. "I have a message for you—a confidential message."

He glanced at me quickly, but followed silently, as I led the way into Godfrey's study and carefully closed the door.

“Sit down,” I said, and I sat down myself and looked at him.

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I had always thought Swain a handsome, thoroughbred-looking fellow; and I saw that, in the past few months, he had grown more thoroughbred-looking than ever. His face was thinner than when he had first gone to work for us, there was a new line between his eyebrows, and the set of his lips told of battles fought and won. A year ago, it had seemed natural to call him Freddie, but no one would think of doing so now. His father's creditors had not attempted to take from him his wardrobe—a costly and extensive one—so that he was dressed as carefully, if not quite as fashionably, as ever, in a way that suggested a young millionaire, rather than a fifteen-dollar-a-week clerk. At this moment, his face was clouded, and he drummed the arm of his chair with nervous fingers. Then he shifted uneasily under my gaze, which was, perhaps, more earnest than I realised.

“You said you had a message for me, sir,” he reminded me.

“Yes,” I said. “Have you ever been out this way before?”

“Yes, I have been out this way a number of times.”

“You know this place, then?”

“I have heard it mentioned, but I have never been here before.”

“Do you know whose place that is next door to us?”

“Yes,” and his voice sank to a lower key. “It belongs to Worthington Vaughan.”

“And you know him?”

“At one time, I knew him quite well, sir,” and his voice was still lower.

“No doubt,” I went on, more and more interested, “you also knew his very fascinating daughter.”

A wave of colour crimsoned his face.

“Why are you asking me these questions, Mr. Lester?” he demanded.

“Because,” I said, “the message I have is from that young lady, and is for a man named Frederic Swain.”

He was on his feet, staring at me, and all the blood was gone from his cheeks.

“A message!” he cried. “From her! From Marjorie! What is it, Mr. Lester? For God’s sake....”

“Here it is,” I said, and handed him the letter.



He seized it, took one look at the address, then turned away to the window and ripped the envelope open. He unfolded the sheet of paper it contained, and as his eyes ran along it, his face grew whiter still. At last he raised his eyes and stared at me with the look of a man who felt the world tottering about him.

CHAPTER V

A CALL FOR HELP

"For heaven's sake, Swain," I said, "sit down and pull yourself together."

But he did not seem to hear me. Instead he read the letter through again, then he turned toward me.

"How did you get this, Mr. Lester?" he asked.

"I found it lying under the trees. It had been thrown over the wall."

"But how did you know it was thrown over by Miss Vaughan?"

"That was an easy guess," I said, sparring feebly. "Who else would attempt to conduct a surreptitious correspondence with a handsome young man?"

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But he did not smile; the look of intensity in his eyes deepened.

"Come, Mr. Lester," he protested, "don't play with me. I have a right to know the truth."

"What right?" I queried.

He paused an instant, as though nerving himself to speak, as though asking himself how much he should tell me. Then he came toward me impulsively.

"Miss Vaughan and I are engaged to be married," he said. "Some persons may tell you that the engagement has been broken off; more than once, I have offered to release her, but she refuses to be released. We love each other."

The word "love" is a difficult one for us Anglo-Saxons to pronounce; the voice in which Swain uttered it brought me to my feet, with outstretched hand.

"If there's anything I can do for you, my boy," I said, "tell me."

"Thank you, Mr. Lester," and he returned my clasp. "You have done a great deal already in giving me this letter so promptly. The only other thing you can do is to permit me to stay here until to-night."

"Until to-night?"

"Miss Vaughan asks me to meet her to-night."

"In her father's grounds?"

"Yes."

"Unknown to him?"

"Yes."

"He is not friendly to you?"

"No."

I had a little struggle with myself.

"See here, Swain," I said, "sit down and let us talk this thing over calmly. Before I promise anything, I should like to know more of the story. From the glimpse I caught of Miss Vaughan, I could see that she is very beautiful, and she also seemed to me to be very young."

"She is nineteen," said Swain.



“Her father is wealthy, I suppose?”

“Very wealthy.”

“And her mother is dead?”

“Yes.”

“Well,” I began, and hesitated, fearing to wound him.

“I know what you are thinking,” Swain burst in, “and I do not blame you. You are thinking that she is a young, beautiful and wealthy girl, while I am a poverty-stricken nonentity, without any profession, and able to earn just enough to live on—perhaps I couldn’t do even that, if I had to buy my clothes! You are thinking that her father is right to separate us, and that she ought to be protected from me. Isn’t that it?”

“Yes,” I admitted, “something like that.”

“And I answer, Mr. Lester, by saying that all that is true, that I am not worthy of her, and that nobody knows it better than I do. There are thousands of men who could offer her far more than I can, and who would be eager to offer it. But when I asked her to marry me, I thought myself the son of a wealthy man. When I found myself a pauper, I wrote at once to release her. She replied that when she wished her release, she would ask for it; that it wasn’t my money she was in love with. Then I came out here and had a talk with her father. He was kind enough, but pointed out that the affair could not go further until I had established myself. I agreed, of course; I agreed, too, when he suggested that it would only be fair to her to leave her free—not to see her or write to her, or try to influence her in any way. I wanted to be fair to her. Since then, I have not seen her, nor heard from her. But her father’s feelings have changed toward me.”

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"In what way?"

"I thought he might be interested to know what I was doing, and two or three months ago, I called and asked to see him. Instead of seeing me, he sent word by a black-faced fellow in a white robe that neither he nor his daughter wished to see me again."

His face was red with the remembered humiliation.

"I wrote to Miss Vaughan once, after that," he added, "but my letter was not answered."

"Evidently she didn't get your letter."

"Why do you think so?"

"If she had got it, she would have known that you were no longer at 1010 Fifth Avenue. Her father, no doubt, kept it from her."

He flushed still more deeply, and started to say something, but I held him silent.

"He was justified in keeping it," I said. "You had promised not to write to her. And I don't see that you have given me any reason why I should assist you against him."

"I haven't," Swain admitted more calmly, "and under ordinary circumstances, my self-respect would compel me to keep away. I am not a fortune-hunter. But I can't keep away; I can't stand on my dignity. When she calls for aid, I *must* go to her, not for my own sake but for hers, because she needs to be protected from her father far more than from me."

"What do you mean by that?" I demanded.

"Mr. Lester," he said, leaning forward in his chair and speaking in a lowered voice and with great earnestness, "her father is mad—I am sure of it. No one but a madman would live and dress as he does; no one but a madman would devote his whole time to the study of the supernatural; no one but a madman would believe in the supernatural as he does."

But I shook my head.

"I'm afraid that won't do, Swain. A good many fairly sane people believe in the supernatural and devote themselves to its study—there is William James, for instance."

"But William James doesn't dress in flowing robes, and worship the sun, and live with a Hindu mystic."

"No," I smiled, "he doesn't do that," and I thought again of the mysterious light and of the two white-clad figures. "Does he live with a Hindu mystic?"

"Yes," said Swain, bitterly. "An adept, or whatever they call it. He's the fellow who kicked me out."

"Does he speak English?"

"Better than I do. He seems a finely-educated man."

"Is he a lunatic, too?"

Swain hesitated.

"I don't know," he said, finally. "I only saw him once, and I was certainly impressed—I wasn't one, two, three with him. I suppose mysticism comes more or less natural to a Hindu; but I'm convinced that Mr. Vaughan has softening of the brain."

"How old is he?"

"About sixty."

"Has he always been queer?"

"He has always been interested in telepathy and mental suggestion, and all that sort of thing. But before his wife's death, he was fairly normal. It was her death that started him on this supernatural business. He hasn't thought of anything else since."

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"Are there any relatives who could be asked to interfere?"

"None that I know of."

I thought over what he had told me.

"Well," I said at last, "I can see no harm in your meeting Miss Vaughan and finding out what the condition of affairs really is. If her father is really mad, he may be a good deal worse now than he was when you saw him last. It would, of course, be possible to have his sanity tested—but his daughter would scarcely wish to do that."

"No, of course not," Swain agreed.

"Her letter tells you nothing?"

"Nothing except that she is in great trouble, and wishes to see me at once."

"You are to go to the house?"

"No; there is an arbour in one corner of the grounds. She says that she will be there at eleven-thirty every night for three nights. After that, she says it will be no use for me to come—that it will be too late."

"What does she mean by 'too late'?"

"I have no idea," he answered, and turned to another anxious perusal of the letter.

I turned the situation over in my mind. Evidently Miss Vaughan believed that she had grave cause for alarm, and yet it was quite possible she might be mistaken. She was being urged to consent to something against her will, but perhaps it was for her own good. In any event, I had seen no indication that her consent was being sought by violence. There must be no interference on our part until we were surer of our ground.

"Well, Swain," I said, at last, "I will help you on one condition."

"What is that?"

"You will meet Miss Vaughan to-night and hear her story, but you will take no action until you and I have talked the matter over. She, herself, says that she has three days," I went on, as he started to protest, "so there is no necessity for leaping in the dark. And I would point out to you that she is not yet of age, but is still under her father's control."

"She is nineteen," he protested.

“In this state, the legal age for women, as for men, is twenty-one. The law requires a very serious reason for interfering between a child and its father. Moreover,” I added, “she must not be compromised. If you persuade her to accompany you to-night, where would you take her? In no case, will I be a party to an elopement—I will do all I can to prevent it.”

He took a short turn up and down the room, his hands clenched behind him.

“Mr. Lester,” he said, at last, stopping before me, “I want you to believe that I have not even thought of an elopement—that would be too base, too unfair to her. But I see that you are right. She must not be compromised.”

“And you promise to ask my advice?”

“Suppose I make such a promise, what then?”

“If you make such a promise, and I agree with you as to the necessity for Miss Vaughan to leave her father, I think I can arrange for her to stay with Mr. and Mrs. Royce for a time. There she will be safe. Should legal proceedings become necessary, our firm will help you. I want to help you, Swain,” I added, warmly, “but I must be convinced that you deserve help. That’s reasonable, isn’t it?”

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"Yes," he agreed, and held out his hand. "And I promise."

"Good. And now for the arrangements."

Two twelve-foot ladders were necessary, one for either side of the wall; but, beyond a short step-ladder, the place possessed none except the long one by which Godfrey and I had mounted into the tree. Swain suggested that this might do for one, but I felt that it would better stay where it was, and sent Hargis over to Yonkers to buy two new ones, instructing him to bring them back with him.

Then Swain and I reconnoitred the wall, and chose for the crossing a spot where the glass escarpment seemed a little less formidable than elsewhere.

"You can step from one ladder to the other," I pointed out, "without touching the top of the wall. A mere touch would be dangerous in the dark."

He nodded his agreement, and finally we went back to the house. Getting there, we found suddenly that we had nothing more to say. Swain was soon deep in his own thoughts; and, I must confess, that, after the first excitement, I began to find the affair a little wearying. Another man's love-affair is usually wearying; and, besides that, the glimpse which I had caught of Marjorie Vaughan made me think that she was worthy of a bigger fish than Swain would ever be. He was right in saying that there were thousands of men who had more to give her, and who would be eager to give.

I examined Swain, as he sat there staring at nothing, with eyes not wholly friendly. He was handsome enough, but in a stereotyped way. And he was only an insignificant clerk, with small prospect of ever being anything much better, for he had started the battle of life too late. Honest, of course, honourable, clean-hearted, but commonplace, with a depth of soul easily fathomed. I know now that I was unjust to Swain, but, at the moment, my scrutiny of him left me strangely depressed.

A rattle of wheels on the drive brought us both out of our thoughts. It was Hargis returning with the ladders. I had him hang them up against the shed where he kept his gardening implements, for I did not wish him to suspect the invasion we had planned; then, just to kill time and get away from Swain, I spent an hour with Hargis in his garden; and finally came the summons to dinner. An hour later, as we sat on the front porch smoking, and still finding little or nothing to say, Mrs. Hargis came out to bid us good-night.

"Mr. Swain can use the bedroom next to yours, Mr. Lester," she said.

"Perhaps he won't stay all night," I said. "If he does, I'll show him the way to it. And thank you very much, Mrs. Hargis."

"Is there anything else I can do, sir?"

“No, thank you.”

“Mr. Godfrey will be here a little before midnight—at least, that’s his usual time.”

“We’ll wait up for him,” I said. “Good night, Mrs. Hargis.”

“Good night, sir,” and she went back into the house.

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I have never passed through a longer or more trying hour than the next one was, and I could tell by the way Swain twitched about in his chair that he felt the tedium as much as I. Once or twice I tried to start a conversation, but it soon trickled dry; and we ended by smoking away moodily and staring out into the darkness.

At last Swain sprang to his feet.

"I can't stand this any longer," he said. "I'm going over the wall."

I struck a match and looked at my watch.

"It isn't eleven o'clock yet," I warned him.

"I don't care. Perhaps she'll be ahead of time. Anyway, I might as well wait there as here."

"Come on, then," I agreed, for I felt myself that another such hour would be unendurable.

Together we made our way back to the shed and took down the ladders. A moment later, we were at the wall. Swain placed his ladder against it, and mounted quickly to the top. As he paused there, I handed him up the other one. He caught it from my hands, lifted it over the wall, and lowered it carefully on the other side. As he did so, I heard him give a muffled exclamation of mingled pain and annoyance, and knew that he had cut himself.

"Not bad, is it?" I asked.

"No; only a scratch on the wrist," he answered shortly, and the next instant he had swung himself over the wall and disappeared.

CHAPTER VI

THE SCREAM IN THE NIGHT

For some moments, I stood staring up into the darkness, half-expecting that shadowy figure to reappear, descend the ladder, and rejoin me. Then I shook myself together. The fact that our plot was really moving, that Swain was in the enemy's country, so to speak, gave the affair a finality which it had lacked before. It was too late now to hesitate or turn back; we must press forward. I felt as though, after a long period of uncertainty, war had been declared and the advance definitely begun. So it was with a certain sense of relief that I turned away, walked slowly back to the house, and sat down again upon the porch to wait.

Now waiting is seldom a pleasant or an easy thing, and I found it that night most unpleasant and uneasy. For, before long, doubts began to crowd upon me—doubts of the wisdom of the course I had subscribed to. It would have been wiser, I told myself, if it had been I, and not Swain, who had gone to the rendezvous; wiser still, perhaps, to have sought an interview openly, and to have made sure of the facts before seeming to encourage what might easily prove to be a girl's more or less romantic illusions. A midnight interview savoured too much of melodrama to appeal to a middle-aged lawyer like myself, however great its appeal might be to youthful lovers. At any rate, I would be certain that the need was very great before I consented to meddle further!

Somewhat comforted by this resolution and by the thought that no real harm had as yet been done, I struck a match and looked at my watch. It was half-past eleven. Well, whatever the story was, Swain was hearing it now, and I should hear it before long. And then I caught the hum of an approaching car, and was momentarily blinded by the glare of acetylene lamps.

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"Hello, Lester," called Godfrey's voice, "I'll be back in a minute," and he ran the car on toward the rear of the house.

I stood up with a gasp of thankfulness. Here was someone to confide in and advise with. The stretch of lonely waiting was at an end; it had been a trying evening!

I think the warmth of my greeting surprised Godfrey, for he looked at me curiously.

"Sit down, Godfrey," I said. "I've got something to tell you."

"What, discoveries already?" he laughed, but he drew a chair close to mine and sat down. "Well, what are they?"

I began at the beginning and related the day's adventures. He listened without comment, but I could see how his interest grew.

"So young Swain is over in those grounds now," he said thoughtfully, when I had finished.

"Yes; he's been there three-quarters of an hour."

"Why do you suppose Miss Vaughan named so late an hour?"

"I don't know. Perhaps because she was afraid of being discovered earlier than that—or perhaps merely because she's just a romantic girl."

Godfrey sat with his head bent in thought for a moment.

"I have it!" he said. "At eleven-thirty every night her father and the adept go up to the roof, to remain there till midnight. That is the one time of the whole day when she is absolutely sure to be alone. Come along, Lester!"

He was on his feet now, and his voice was quivering with excitement.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Up the ladder. It's nearly twelve. If the star falls as usual, we'll know that everything is all right. If it doesn't ..."

He did not finish, but hurried away among the trees. In a moment we were at the ladder; in another moment we were high among the leaves, straining our eyes through the darkness.

"I'm going to look at my watch," said Godfrey, in a low voice. "Lean back and screen me."

I heard the flash of the match and saw a little glare of light against the nearest leaves. Then Godfrey's voice spoke again.

"It's three minutes of twelve," he said.

There was a tension in his voice which sent a shiver through me, though I understood but dimly what it was he feared. The stars were shining brightly, and once I fancied that I saw the strange star appear among them; but when I closed my eyes for an instant and looked again, it was gone. Slow minute followed minute, and the hand with which I clutched the ladder began to tremble. The sight of that mysterious light had shaken me the night before, but not half so deeply as its absence shook me now. At last the suspense grew unendurable.

"It must be long past midnight," I whispered.

"It is," agreed Godfrey gravely; "we may as well go down."

He paused an instant longer to stare out into the darkness, then descended quickly. I followed, and found him waiting, a dark shadow. He put his hand on my arm, and stood a moment, as though in indecision. For myself, I felt as though an intolerable burden had been laid upon my shoulders.

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"Well," I asked, at last, "what now?"

"We must see if Swain has returned," he answered. "If he has, all right. If he hasn't, we'll have to go and look for him."

"What is it you fear, Godfrey?" I demanded. "Do you think Swain's in danger?"

"I don't know what I fear; but there's something wrong over there. This is the first night for a week that that light hasn't appeared."

"Still," I pointed out, "that may have nothing to do with Swain."

"No; but it's a coincidence that he should be in the grounds—and I'm always afraid of coincidences. Let us see if he is back," and he turned toward the house.

But I held his arm.

"If he's back," I said, "he'll have taken the ladders down from the wall."

"That's true," and together we made our way forward among the trees. Then we reached the wall, and there was the dim white line of the ladder leaning against it. Without a word, Godfrey mounted it, stood an instant at the top, and then came down again.

"The other ladder is still there," he said, and took off his cap and rubbed his head perplexedly. I could not see his face, but I could guess how tense it was. I had been with him in many trying situations, but only once before had I seen him use that gesture!

"It won't do to alarm the house," he said, at last. "Do you know where he was to meet Miss Vaughan?"

"At an arbour in one corner of the grounds," I answered.

"Then we'll start from there and take a quiet look for him. Wait here for me a minute."

He melted into the darkness, and I stood holding on to the ladder as though in danger of falling, and staring at the top of the wall, where I had last seen Swain. An hour and a half had passed since then....

A touch on the arm brought me around with a start.

"Here, put this pistol in your pocket," said Godfrey's voice, and I felt the weapon pressed into my hand. "And here's an electric torch. Do you feel the button?"

“Yes,” I said, and pressed it. A ray of light shot toward the wall, but I released the button instantly.

“You’d better keep it in your hand,” he added, “ready for action. No telling what we’ll run across. And now come ahead.”

He put his foot on the ladder, but I stopped him.

“Look here, Godfrey,” I said, “do you realise that what we’re about to do is pretty serious? Swain might have a legal excuse, since the daughter of the house invited him to a meeting; but if we go over the wall, we’re trespassers pure and simple. Anybody who runs across us in the darkness has the right to shoot us down without asking any questions—and we’d have no legal right to shoot back!”

I could hear Godfrey chuckling, and I felt my cheeks redden.

“You remind me of Tartarin,” he said; “the adventurer-Tartarin urging you on, the lawyer-Tartarin holding you back. My advice is to shake the lawyer, Lester. He’s out of his element here to-night. But if he’s too strong for you, why, stay here,” and he started up the ladder.

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Burning with vexation, I started after him, but suddenly he stopped.

"Listen!" he whispered.

I heard something rattle against the other side of the wall; then a dark figure appeared on the coping.

I felt Godfrey press me back, and descended cautiously. A moment later, something slid down the wall, and I knew that the person at the top had lifted the other ladder over. Then the figure descended, and then a distorted face stared into the circle of Godfrey's torch.

For a breath, I did not recognise it; then I saw that it was Swain's.

I shall never forget the shock it gave me, with its starting eyes and working mouth and smear of blood across the forehead. Godfrey, I knew, was also startled, for the light flashed out for an instant, and then flashed on again.

"What is it, Swain?" I cried, and seized him by the arm; but he shook me off roughly.

"Stand back!" he cried, hoarsely. "Who is it? What do you want?"

"It's Lester," I said, and Godfrey flashed his torch into my face, then back to Swain's.

"But you're not alone."

"No; this is Mr. Godfrey."

"Mr. Godfrey?"

"Whose house we're staying at," I explained.

"Ah!" said Swain, and put one hand to his head and leaned heavily against the ladder.

"I think we'd better go to the house," Godfrey suggested, soothingly. "We all need a bracer. Then we can talk. Don't you think so, Mr. Swain?"

Swain nodded vacantly, but I could see that he had not understood. His face was still working and he seemed to be in pain.

"I want to wash," he said, thickly. "I cut my wrist on that damned glass, and I'm blood all over, and my head's wrong, somehow." His voice trailed off into an unintelligible mumble, but he held one hand up into the circle of light, and I saw that his cuff was soaked with blood and his hand streaked with it.

“Come along, then,” said Godfrey peremptorily. “You’re right—that cut must be attended to,” and he started toward the house.

“Wait!” Swain called after him, with unexpected vigour. “We must take down the ladders. We mustn’t leave them here.”

“Why not?”

“If they’re found, they’ll suspect—they’ll know ...” He stopped, stammering, and again his voice trailed away into a mumble, as though beyond his control.

Godfrey looked at him for a moment, and I could guess at the surprise and suspicion in his eyes. I myself was ill at ease, for there was something in Swain’s face—a sort of vacant horror and dumb shrinking—that filled me with a vague repulsion. And then to see his jaw working, as he tried to form articulate words and could not, sent a shiver over my scalp.

“Very well,” Godfrey agreed, at last. “We’ll take the ladders, since you think it so important. You take that one, Lester, and I’ll take this.”

I stooped to raise the ladder to my shoulder, when suddenly, cutting the darkness like a knife, came a scream so piercing, so vibrant with fear, that I stood there crouching, every muscle rigid. Again the scream came, more poignant, more terrible, wrung from a woman’s throat by the last extremity of horror; and then a silence sickening and awful. What was happening in that silence?

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I stood erect, gaping, suffocated, rising as from a long submersion. Godfrey's finger had slipped from the button of his torch, and we were in darkness; but suddenly a dim figure hurled itself past us, up the ladder.

With a low cry, Godfrey snatched at it, but his hand clutched only the empty air. The next instant, the figure poised itself on the coping of the wall and then plunged forward out of sight. I heard the crash of breaking branches, a scramble, a patter of feet, and all was still.

"It's Swain!" said Godfrey, hoarsely; "and that's a twelve-foot drop! Why, the man's mad! Hand me that ladder, Lester!" he added, for he was already at the top of the wall.

I lifted it, as I had done once before that night, and saw Godfrey slide it over the wall.

"Come on!" he said. "We must save him if we can!" and he, too, disappeared.

The next instant, I was scrambling desperately after him. The lawyer-Tartarin had vanished!

CHAPTER VII

THE TRAGEDY

The wall was masked on the other side by a dense growth of shrubbery, and struggling through this, I found myself on the gravelled path where I had seen Marjorie Vaughan. Before me, along this path, sped a shadow which I knew to be Godfrey, and I followed at top speed. At the end of a moment, I caught a flash of light among the trees, and knew that we were nearing the house; but I saw no sign of Swain.

We came to the stretch of open lawn, crossed it, and, guided by the light, found ourselves at the end of a short avenue of trees. At the other end, a stream of light poured from an open door, and against that light a running figure was silhouetted. Even as I saw it, it bounded through the open door and vanished.

"It's Swain!" gasped Godfrey; and then we, too, were at that open door.

For an instant, I thought the room was empty. Then, from behind the table in the centre, a demoniac, blood-stained figure rose into view, holding in its arms a white-robed woman. With a sort of nervous shock, I saw that the man was Swain, and the woman Marjorie Vaughan. A thrill of fear ran through me as I saw how her head fell backwards against his shoulder, how her arms hung limp....

Without so much as a glance in our direction, he laid her gently on a couch, fell to his knees beside it, and began to chafe her wrists.

It was Godfrey who mastered himself first, and who stepped forward to Swain's side.

"Is she dead?" he asked.

Swain shook his head impatiently, without looking up.

"How is she hurt?" Godfrey persisted, bending closer above the unconscious girl.

Swain shot him one red glance.

"She's not hurt!" he said, hoarsely. "She has fainted—that's all. Go away."

But Godfrey did not go away. After one burning look at Swain's lowering face, he bent again above the still figure on the couch, and touched his fingers to the temples. What he saw or felt seemed to reassure him, for his voice was more composed when he spoke again.

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"I think you're right, Swain," he said. "But we'd better call someone."

"Call away!" snarled Swain.

"You mean there's no one here? Surely, her father ..."

He stopped, for at the words Swain had burst into a hoarse laugh.

"Her father!" he cried. "Oh, yes; he's here! Call him! He's over there!"

He made a wild gesture toward a high-backed easy-chair beside the table, his eyes gleaming with an almost fiendish excitement; then the gleam faded, and he turned back to the girl.

Godfrey cast one astonished glance at him and strode to the chair. I saw his face quiver with sudden horror, I saw him catch at the table for support, and for an instant he stood staring down. Then he turned stiffly toward me and motioned me to approach.

In the chair a man sat huddled forward—a grey-haired man, clad in a white robe. His hands were gripping the chair-arms as though in agony. His head hung down almost upon his knees.

Silently Godfrey reached down and raised the head. And a cry of horror burst from both of us.

The face was purple with congested blood, the tongue swollen and horribly protruding, the eyes suffused and starting from their sockets. And then, at a motion from Godfrey's finger, I saw that about the neck a cord was tightly knotted. The man had been strangled.

Godfrey, after a breathless moment in which he made sure that the man was quite dead, let the head fall forward again. It turned me sick to see how low it sagged, how limp it hung. And I saw that the collar of the white robe was spotted with blood.

I do not know what was in Godfrey's mind, but, by a common impulse, we turned and looked at Swain. He was still on his knees beside the couch. Apparently he had forgotten our presence.

"It's plain enough," said Godfrey, his voice thick with emotion. "She came in and found the body. No wonder she screamed like that! But where are the servants? Where is everybody?"

The same thought was in my own mind. The utter silence of the house, the fact that no one came, added, somehow, to the horror of the moment. Those wild screams must have echoed from cellar to garret—and yet no one came!



Godfrey made a rapid scrutiny of the room, which was evidently the library, with a double door opening upon the grounds and another opposite opening into the hall. On the wall beside the inner door, he found an electric button, and he pushed it for some moments, but there was no response. If it rang a bell, the bell was so far away that we could not hear it.

A heavy curtain hung across the doorway. Godfrey pulled it aside and peered into the hall beyond. The hall was dark and silent. With face decidedly grim, he took his torch from one pocket and his pistol from another.

"Come along, Lester," he said. "We've got to look into this. Have your torch ready—and your pistol. God knows what further horrors this house contains!"

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He pulled back the curtain, so that the hall was lighted to some extent from the open doorway, and then passed through, I after him. The hall was a broad one, running right through the centre of the house from front to rear. Godfrey proceeded cautiously and yet rapidly the whole length of it, flashing his torch into every room. They were all luxuriously furnished, but were empty of human occupants. From the kitchen, which closed the hall at the rear, a flight of stone steps led down into the basement, and Godfrey descended these with a steadiness I could not but admire. We found ourselves in a square, stone-flagged room, evidently used as a laundry. Two doors opened out of it, but both were secured with heavy padlocks.

“Store-rooms or wine-cellars, perhaps,” Godfrey ventured, mounted the stairs again to the kitchen, and returned to the room whence we had started.

Everything there was as we had left it. The dead man sat huddled forward in his chair; Swain was still on his knees beside the couch; the girl had not stirred. Godfrey went to the side of the couch, and, disregarding Swain’s fierce glance, again placed his fingers lightly on the girl’s left temple. Then he came back to me.

“If she doesn’t revive pretty soon,” he said, “we’ll have to try heroic measures. But there must be somebody in the house. Let’s look upstairs.”

He led the way up the broad stairs, which rose midway of the hall, sending a long ray of light ahead of him. I followed in no very happy frame of mind, for I confess that this midnight exploration of an unknown house, with a murdered man for its only occupant, was getting on my nerves. But Godfrey proceeded calmly and systematically.

The hall above corresponded to that below, with two doors on each side, opening into bedroom suites. The first was probably that of the master of the house. It consisted of bedroom, bath and dressing-room, but there was no one there. The next was evidently Miss Vaughan’s. It also had a bath and a daintily-furnished boudoir; but these, too, were empty.

Then, as we opened the door across the hall, a strange odour saluted us—an odour suggestive somehow of the East—which, in the first moment, caught the breath from the throat, and in the second seemed to muffle and retard the beating of the heart.

A flash of Godfrey’s torch showed that we were in a little entry, closed at the farther end by a heavy drapery. Godfrey strode forward and swept the drapery aside. The rush of perfume was over-powering, and through the opening came a soft glow of light.

It was a moment before I got my breath; then a mist seemed to fall from before my eyes and a strange sense of exaltation and well-being stole through me. I saw Godfrey standing motionless, transfixed, with one hand holding back the drapery, and his torch

hanging unused in the other, and I crept forward and peered over his shoulder at the strangest scene I have ever gazed upon.

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Just in front of us, poised in the air some three feet from the floor, hung a sphere of crystal, glowing with a soft radiance which seemed to wax and wane, to quiver almost to darkness and then to burn more clearly. It was like a dreamer's pulse, fluttering, pausing, leaping, in accord with his vision. And as I gazed at the sphere, I fancied I could see within it strange, elusive shapes, which changed and merged and faded from moment to moment, and yet grew always clearer and more suggestive. I bent forward, straining my eyes to see them better, to fathom their meaning ...

Godfrey, turning to speak to me, saw my attitude and shook me roughly by the arm.

"Don't do that, Lester!" he growled in my ear. "Take your eyes off that crystal!"

I tried to move my eyes, but could not, until Godfrey pulled me around to face him. I stood blinking at him stupidly.

"I was nearly gone, myself, before I realised the danger," he said. "A sphere like that can hypnotise a man more quickly than anything else on earth, especially when his resistance is lessened, as it is by this heavy perfume."

"It was rather pleasant," I said. "I should like to try it some time."

"Well, you can't try it now. You've got something else to do. Besides, it has two victims already."

"Two victims?"

"Look carefully, but keep your eyes off the sphere," he said, and swung me around toward the room again.

The room was shrouded in impenetrable darkness, except for the faint and quivering radiance which the sphere emitted, and as I plunged my eyes into its depths in an effort to see what lay there, it seemed to me that I had never seen blackness so black. As I stared into it, with straining eyes, a vague form grew dimly visible beside the glowing sphere; and then I recoiled a little, for suddenly it took shape and I saw it was a man.

I had a queer fancy, as I stood there, that it was really a picture into which I was gazing—one of Rembrandt's—for, gradually, one detail after another emerged from the darkness, vague shadows took on shape and meaning, but farther back there was always more shadow, and farther back still more ...

The man was sitting cross-legged on a low divan, his hands crossed in front of him and hanging limply between his knees. His clothing I could see but vaguely, for it was merged into the darkness about him, but his hands stood out white against it. He was staring straight at the crystal, with unwavering and unwinking gaze, and sat as motionless as though carved in stone. The glow from the sphere picked out his profile

with a line of light—I could see the high forehead, the strong, curved nose, the full lips shaded by a faint moustache, and the long chin, only partially concealed by a close-clipped beard. It was a wonderful and compelling face, especially as I then saw it, and I gazed at it for a long moment.

“It’s the adept, I suppose,” said Godfrey, no longer taking care to lower his voice.

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It sounded unnaturally loud in the absolute stillness of the room, and I looked at the adept quickly, but he had not moved.

"Can't he hear you?" I asked.

"No—he couldn't hear a clap of thunder. That is, unless he's faking."

I looked again at the impassive figure.

"He's not faking," I said.

"I don't know," and Godfrey shook his head sceptically. "It looks like the real thing—but these fellows are mighty clever. Do you see the other victim? There's no fake about it!"

"I see no one else," I said, after a vain scrutiny.

"Look carefully on the other side of the sphere. Don't you see something there?"

My eyes were smarting under the strain, and for a moment longer I saw nothing; then a strange, grey shape detached itself from the blackness. It was an ugly and repulsive shape, slender below, but swelling hideously at the top, and as I stared at it, it seemed to me that it returned my stare with malignant eyes screened by a pair of white-rimmed glasses. Then, with a sensation of dizziness, I saw that the shape was swaying gently back and forth, in a sort of rhythm. And then, quite suddenly, I saw what it was, and a chill of horror quivered up my back.

It was a cobra.

To and fro it swung, to and fro, its staring eyes fixed upon the sphere, its spectacled hood hideously distended.

The very soul within me trembled as I gazed at those unwinking eyes. What did they see in the sphere? What was passing in that inscrutable brain? Could it, too, reconstruct the past, read the mysteries of the future ...

Some awful power, greater than my will, seemed stretching its tentacles from the darkness: I felt them dragging at me, certain, remorseless, growing stronger and stronger ...

With something very like a shriek of terror, I tore myself away, out of the entry, into the hall, to the stairs, and down them into the lighted room below.

And as I stood there, gasping for breath, Godfrey followed me, and I saw that his face, too, was livid.



CHAPTER VIII

A FRESH ENIGMA

Godfrey met my eyes with a little deprecating smile, put his torch in one pocket, took a handkerchief from another, and mopped his forehead.

“Rather nerve-racking, wasn’t it, Lester?” he remarked, and then his gaze wandered to the couch, and he stepped toward it quickly.

I saw that a change had come in Miss Vaughan’s condition. Her eyes were still closed, but her body no longer lay inert and lifeless, for from moment to moment it was shaken by a severe nervous tremor. Godfrey’s face was very grave as he looked at her.

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"Stop stroking her wrists, Swain," he said; "that does no good," and when Swain, without answering or seeming to hear, kept on stroking them, Godfrey drew the hands away, took Swain by the arm, and half-lifted him to his feet. "Listen to me," he said, more sternly, and shook him a little, for Swain's eyes were dull and vacant. "I want you to sit quietly in a chair for a while, till you get your senses back. Miss Vaughan is seriously ill and must not be disturbed in any way. I'm going to get a doctor and a nurse at once; they'll do what needs to be done. Until then, she must be left alone. Understand?"

Swain nodded vaguely, and permitted Godfrey to lead him to a chair near the outer door, where he sat down. As his hand fell across the arm of the chair, I could see that a little blood was still oozing from the wound on the wrist. Godfrey saw it, too, and picked up the hand and looked at it. Then he laid it gently down again and glanced at his watch. I followed his example, and saw that it was half-past one.

"Have you nerve enough to stay here half an hour by yourself, Lester?" he asked.

"By myself?" I echoed, and glanced at the dead man and at the quivering girl.

"I've got to run over to my place to get a few things and do some telephoning," he explained. "We must get a doctor up here at once; and then there's the police—I'll try to get Simmonds. Will you stay?"

"Yes," I said, "of course. But please get back as soon as you can."

"I will," he promised, and, after a last look around the room, stepped out upon the walk.

I went to the door and looked after him until the sound of his footsteps died away. Then, feeling very lonely, I turned back into the room. Those regular tremors were still shaking the girl's body in a way that seemed to me most alarming, but there was nothing I could do for her, and I finally pulled a chair to Swain's side. He, at least, offered a sort of companionship. He was sitting with his head hanging forward in a way that reminded me most unpleasantly of the huddled figure by the table, and did not seem to be aware of my presence. I tried to draw him into talk, but a slight nod from time to time was all I could get from him, and I finally gave it up. Mechanically, my hand sought my coat pocket and got out my pipe—yes, that was what I needed; and, sitting down in the open doorway, I filled it and lighted up.

My nerves grew calmer, presently, and I was able to think connectedly of the events of the night, but there were two things which, looked at from any angle, I could not understand. One was Swain's dazed and incoherent manner; the other was the absence of servants.

As to Swain, I believed him to be a well-poised fellow, not easily upset, and certainly not subject to attacks of nerves. What had happened to him, then, to reduce him to the



pitiable condition in which he had come back to us over the wall, and in which he was still plunged? The discovery of the murder and of Miss Vaughan's senseless body might have accounted for it, but his incoherence had antedated that—unless, indeed, he knew of the murder before he left the grounds. That thought gave me a sudden shock, and I put it away from me, not daring to pursue it farther.

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As to the house, its deserted condition seemed sinister and threatening. It was absurd to suppose that an establishment such as this could be carried on without servants, or with less than three or four. But where were they? And then I remembered that Godfrey and I had not completed our exploration of the house. We had stopped at the gruesome room where the adept and his serpent gazed unwinking into the crystal sphere. There was at least one suite on the same floor we had not looked into, and no doubt there were other rooms on the attic floor above. But that any one could have slept on undisturbed by those piercing screams and by our own comings and goings seemed unbelievable. Perhaps there were separate quarters in the grounds somewhere—

And then, without conscious will of my own, I felt my body stiffen and my fingers grip my pipe convulsively. A slow tremor seemed to start from the end of my spine, travel up it, and pass off across my scalp. There was someone in the room behind me; someone with gleaming eyes fixed upon me; and I sat there rigidly, straining my ears, expecting I knew not what—a blow upon the head, a cord about the neck.

A rapid step came up the walk and Godfrey appeared suddenly out of the darkness.

“Well, Lester,” he began; but I sprang to my feet and faced the room, for I could have sworn that I had heard behind me the rustle of a silken dress. But there was no one there except Swain and Miss Vaughan and the dead man—and none of them had moved.

“What is it?” Godfrey asked, stepping past me into the room.

“There was someone there, Godfrey,” I said. “I’m sure of it—I felt someone—I felt his eyes on me—and then, as you spoke, I heard the rustle of a dress.”

“Of a dress?”

“Or of a robe,” and my thoughts were on the bearded man upstairs.

Godfrey glanced at me, crossed the room, and looked out into the hall. Then he turned back to me.

“Well, whoever it was,” he said, and I could see that he thought my ears had deceived me, “he has made good his escape. There’ll be a doctor and a nurse here in a few minutes, and I got Simmonds and told him to bring Goldberger along. He can’t get here for an hour anyway. And I’ve got a change here for Swain,” he added, with a gesture toward some garments he carried over one arm; “also a bracer to be administered to him,” and he drew a flask from his pocket and handed it to me. “Maybe you need one, yourself,” he added, smiling drily, “since you’ve taken to hearing rustling robes.”

"I do," I said, "though not on that account," and I raised the flask to my lips and took a long swallow.

"Suppose you take Swain up to the bath-room," Godfrey suggested, "and help him to get cleaned up. I'll go down to the gate and wait for the doctor."

"The gate's probably locked."

"I thought of that," and he drew a small but heavy hammer from his pocket. "I'll smash the lock, if there's no other way. I'd like you to get Swain into shape before anyone arrives," he added. "He's not a prepossessing object as he is."

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"No, he isn't," I agreed, looking at him, and I took the garments which Godfrey held out to me. Then I went over to Swain and put the flask into his uninjured hand. "Take a drink of that," I said.

He did not understand at first; then he put the flask to his lips and drank eagerly—so eagerly that I had to draw it away. He watched me longingly as I screwed on the cap and slipped it into my pocket; and there was more colour in his face and a brighter light in his eyes.

"Now, come along," I said, "and get that cut fixed up."

He rose obediently and followed me out into the hall. Godfrey had preceded us, found the light-switch after a brief search, and turned it on.

"There's a switch in the bath-room, too, no doubt," he said. "Bring him down again, as soon as you get him fixed up. You'll find some cotton and gauze in one of the pockets of the coat."

Swain followed me up the stair and into the bath-room. He seemed to understand what I intended doing, for he divested himself of coat and shirt and was soon washing arms and face vigorously. Then he dried himself, and stood patiently while I washed and bandaged the cut on the wrist. It was not a deep one, and had about stopped bleeding.

"Feel better?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, and without waiting for me to tell him, slipped into the clean shirt which Godfrey had brought, attached the collar and tied the tie, all this quite composedly and without hesitation or clumsiness. Yet I felt, in some indefinable way, that something was seriously wrong with him. His eyes were vacant and his face flabby, as though the muscles were relaxed. It gave me the feeling that his intelligence was relaxed, too!

He picked up his own coat, but I stopped him.

"Don't put that on," I said, speaking to him as I would have spoken to a child. "The sleeve is blood-stained and there's a long tear down the side. Take this one," and I held out the light lounging-coat Godfrey had brought with him.

Swain laid down his own garment without a word and put on the other one. I rolled the soiled garments into a bundle, took them under my arm, turned out the lights, and led the way downstairs.

A murmur of voices from the library told me that someone had arrived, and when I reached the door, I saw that it was the doctor and the nurse. The former was just rising from a rapid examination of the quivering figure on the couch.

“We must get her to bed at once,” he said, turning to Godfrey. “Her bedroom’s upstairs, I suppose?”

“Yes,” said Godfrey; “shall I show you the way?”

The doctor nodded and, lifting the girl carefully in his arms, followed Godfrey out into the hall. The nurse picked up a medicine-case from the floor and followed after.

I had expected Swain to rush forward to the couch, to make a scene, perhaps, and had kept my hand upon his arm; but to my astonishment he did not so much as glance in that direction. He stood patiently beside me, with his eyes on the floor, and when my restraining hand fell away, he walked slowly to the chair in which he had been sitting, and dropped into it, relaxing limply as with fatigue.

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Godfrey was back in a moment.

"That doctor was the nearest one I could find," he said. "He seems to be all right. But if Miss Vaughan isn't better in the morning, I'll get a specialist out."

"Godfrey," I said, in a low tone, "there's something the matter with Swain," and I motioned to where he sat, flaccid and limp, apparently half-asleep. "He is suffering from shock, or something of that sort. It's something more, anyway, than over-wrought nerves. He seems to be only half-conscious."

"I noticed it," said Godfrey, with a little nod. "We'll have the doctor look at him when he comes down," and he sank wearily into a chair. "This has been a pretty strenuous night, Lester."

"Yes; and it isn't over yet. I wonder what the man with the snake is doing?"

"Still staring into the crystal, no doubt. Do you want to go and see?"

"No," I said decidedly, "I don't. Godfrey," I added, "doesn't the absence of servants seem strange to you?"

"Very strange. But, I dare say, we'll find them around somewhere—though they seem to be sound sleepers! We didn't look through the whole house, you know. I'm not going to, either; I'm going to let the police do that. They ought to be here pretty soon. I told Simmonds to bring two or three men with him."

I glanced at the huddled body of the murdered man. With all the night's excitements and surprises, we had not even touched upon that mystery. Not a single gleam of light had been shed upon it, and yet it was the centre about which all these other strange occurrences revolved. Whose hand was it that had thrown that cord about the throat and drawn it tight? What motive lay behind? Fearsome and compelling must the motive be to drive a man to such a crime! Would Simmonds be able to divine that motive, to build the case up bit by bit until the murderer was found? Would Godfrey?

I turned my head to look at him. He was lying back in his chair, his eyes closed, apparently lost in thought, and for long minutes there was no movement in the room.

At last the doctor returned, looking more cheerful than when he had left the room. He had given Miss Vaughan an opiate and she was sleeping calmly; the nervous trembling had subsided and he hoped that when she waked she would be much better. The danger was that brain fever might develop; she had evidently suffered a very severe shock.

"Yes," said Godfrey, "she discovered her father strangled in the chair yonder."



"I saw the body when I came in," the doctor remarked, imperturbably. "So it's her father, is it?"

"Yes."

"And strangled, you say?"

Godfrey answered with a gesture, and the doctor walked over to the body, glanced at the neck, then disengaged one of the tightly clenched hands from the chair-arm, raised it and let it fall. I could not but envy his admirable self-control.

"How long has he been dead?" Godfrey asked.

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"Not more than two or three hours," the doctor answered. "The muscles are just beginning to stiffen. It looks like murder," he added, and touched the cord about the neck.

"It *is* murder."

"You've notified the police?"

"They will be here soon."

I saw the doctor glance at Godfrey and then at me, plainly puzzled as to our footing in the house; but if there was a question in his mind, he kept it from his lips and turned back again to the huddled body.

"Any clue to the murderer?" he asked, at last.

"We have found none."

And then the doctor stooped suddenly and picked up something from the floor beside the chair.

"Perhaps this is a clue," he said, quietly, and held to the light an object which, as I sprang to my feet, I saw to be a blood-stained handkerchief.

He spread it out under our eyes, handling it gingerly, for it was still damp, and we saw it was a small handkerchief—a woman's handkerchief—of delicate texture. It was fairly soaked with blood, and yet in a peculiar manner, for two of the corners were much crumpled but quite unstained.

The doctor raised his eyes to Godfrey's.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

"A clue, certainly," said Godfrey; "but scarcely to the murderer."

The doctor looked at it again for a moment, and then nodded. "I'd better put it back where I found it, I guess," he said, and dropped it beside the chair.

And then, suddenly, I remembered Swain. I turned to find him still drooping forward in his chair, apparently half-asleep.

"Doctor," I said, "there is someone else here who is suffering from shock," and I motioned toward the limp figure. "Or perhaps it's something worse than that."

The doctor stepped quickly to the chair and looked down at its occupant. Then he put his hand under Swain's chin, raised his head and gazed intently into his eyes. Swain returned the gaze, but plainly in only a half-conscious way.

"It looks like a case of concussion," said the doctor, after a moment. "The left pupil is enlarged," and he ran his hand rapidly over the right side of Swain's head. "I thought so," he added. "There's a considerable swelling. We must get him to bed." Then he noticed the bandaged wrist. "What's the matter here?" he asked, touching it with his finger.

"He cut himself on a piece of glass," Godfrey explained. "You'd better take him over to my place, where he can be quiet."

"I've got my car outside," said the doctor, and together he and I raised Swain from the chair and led him to it.

He went docilely and without objection, and ten minutes later, was safely in bed, already dozing off under the influence of the opiate the doctor had given him. "He'll be all right in the morning," the latter assured me. "But he must have got quite a blow over the head."

"I don't know what happened to him," I answered. "You'll come back with me, won't you?"

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"Yes; I may be useful," and he turned the car back the way we had come. "Besides," he added, frankly, "I'm curious to learn what happened in that house to-night."

He had certainly shown himself equal to emergencies, I reflected; and I liked his voice and his manner, which was cool and capable.

"My name is Lester," I said. "I'm a lawyer staying with Mr. Godfrey. We heard Miss Vaughan scream and ran over to the house, but we don't know any more than you do."

"My name is Hinman, and I'm just a country doctor," said my companion; "but if I can be of any help, I hope you'll call upon me. Hello!" he added, as we turned through the gate into the grounds of Elmhurst, and he threw on the brake sharply, for a uniformed figure had stepped out into the glare of our lamps and held up his hand.

The police had arrived.

CHAPTER IX

FIRST STEPS

We found a little group of men gathered about the chair in which sat the huddled body. Two of them I already knew. One was Detective-sergeant Simmonds, and the other Coroner Goldberger, both of whom I had met in previous cases. Simmonds was a stolid, unimaginative, but industrious and efficient officer, with whom Godfrey had long ago concluded an alliance offensive and defensive. In other words, Godfrey threw what glory he could to Simmonds, and Simmonds such stories as he could to Godfrey, and so the arrangement was to their mutual advantage.

Goldberger was a more astute man than the detective, in that he possessed a strain of Semitic imagination, a quick wit, and a fair degree of insight. He was in his glory in a case like this. This was shown now by his gleaming eyes and the trembling hand which pulled nervously at his short, black moustache. Goldberger's moustache was a good index to his mental state—the more ragged it grew, the more baffling he found the case in hand!

Both he and Simmonds glanced up at our entrance and nodded briefly. Then their eyes went back to that huddled figure.

There were three other men present whom I did not know, but I judged them to be the plain-clothes-men whom Simmonds had brought along at Godfrey's suggestion. They stood a little to one side until their superiors had completed the examination.

"I didn't stop to pick up my physician," Goldberger was saying. "But the cause of death is plain enough."

“Doctor Hinman here is a physician,” I said, bringing him forward. “If he can be of any service....”

Goldberger glanced at him, and was plainly favorably impressed by Hinman’s dark, eager face, and air of intelligence and self-control.

“I shall be very glad of Dr. Hinman’s help,” said Goldberger, shaking hands with him. “Have you examined the body, sir?”

“Only very casually,” answered Hinman. “But it is evident that the cause of death was strangulation.”

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"How long has he been dead?"

Hinman lifted the stiff hand again and ran his fingers along the muscles of the arm.

"About four hours, I should say."

Goldberger glanced at his watch.

"That would put his death at a little before midnight. The murderer must have come in from the grounds, crept up behind his victim, thrown the cord about his neck and drawn it tight before his presence was suspected. The victim would hardly have remained seated in the chair if he had known his danger. After the cord was round his throat, he had no chance—he could not even cry out. There's one thing I don't understand, though," he added, after a moment. "Where did that blood come from?" and he pointed to the dark spots on the collar of the white robe.

Hinman looked up with a little exclamation.

"I forgot," he said. "Did you find the handkerchief? No, I see you didn't," and he pointed to where it lay on the floor. "I noticed it when I first looked at the body."

Without a word, Goldberger bent and picked up the blood-stained handkerchief. Then he and Simmonds examined it minutely. Finally the coroner looked at Godfrey, and his eyes were very bright.

"There can be only one inference," he said. "The dead man is not bleeding—the cord did not cut the flesh. The blood, then, must have come from the murderer. He must have been injured in some way—bleeding profusely. Look at this handkerchief—it is fairly soaked."

I am sure that, at that instant, the same thought was in Godfrey's mind which flashed through mine, for our eyes met, and there was a shadow in his which I knew my own reflected. Then I glanced at Hinman. He was looking at the handkerchief thoughtfully, his lips tightly closed. I could guess what he was thinking, but he said nothing.

Goldberger laid the handkerchief on the table, at last, and turned back to the body. He bent close above it, examining the blood spots, and when he stood erect again there was in his face a strange excitement.

"Lend me your glass, Simmonds," he said, and when Simmonds handed him a small pocket magnifying-glass, he unfolded it and bent above the stains again, scrutinising each in turn. At last he closed the glass with an emphatic little snap. "This case isn't going to be so difficult, after all," he said. "Those spots are finger-prints."

With an exclamation of astonishment, Simmonds took the glass and examined the stains; then he handed it to Godfrey, who finally passed it on to me. Looking through it, I saw that Goldberger was right. The stains had been made by human fingers. Most of them were mere smudges, but here and there was one on which faint lines could be dimly traced.

"They seem to be pretty vague," I remarked, passing the glass on to Hinman.

"They're plenty clear enough for our purpose," said Goldberger; "besides they will come out much clearer in photographs. It's lucky this stuff is so smooth and closely-woven," he added, fingering a corner of the robe, "or we wouldn't have got even those. It's as hard and fine as silk."

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"How do you suppose those marks came there, Mr. Goldberger?" Godfrey asked, and there was in his tone a polite scepticism which evidently annoyed the coroner.

"Why, there's only one way they could come there," Goldberger answered impatiently. "They were put there by the murderer's fingers as he drew the cord tight. Do you see anything improbable in that?"

"Only that it seems too good to be true," Godfrey answered, quietly, and Goldberger, after looking at him a moment, turned away with a shrug of the shoulders.

"See if you can get the cord loose, Simmonds," he said.

The cord was in the form of a running noose, which had been knotted to hold it in place after being drawn tight. Although it had not cut the flesh of the neck, it had sunk deeply into it, and Simmonds worked at the knot for some moments without result. I suspect his fingers were not quite as steady as they might have been; but it was evidently an intricate knot.

"That's a new one on me," he said, at last. "I can't get it loose."

Godfrey bent close above it and looked at it.

"It *is* a peculiar knot," he agreed. "If you'll permit a suggestion, Mr. Goldberger, you'll cut the cord and leave the knot as it is. It may help us to find the man who made it."

"You're right," agreed Goldberger, promptly. "Cut the cord, Simmonds."

Simmonds got out his pocket-knife, opened it and slipped the blade under the cord, cut it, and pulled it out of the ridge of flesh. He looked at it a moment, and then handed it to Goldberger. The latter examined it carefully.

"It's stained with blood, too," he remarked, and passed it on to Godfrey.

"It looks like curtain-cord," Godfrey said, and made a little tour of the room. "Ah!" he added, after a moment, from the door opening into the grounds. "See here!"

He was holding up the end of the cord by which the curtains covering the upper part of the double doors were controlled.

"You were right, Mr. Coroner," he said, "in thinking that the murderer entered by this door, for he stopped here and cut off a piece of this cord before going on into the room."

"Then he must also have stopped to make it into a noose," remarked Goldberger. "If he did that, he was certainly a cool customer. It's a wonder his victim didn't hear the noise he made."



“Making a knot isn’t a noisy operation,” Godfrey pointed out; “besides, the back of the chair was toward the door. And then, of course, it’s possible his victim *did* hear him.”

“But then he would have jumped from the chair,” objected Simmonds.

“Not necessarily. Suppose you were sitting there, and heard a noise, and looked around and saw me standing here, you wouldn’t jump from the chair, would you?”

“No; I’d have no reason to jump from you.”

“Perhaps Vaughan thought he had no reason to jump from the man *he* saw—if he saw anyone. I’m inclined to think, however, that he didn’t suspect anyone else was in the room until he felt the cord about his throat.”

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"And, of course," said Goldberger, taking the cord again and looking at it, "it was while the murderer was making it into a noose with his blood-stained fingers that he stained it in that way. Don't you agree, Mr. Godfrey?"

"That is a possible explanation," Godfrey conceded.

"But why did he make this second knot?" inquired the coroner; "the knot which holds the noose tight and prevents it from slipping?"

"If he hadn't knotted it like that he would have had to stand there holding it until his victim was dead. As it was, he didn't have to wait."

I shivered a little at the thought of the scoundrel calmly tying the knot to secure his noose, and then leaving his victim to twitch his life out.

"It's no little trick to tie a knot like that," Godfrey added, thoughtfully. "I should like to study it."

"All right," agreed Goldberger; "you can have it whenever you want it," and he got a heavy manila envelope out of his pocket and placed the cord carefully inside. "Now we must get that robe off. We can't run any risk of having those finger-prints smeared."

It was a difficult job and a revolting one, for the body had stiffened into its huddled posture, but at last the robe was removed and the body itself lying at full length on its back on the couch. Seen thus, with the light full on it, the face was horrible, and Goldberger laid his handkerchief over the swollen and distorted features, while, at a sign from him, Simmonds pulled down the portiere from the inner door and placed it over the body. Then the coroner picked up the robe and held it out at arms' length.

"What kind of a freak dress is this, anyway?" he asked.

"It's a robe," said Godfrey. "Mr. Vaughan was a mystic."

"A what?"

"A mystic—a believer in Hinduism or some other Oriental religion."

"Did he dress this way all the time?"

"I believe so. It is probably the dress of his order."

Goldberger rolled the robe up carefully, and said nothing more; but I could see from his expression that he had ceased to wonder why Vaughan had come to a strange and violent end. Surely anything might happen to a mystic! Then he placed the blood-

stained handkerchief in another envelope, and finally put his hand in his pocket and brought out half a dozen cigars.

“Now,” he said, “let’s sit down and rest awhile. Simmonds tells me it was you who called him, Mr. Godfrey. How did you happen to discover the crime?”

The question was asked carelessly, but I could feel the alert mind behind it. I knew that Godfrey felt it, too, from the way in which he told the story, for he told it carefully, and yet with an air of keeping nothing back.

Of the mysterious light he said nothing, but, starting with my finding of the letter and summoning Swain to receive it, told of the arrangements for the rendezvous, dwelling upon it lightly, as a love-affair which could have no connection with the tragedy. He passed on to his own arrival from the city, to Swain’s return from the rendezvous, and finally to the screams which had reached us, and to the discovery we had made when we burst into the house.

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"I summoned Dr. Hinman immediately," he added, "for Miss Vaughan seemed to be in a serious condition; then I called Simmonds, and suggested that he stop for you, Mr. Coroner, for I knew that the case would interest you. Dr. Hinman arrived perhaps half an hour ahead of you, and had Miss Vaughan put to bed at once. And I guess you know the rest," he concluded.

We had all listened intently. I was pretty sure that Simmonds would make no inferences which Godfrey wished to avoid; but I feared the more penetrating mind of the coroner. His first question proved that I was right to do so.

"Where is this man Swain?" he asked.

"He was suffering from the shock," said Godfrey, "and Lester and Dr. Hinman took him over to my place and put him to bed. That's where they were when you got here."

"He seemed to be suffering from a slight concussion," Hinman explained. "There was a swelling on one side of his head, as though some one had struck him, and the pupils of his eyes were unsymmetrical. He had also a cut on the wrist," he added, after an instant's hesitation.

"Ah!" commented Goldberger, with a glance at Godfrey. "Had it been bleeding?"

"He cut himself when crossing the wall," Godfrey explained; "a mere scratch, but I believe it *did* bleed a good deal."

"Ah!" said Goldberger again; and then he turned to the doctor. "Did I understand you to say that he went to sleep?"

"He certainly did. I gave him a good strong opiate to make sure of it."

"Do you think he'll sleep till morning?"

"He'll sleep nine or ten hours, at least."

"Then *that's* all right," said Goldberger, and settled back in his chair again. "But didn't anybody live in this house except that old man and his daughter? Aren't there any servants?"

"There must be some somewhere about," answered Godfrey, to whom the question was addressed; "but Lester and I looked through the lower floor and part of the upper one and didn't find any. There's a bell there by the door, but nobody answered when I rang. We didn't have time to go all over the house. We *did* find one thing, though," he added, as if by an afterthought.

"What was that?"



"There's an adept in one of the rooms upstairs."

Goldberger sat up and stared at him.

"An adept?" he repeated. "What's that?"

"An expert in mysticism. I judge that Vaughan was his pupil."

"Do you mean he's a Hindu?" asked the coroner, as though that would explain everything.

But Godfrey was having his revenge.

"I don't know whether he's a Hindu or not," he said, airily. "I didn't get a very good look at him."

"What was he doing?" Goldberger demanded.

"He was just sitting there."

Again Goldberger stared at him, this time suspiciously.

"But, good heavens, man!" he cried. "That was three or four hours ago! You don't suppose he's sitting there yet!"

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"Yes," said Godfrey drily, "I think he is."

Goldberger's face flushed, and he sprang to his feet impatiently.

"Show me the room," he commanded.

"Glad to," said Godfrey laconically, and led the way out into the hall.

The whole crowd tailed along after him. As I rose to follow, I saw that the outside world was turning grey with the approaching dawn.

The nurse, hearing our footsteps on the stairs, looked out in alarm, and held up a warning finger. Godfrey paused for a word with her.

"How is she?" he asked.

"Sleeping quietly," said the nurse; "but please don't make any more noise than you can help."

"We won't," Godfrey promised, and crossed the hall to the door leading into the little entry. Then he paused and looked around at Goldberger. "Better go slow here," he cautioned. "The adept has a pet cobra."

"A snake?"

"The deadliest snake in the world."

Goldberger drew back a little, as did all the others.

"I don't think it will bite us, though," added Godfrey, cheerfully, "if we don't crowd it. It's sitting there, too," and he opened the outer door, passed through, and held back the curtain at the farther end.

I was just behind Goldberger and Simmonds, and I heard their gasp of amazement, as they saw what lay beyond.

The scene had not changed in the slightest detail. The crystal sphere still softly glowed, with intangible shadows flitting across its surface; the adept still sat cross-legged staring into its depths; opposite him, the cobra, its hood distended, swayed slowly to and fro.

But as we stood there staring, a single delicate ray of sunlight coming through a pin-hole in the curtained window, struck the sphere and seemed to extinguish it. The glow within it flickered and fluttered and finally vanished, and it hung there dull and grey. An instant later, the motionless figure raised its arms high in air, with a motion somehow

familiar; then it got slowly to its feet, crossed to the window, drew back the curtain and flung wide the shutter.

The sun was just peeping over the trees to the east, and for a second its light blinded me. Then I saw the adept bowing low before it, his arms still extended. Once, twice, thrice he bowed, as before a deity, while we stood there staring. Then he turned slowly toward us.

“Enter, friends,” he said calmly. “The peace of the Holy One be on you, and his love within your hearts!”

CHAPTER X

THE WHITE PRIEST OF SIVA

The adept was an impressive figure, as he stood there with the sun behind him, throwing a yellow nimbus around his head. The robe he wore was of a rich purple, and gave an added effect of height and dignity to a figure already tall. His hair was dark and crinkled like wind-swept water, his complexion dark, but with an under-blush of red in the cheeks. His lips were scarlet and his eyes coal-black and of an arresting brilliance. The whole effect he gave was of transcendent energy and magnetism, nor did he show the slightest fatigue from his long vigil.

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His eyes swept our faces, as we stood crowded there in the doorway. He did not seem surprised. If there was any expression in his face except courteous inquiry, it was one of carefully suppressed amusement.

“Enter, friends,” he repeated. “What is it you desire?”

His voice was rich and deep, and he spoke with a peculiar intonation, but without accent. It was something of a shock to hear the ordinary words of English speech coming from his lips, for they seemed formed to utter prophecies in unknown tongues.

Goldberger took one step into the room, and then stopped abruptly. Following his eyes, I saw that the cobra had also awakened from its trance, and was regarding us steadily and hissing slightly. The adept smiled as he saw us shrink back.

“Do not fear,” he said. “Come, Toto,” and stepping across the room, he lifted the cobra in one hand and held it a moment close to him, gently stroking the distended hood. The snake curled itself about his arm and seemed to cuddle to him, but it kept its eyes fixed on us. I could not but smile at the incongruity of its name. Toto was well enough for a French poodle, but for a cobra!

After a moment, the adept lifted the lid of a round basket which stood on the floor near the divan, dropped the snake gently into it, and fastened down the lid. Then he clapped his hands softly, and an instant later the curtains at the rear of the room parted and a strange figure appeared between them.

It was the figure of a man, not over five feet tall and very thin. He was almost as dark as a full-blooded negro, and the white burnoose which was thrown about his shoulders and covered him to just below the hips, made him look even darker. His legs were bare and seemed to be nothing but skin and bone. The flat-nosed face, with its full lips and prominent eyes, reminded me of an idol I had seen pictured somewhere.

The newcomer bowed low before the adept, and, at a sign from him, picked up Toto's basket and disappeared with it through the curtains. He had not even glanced in our direction. The adept turned back to us.

“Now, friends,” he said, “will you not enter?”

Goldberger led the way into the room and stopped to look about it. The walls were hung with black velvet, so arranged that windows and doors could be covered also, and the room was absolutely devoid of furniture, save for a low, circular divan in the centre of which stood the crystal sphere, supported, as I saw now, by a slender pedestal.

“I have a few questions to ask you,” began Goldberger at last, in a voice deferential despite himself.



"Proceed, sir," said the adept, courteously.

"Do you know that Mr. Vaughan is dead?"

The adept made a little deprecating gesture.

"Not dead," he protested. "A man does not die. His soul rejoins the Over-soul, that is all. Yes, I know that at midnight the soul of my pupil passed over."

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“How did you learn that?” Goldberger demanded.

“I saw it in the sphere,” replied the adept calmly.

“Where were you at the time?”

“I was gazing at the sphere.”

“Do you mean,” asked Goldberger incredulously, “that you sat for five hours and more staring at that thing?”

“My vigil began at sundown,” said the adept, with a slight smile. “Last night was the White Night of Siva. It must be spent in meditation by all who follow him.”

Goldberger worried his moustache with nervous fingers, as he stared at the adept, plainly at a loss how to proceed.

“Perhaps,” ventured Godfrey, softly, “your crystal could give us some further information which we very much desire.”

The adept turned his dark eyes on the speaker, and it seemed to me that they glittered more coldly, as though they recognised an adversary.

“What information, sir?” he asked.

“Information as to the manner of Mr. Vaughan’s passing—can you tell us anything of that?”

The adept shook his head.

“I only saw the soul as it passed over. I knew, however, that it had been torn from the body by violence.”

“How did you know that?” broke in Goldberger.

“Because of its colour,” answered the adept; and then, when he saw our benumbed expressions, he explained. “Souls which pass in peace are white; souls which the body has driven forth by its own hands are black; souls which are torn from the body by an alien hand are red. My pupil’s soul was red.”

I could see that Goldberger did not know whether to snort with derision or to be impressed. He ended by smiling feebly. As for me, I admit I was impressed.

“When an alien hand, as you put it, is used,” said the coroner, “we call it murder in this country, and the law tries to get hold of the alien and to send his soul after his victim’s. That’s what we are trying to do now. We are officers of the law.”

The adept bowed.

“Any assistance I can give you,” he said, softly, “I shall be glad to give; though to do murder, as you call it, is not always to do wrong.”

“Our law doesn’t make such nice distinctions,” said Goldberger, drily. “May I ask your profession?”

“I am a White Priest of Siva,” said the adept, touching his forehead lightly with the fingers of his left hand, as in reverence.

“Who is Siva?”

“The Holy One, the Over-soul, from whom we come and to whom we all return.”

Again Goldberger worried his moustache.

“Well,” he said, at last, “until the mystery is cleared up, I must ask you not to leave this house.”

“I have no wish to leave it, sir.”

“And the other fellow—the fellow who took away the snake—where was he last night?”

“He slept in a small room opening into this one.”

“May I look into it?”

“Certainly,” and the adept swept aside the curtains.

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The room into which we looked was not more than ten feet square, and empty of furniture, except for a mat in the middle of the floor and three or four baskets set against the wall. On the mat was squatted the attendant, his legs crossed with feet uppermost, and his hands held palm to palm before him. On the floor in front of him were what looked to me like a strip of cloth, a bone and a tooth. He did not raise his eyes at our entrance, but sat calmly contemplating these relics.

Goldberger's moustache lost a few more hairs as he stood staring down at this strange figure.

"What are those things? His grandmother's remains?" he asked, at last.

"Those are the attributes of Kali," said the adept gravely, as one rebuking blasphemy.

"Very interesting, no doubt," commented the coroner drily. "Would it disturb the gentleman too much to ask him a few questions?"

"He speaks no English, but I shall be glad to translate for you."

The coroner thought this over for a moment, and then shook his head.

"No," he said; "I'll wait for the court interpreter. You might tell him, though, that there will be officers of the law on duty below, and that he is not to leave the house."

"I will caution him," answered the adept, and let the curtain fall, as we passed out.

"I suppose there are some other servants somewhere about the place?" asked Goldberger.

"There are three—they sleep on the floor above."

"Are they Hindus, too?"

"Oh, no," and the adept smiled. "Two of them are German and the other is Irish."

The coroner reddened a little, for the words somehow conveyed a subtle rebuke.

"That is all for to-day," he said; "unless Mr. Simmonds has some questions?" and he looked at his companion.

But Simmonds, to whom all these inquiries had plainly been successive steps into the darkness, shook his head.

"Then we will bid you good-morning," added Goldberger, still a little on his dignity. "And many thanks for your courtesy."

The adept responded with a low bow and with a smile decidedly ironical. I, at least, felt that we had got the worst of the encounter.

Goldberger, without a word, led the way up the stair that mounted to the attic story, and there soon succeeded in routing out the three servants. The Germans proved to be a man and wife, well past middle age, the former the gardener and the latter the cook. Erin was represented by a red-haired girl who was the housemaid. All of them were horrified when told their master had been murdered, but none of them could shed any light on the tragedy. They had all been in bed long before midnight, and had not been disturbed by any of the noises of the night.

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This could be the more readily understood when, as a little investigation showed, we found that they had all slept with doors locked and windows closed and shuttered. Any sounds from the house would really have to penetrate two doors to reach them, for their rooms were at the end of an entry, closed by an outer door. As to the windows, it was the rule of the house that they should always be closed and tightly shuttered during the night. They knew of no especial reason for the rule, though the Irish girl remarked that, with heathen in the house and lunatics, there was no telling how the nights were spent.

They were all evidently innocent of any connection with the tragedy; but Goldberger, for some ridiculous reason, brought them downstairs with him and made them look at their master's body. This had no result except to send the Irish girl into hysterics, and Hinman for a few minutes had another patient on his hands.

"Well," said Goldberger, passing his hand wearily across his forehead, "I guess there's nothing more to be done. And I'm dead tired. I had just got to bed when Simmonds called me. I'll set the inquest for ten o'clock to-morrow morning, and I'll hold it here in this room. We'll want you here, Mr. Godfrey, and you, Mr. Lester. And—oh, yes," he added suddenly, "we'll want that Mr. Swain, whose story I haven't heard yet. No doubt of his appearing is there?"

"Absolutely none," I assured him.

"I could put him under guard, of course," said Goldberger, pensively, "for I'm sure he'll prove to be a very important witness; but if you will be personally responsible for him, Mr. Lester...."

"I will," I agreed, and Goldberger nodded.

"Have him here at ten o'clock, then," he said.

"Dr. Hinman would better see him again to-day," I suggested.

"I'll call about four o'clock this afternoon," the doctor promised; and, leaving Goldberger to complete his arrangements and Simmonds to post his men, Godfrey and I stepped out upon the lawn.

It was after five o'clock and the sun was already high. It scarcely seemed possible that, only six hours before, Swain had crossed the wall for the first time!

"We'd better go out as we came," Godfrey said, and turned across the lawn. He walked with head down and face puckered with thought.

"Can you make anything of it?" I asked, but he only shook his head.

We soon reached the ladder, and Godfrey paused to look about him. The shrubbery was broken in one place, as though some heavy body had fallen on it, and this was evidently the mark of Swain's wild jump from the wall.

At last, Godfrey motioned me to precede him, and, when I was over, reached one ladder down to me and descended to my side. We replaced the ladders against the shed, and then walked on toward the house. As we turned the corner, we found Mrs. Hargis standing on the front porch.

"Well, you *are* out early!" she said.

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"Yes," laughed Godfrey; "fact is, we haven't been to bed yet. Will you have something to eat, Lester, before you turn in?"

A glass of milk was all I wanted; and five minutes later I mounted to my room. I glanced in for a moment at Swain, who seemed to be sleeping peacefully; and then darkened my room as well as I could and tumbled into bed. I must have dropped asleep the moment my head touched the pillow, for I remember nothing more until I opened my eyes to find Godfrey standing over me.

CHAPTER XI

SWAIN'S STORY

"I hate to wake you, Lester," Godfrey said, smiling, "but it's nearly four o'clock. Dr. Hinman will be here before long, and if you're going to hear Swain's story, you'll have to be getting up."

I sat up in bed at once, all trace of sleepiness vanished.

"How is he?" I asked.

"He seems to be all right. He's been up for some time. I haven't said anything to him about last night—I wanted the doctor to see him first; besides, I thought you ought to be present."

"I'll be down right away," I said, and twenty minutes later, I found Godfrey and Swain sitting together on the front porch. As Swain returned my greeting, I was relieved to see that his eyes were no longer fixed and staring, but seemed quite normal.

"Mrs. Hargis has your breakfast ready," said Godfrey, "and I think I'll join you. Will you come, Mr. Swain?"

"No, thank you," Swain replied. "I had my breakfast only about an hour ago. I'll just sit here, if you don't mind."

"All right," said Godfrey, "we won't be long," and together we went back to the dining-room.

Mrs. Hargis was there, and greeted us as though stopping out till dawn and breakfasting at four o'clock in the afternoon were the most ordinary things in the world. A copy of the *Record* was lying, as usual, on the table, and a black headline caught my eye:

WORTHINGTON VAUGHAN
MURDERED

* * * * *

RICH RECLUSE STRANGLED TO
DEATH AT HIS HOME IN
THE BRONX

* * * * *

I glanced at Godfrey in surprise.

“Yes,” he said, reddening a little, “I was just in time to ’phone the story in for the last edition. I called the doctor first, though, Lester—you must give me credit for that! And it was a beautiful scoop!”

“What time did you get up?” I asked.

“About noon. I sent down the full story for to-morrow morning’s paper just before I called you.”

“Any developments?”

“None that I know of. Of course, I haven’t heard Swain’s story yet.”

“Godfrey,” I said, “it seems to me that this thing is going to look bad for Swain—I think Goldberger suspects him already. A good deal depends upon his story.”

“Yes, it does,” Godfrey agreed.

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We finished the meal in silence. It was not a long one, for I, at least, was anxious to get back to Swain. As we rejoined him on the porch, Dr. Hinman's car came up the drive. He got out and shook hands with us. As he greeted Swain, I saw him glance anxiously into his eyes—and saw also that the glance reassured him.

"You're feeling better to-day," he said, sitting down by Swain's side.

"Yes," said Swain quietly, "I'm feeling all right again."

"How is Miss Vaughan, doctor?" I asked.

Swain jerked round toward the doctor.

"Is Miss Vaughan ill?" he demanded.

"She had a shock last night," answered the doctor, slowly; "but she's getting along nicely. She'll have to be kept quiet for a few days."

I was looking at Swain curiously. He was rubbing his head perplexedly, as though trying to bring some confused memory to the surface of his mind.

"I seem to remember," he said, "that Miss Vaughan fainted, and that I picked her up." Then he stopped and stared at us. "Is her father dead?"

"Yes," I said, and he fell to rubbing his head again.

I glanced at Hinman, and he nodded slightly. I took it for assurance that Swain might be questioned. Godfrey, who had gone indoors to get some cigars, came back with a handful. All of us, including Swain, lighted up.

"Now, Swain," I began, "I want you to tell us all that you remember of last night's happenings. Both Mr. Godfrey and Dr. Hinman are in my confidence and you may speak freely before them. I want them to hear your story, because I want their advice."

There was a pucker of perplexity on Swain's face.

"I've been trying, ever since I woke up this morning, to straighten out my remembrance of last night," he began, slowly; "but I haven't succeeded very well. At least, everything seems to stop right in the middle."

"Go ahead," I said, "and tell us what you do remember. Maybe it will grow clearer as you recall it, or maybe we can fill in the gaps. Begin at the moment you went over the wall. We know everything that happened up to that time. You remember that clearly, don't you?"

“Oh, yes,” said Swain. “I remember all that,” and he settled back in his chair. “Well, after I went down the ladder, I found myself in a clump of shrubbery, and beyond that was a path. I knew that the arbour where I was to meet Miss Vaughan was in the corner of the grounds at the back next to Mr. Godfrey’s place, so I turned back along the wall, leaving the path, which curved away from it. It was very dark under the trees, and I had to go slowly for fear of running into one of them. But I finally found the arbour. I struck a match to assure myself that it was empty, and then sat down to wait. Once or twice I fancied I heard some one moving outside, but it was only the wind among the trees, I guess, for it was fully half an hour before Miss Vaughan came.”

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I could see how his hand was trembling on the arm of his chair, and he paused a moment to collect himself.

"What Miss Vaughan told me," he went on, at last, and I saw that of the details of the meeting he did not intend to speak, "convinced me that her father was quite mad—much worse than I had suspected. I knew, of course, that he was a student of the supernatural, but since the coming of this yogi...."

"This what?" Hinman interrupted.

"A yogi," Swain answered, turning toward him, "is, as nearly as I can make out, a sort of high priest of Hinduism. He knows all its secrets, and is supposed to be able to do all sorts of supernatural things. This fellow who lived with Mr. Vaughan is a yogi. Mr. Vaughan was his disciple."

"Where did the yogi come from?" Godfrey asked.

"I don't know. I don't think Miss Vaughan knows. He arrived, with his attendant, about six months ago; and since then things have gone from bad to worse. There has been crystal-gazing and star-worship and necromancy of all sorts. I confess I didn't understand very much of it," he added. "It was all so wild and weird; but it ended not only in Mr. Vaughan's becoming a convert to whatever religion it is the yogi practises, but in a determination that his daughter should become a priestess of the cult. It was from that she wished me to help her to escape."

He stopped and again rubbed his head slowly.

"As I tell it," he went on, at last, "it sounds absurd and unbelievable; but as she told it, there in the darkness, with those strange rustlings round us, it sent the chills up and down my spine. Perhaps those Orientals *do* know more about the supernatural than we give them credit for; at any rate, I know that Miss Vaughan had been impressed with the yogi's power. It fascinated and at the same time horrified her. She said he had a hideous snake, a cobra, which he petted as she would pet a kitten...."

His voice broke off again, and he wiped the perspiration from his forehead. I myself felt decidedly nervous. Godfrey threw away his cigar, which had broken in his fingers.

"At any rate," Swain went on, "I was so upset by what she told me that I could think of nothing to do except to beg her to come away with me at once. I remembered my promise to you, Mr. Lester, but I was sure you would approve. I told her about you—that it was into your hands the letter had fallen. She said she had seen you looking at her from a tree and had known at a glance that she could trust you. You didn't tell me you were in a tree," he added.



"Yes," I said, awkwardly. "I was just taking a little look over the landscape. Rather foolish of me, wasn't it?"

"Well, it was mighty fortunate, anyway. She had written the letter, but she had no idea how she was going to get it to me."

"You mean she couldn't go out when she wanted to?" demanded Godfrey.

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"I gathered from what she told me," said Swain, his face flushing with anger, "that she has been practically a prisoner ever since the yogi arrived. Besides, even if she had succeeded in mailing the letter, it wouldn't have reached me until too late."

"In what way too late?"

"Her father seems to have had a sudden turn for the worse yesterday; he became almost violent in insisting that she consent to his plan. He told her that the life of his own soul as well as of hers depended upon it. He threatened—I don't know what. The yogi talked to her afterwards. He, of course, believed, or pretended to believe, as her father did; moreover, he told her that her father would certainly suffer a serious mental shock if she refused, perhaps a fatal one. In despair, she finally agreed, on the condition that she be given three days in which to prepare herself. If she did not hear from me in that time, she had made up her mind to consent."

Swain stopped again, and I lay back in my chair, wondering if such things were possible in this twentieth century, here within the boundaries of Greater New York! My brain reeled at the absurdity of it!

"Vaughan was undoubtedly suffering from mania," said Dr. Hinman, in a low voice. "The symptoms, as Mr. Swain describes them, are unmistakable."

"It was that argument I used," said Swain. "I told her that, since he was clearly mad, she must, in self-defence, place herself beyond his reach. But she refused to leave him. Then, I argued, in kindness to him she must have him committed to some institution where he would be taken care of, and where he might, in time, regain his sanity. I told her that it would be criminal folly to permit him to remain longer under the influence of the yogi. She had to agree with me; and she finally consented to sign an affidavit to the facts as I have told them, and a petition asking that a commission be appointed to examine her father. You were to have drawn up the papers to-day, Mr. Lester, and I was to have taken them to her for signature to-night."

"That would have settled the matter," said Godfrey, thoughtfully. "It's too bad it wasn't settled in that way. What else happened, Mr. Swain?"

"Miss Vaughan had grown very nervous, with all this discussion, and at last she sprang to her feet and said she must go, or her father would discover her absence. We rose to leave the harbour, and at that instant, a white-robed figure sprang to her side, seized her and tore her away from me. I was too startled for an instant to resist; then, as I started toward them, Marjorie pushed me back.

"Go! Go!" she cried. 'It is my father!'



“But he stopped me. In a voice shaking and husky with rage, he warned me that if I entered the place again, my life would be forfeit. I can’t repeat the horrible things he said. I could see his eyes gleaming like a wild beast’s. He cursed me. I had never been cursed before,” and Swain smiled thinly, “and I confess it wasn’t pleasant. Then he led his daughter away.

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"I stood staring after them. I didn't know what to do. I felt like a madman myself. I sat down and tried to collect my thoughts. I saw that some new plan must be made—that there was no hope of meeting Marjorie again. I was sick with fear for her; I thought of following to the house and compelling her to come with me at once. And then, suddenly, I saw two eyes gleaming at me. They were not human eyes—they were too close together—and they were swaying gently back and forth in the air, about a foot from the ground. I gazed at them, fascinated, and then I heard a soft, low whistle, followed by a faint hissing, as the eyes fell forward.

"In a flash, I knew what it was—the cobra; I knew why it was there—Vaughan had said my life was forfeit. I sprang up with a shriek, dashed along the seat to the door and out into the darkness. I struck my head against something—a tree, I suppose; but I kept on, and reached the wall and got over it somehow—it is all confused, after that. I seem to remember hearing Marjorie scream, and finding her lying beside her father, who was dead—but I can't put things together," and he rubbed his head helplessly.

"I'll put them together for you," said Godfrey. "When you ran into the tree, you suffered a partial concussion. It's lucky it wasn't total, or Toto would have got you!"

"Toto?"

"That, I believe, is the cobra's name," explained Godfrey, with a smile; "unless, of course, there are two of them." And he told Swain in detail of the events which had followed.

Swain listened with staring eyes. I did not blame him. Indeed, I felt that my own eyes were staring a little, though I already knew the story. But Godfrey, with a gift of narration born of long newspaper experience, told it in a way that made its horror salient and left one gasping.

"There is one question I want to ask you, Swain," he said, in conclusion, "and I want you to think carefully before you answer it. During your altercation with Mr. Vaughan, did you at any time touch him?"

"Touch him? No, of course not," and Swain shook his head decidedly.

"You are sure of that?" asked Godfrey earnestly.

"Perfectly sure," said Swain, looking at him in astonishment. "I was never within three feet of him."

Godfrey sprang to his feet with a gesture of relief.

"I seem to need a cocktail," he said, in another tone. "Isn't that the prescription for all of us, doctor?"

“Yes,” assented Hinman, smiling, “and, after that, complete change of subject!”

CHAPTER XII

GUESSES AT THE RIDDLE

We tried to follow Dr. Hinman's prescription, but not with any great success, for it is difficult to talk about one thing and think about another. So the doctor took himself off, before long, and Swain announced that he himself would have to return to the city. He had come out without so much as a tooth-brush, he pointed out; his trousers were in a lamentable condition, and, while Godfrey's coat was welcome, it was far from a perfect fit.

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"Which reminds me," he added, "that I don't know what has become of my own coat and shirt."

I looked at Godfrey quickly.

"No, I forgot them," he said. "They're over in the library at Elmhurst," he added to Swain. "You can get them to-morrow."

"I shall have to be there to-morrow, then?"

"Yes, at the inquest; I've promised to produce you there," I said.

"At what time?"

"You'd better be there by ten."

"Very well; that's all the more reason for getting back to my base of supplies. If I went on the stand looking like this, the jury would probably think I was the murderer!" he added, laughing.

My answering smile was decidedly thin. Godfrey did not even try to force one.

"Wait a few minutes," he suggested, "and I'll take you down in my car. I'll try to get back early, Lester," he added, apologetically. "I'm far from an ideal host—but you'll find some books on my desk that may interest you—I got them up to-day. Take a look at them after dinner."

He went back to bring out his car, and Swain sat down again beside me.

"Mr. Lester," he said, in a low voice, "I hope you haven't forgotten your promise."

"What promise?"

"To put Miss Vaughan in a safe place and to look after her interests."

"No," I said, "I haven't forgotten. I am going to ask to see her after the inquest to-morrow. If she wishes us to represent her, we will."

"And to protect her," he added, quickly. "She hasn't even a mad father now!"

"She's safe enough for the present," I pointed out. "Dr. Hinman has employed another nurse, so that one is with her all the time."

"I won't be satisfied," said Swain, "till you get her out of that house and away from those damned Hindus. One nurse, or even two, wouldn't stop them."

“Stop them from what?”

“I don’t know,” and he twisted his fingers helplessly.

“Well, the police will stop them. There are three or four men on duty there, with orders to let no one in or out.”

His face brightened.

“Ah, that’s better,” he said. “I didn’t know that. How long will they be there?”

“Till after the inquest, anyway.”

“And you will see Miss Vaughan after the inquest?”

“Yes.”

“And urge her to go to Mr. and Mrs. Royce?”

“Yes—but I don’t think she’ll need much urging. I’ll get a note from Mrs. Royce. I’ll telephone to Mr. Royce now, and you can stop and get the note as you come up in the morning.”

Godfrey’s car glided up the drive and stopped at the porch. Swain held out his hand and clasped mine warmly.

“Thank you, Mr. Lester,” he said; and a moment later the car turned into the highway and passed from sight.

Then I went in, got Mr. Royce on the ‘phone, and give him a brief outline of the incidents of the night before. He listened with an exclamation of astonishment from time to time, and assented heartily when I suggested that Miss Vaughan might be placed in Mrs. Royce’s care temporarily.

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"She's a beautiful girl," I concluded, "and very young. I agree with Swain that she mustn't be left alone in that house."

"Certainly she mustn't," said my partner. "I'll have Mrs. Royce write the note, and get a room ready for her."

"Of course," I said, "it's possible she won't come—though I believe she'll be glad to. Or there may be a family lawyer who will want to look after her. Only she didn't appear to know of any when she was talking to Swain."

"Well, bring her along if you can," said Mr. Royce. "We'll be glad to have her. And take your time about coming back, if you're needed up there. We're getting along all right."

I thanked him, and hung up; and presently Mrs. Hargis came to summon me to dinner. That meal over, I went in to Godfrey's desk to see what the books were he had suggested that I look at. There was quite a pile of them, and I saw that they all related to mysticism or to the religions of India. There was Sir Monier Williams's "Brahmanism and Hinduism," Hopkins's "The Religions of India," a work on crystallogamy, Mr. Lloyd Tuckey's standard work on "Hypnotism and Suggestion," and some half dozen others whose titles I have forgotten. And as I looked at them, I began to understand one reason for Godfrey's success as a solver of mysteries—no detail of a subject ever escaped him.

I lit my pipe, sat down, and was soon deep in the lore of the East. I must confess that I did not make much of it. In that maze of superstition, the most I could do was to pick up a thread here and there. The yogi had referred to the White Night of Siva, and I soon found out that Siva is one of the gods of Hinduism—one of a great trilogy: Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Siva the destroyer. He had also spoken of the attributes of Kali, and, after a little further search, I discovered that Kali was Siva's wife—a most unprepossessing and fiendish female.

But when I passed on to Hinduism itself, and tried to understand its tenets and its sects, I soon found myself out of my depth. They were so jumbled, so multitudinous, and so diverse that I could get no clear idea of them. I read of the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Brahmanas; of metaphysical abstractions too tenuous to grasp; of karma or action, of maya or illusion, and I know not what "tangled jumble of ghosts and demons, demi-gods, and deified saints, household gods, village gods, tribal gods, universal gods, with their countless shrines and temples and din of discordant rites." At last, in despair, I gave it up, and turned to the book on crystallogamy.

Here, at least, was something comprehensible, if not altogether believable, and I read with interest of the antiquity of crystal-gazing as a means of inducing hallucination for the purpose of seeking information not to be gained by any normal means. I read of its use in China, in Assyria, in Egypt, in Arabia, in India, in Greece and Rome; of how its

practitioners in the Middle Ages were looked upon as heretics and burnt at the stake or broken on the wheel; of the famous Dr. Dee, and so down to the present time. The sryers or seers sometimes used mirrors, sometimes vessels filled with water, but usually a polished stone, and beryl was especially esteemed.

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The effect of gazing at these intently for a time was to abstract the mind from normal sensory impressions, and to induce a state of partial hypnosis during which the scryer claimed he could perceive in the crystal dream-pictures of great vividness, scenes at a distance, occurrences of the past, and of the future.

I was still deep in this, when I heard a step outside, the door opened, and Godfrey came in. He smiled when he saw what I was doing.

"How have you been getting along?" he asked.

"Not very well," and I threw the book back on the table. "The crystal-gazing isn't so bad—one can understand that; but the jumble of abstractions which the Hindus call religion is too much for me. I didn't know it was so late," I added, and looked at my watch; but it was not yet eleven o'clock.

"I'm earlier than usual," said Godfrey. "I cut loose as soon as I could, because I thought we'd better talk things over. I saw Simmonds in town to-night."

"Ah," I said; "and what did he tell you?"

"Nothing I didn't know already. The police have discovered nothing new—or, if they have, they're keeping it dark until to-morrow. Simmonds did, however, regale me with his theory of the case. He says the murder was done either by one of the Hindus or by young Swain."

"What do *you* think?" I asked.

"I'm inclined to agree with Simmonds," said Godfrey, grimly. "With the emphasis on the Hindus," he added, seeing the look on my face, "I don't believe Swain had any hand in it."

"Neither do I," I agreed, heartily. "In fact, such a theory is too absurd to discuss."

"Just the same," said Godfrey, slowly, "I'm glad he didn't touch Vaughan. If he had happened to seize him by the neck, while they were struggling together,—in other words, if those finger-prints Goldberger found had happened to be Swain's—things would have looked bad for him. I'm hoping they'll turn out to belong to one of the Hindus—but, as I said to Goldberger, I'm afraid that's too good to be true."

"Which one of the Hindus?" I asked.

"Oh, the Thug, of course."

I sat bolt upright.

“The Thug?” I echoed.

“Didn’t you get that far?” and Godfrey picked up one of the books and ran rapidly through the pages. “You remember we found him squatting on the floor with a rag and a tooth and a bone in front of him?”

“Yes.”

“And do you remember how the yogi described them, when Goldberger asked him about them?”

“Very distinctly—he called them the attributes of Kali.”

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"Now listen to this: 'The Thugs are a religious fraternity, committing murders in honor of Kali, the wife of Siva, who, they believe, assists them and protects them. Legend asserts that she presented her worshippers with three things, the hem of her lower garment to use as a noose, a rib to use as a knife, and a tooth to use as a pick-axe in burying the victims.'" He glanced at me, and then went on: "But the knife was little used, for the religious character of an assassination came to depend more and more upon its bloodless character, and for this a noose was used, with which the victim was strangled. The aversion to bloodshed became in time so great that many sects of Thuggee consider it defiling to touch human blood!" He closed the book and threw it on the table. "Don't you think that proves the case?"

"Yes," I said, thoughtfully. "And the yogi—is he also a Thug?"

"Oh, no; a White Priest of Siva could never be a Thug. The worship of Siva and of Kali are the very opposites of each other. The Saivas are ascetics. That is," he added, in another tone, "if the fellow is really a Saiva and not just a plain fraud."

"All these fellows are frauds, more or less, aren't they?" I questioned.

"No," was Godfrey's unexpected answer; "the real yogin are no doubt sincere; but a real yogi wouldn't waste his time on a soft-brained old man, and fire sky-rockets off at midnight to impress him. My own opinion is that this fellow is a fakir—a juggler, a sleight-of-hand man—and, of course, a crook."

"Well?" I asked, as Godfrey stopped and failed to continue.

"Well, that's as far as I've got. Oh, yes—there's Toto. A cobra is one of a fakir's stock properties."

"But, Godfrey," I protested, "he is no ignorant roadside juggler. He's a cultivated man—an unusual man."

"Certainly he is—most unusual. But that doesn't disprove my guess; it only makes the problem harder. Even a roadside juggler doesn't do his tricks for nothing—what reward is it this fellow's working for? It must be a big one, or it wouldn't tempt him."

"I suppose Vaughan paid him well," I ventured.

"Yes; but did you look at him, Lester? You've called him unusual, but that word doesn't begin to express him. He's extraordinary. No doubt Vaughan *did* pay him well, but it would take something more than that to persuade such a man to spend six months in a place like that. And I think I can guess at the stake he's playing for."

"You mean Miss Vaughan?"

“Just that,” and Godfrey leaned back in his chair.

I contemplated this theory for some moments in silence. It was, at least, a theory and an interesting one—but it rested on air. There was no sort of foundation for it that I could see, and at last I said so.

“I know it’s pretty thin,” Godfrey admitted, “but it’s the best I’ve been able to do—there’s so little to build a theory out of. But I’m going to see if I can’t prove one part of it true tonight.”

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"Which part?"

"About his being a fakir. Here's my theory: that hocus-pocus on the roof at midnight was for the purpose of impressing Vaughan. No doubt he believed it a real spiritual manifestation, whereas it was only a clever bit of jugglery. Now that Vaughan is dead, that particular bit of jugglery will cease until there is some new victim to impress. In fact, it has ceased already. There was no star last night."

"But you know why," I pointed out. "The yogi spent the night in contemplation. We can bear witness to that."

"We can't bear witness to when he started in," said Godfrey, drily. "We didn't see him till after half-past twelve. However, accepting his explanation, there would be no reason for omitting the phenomenon to-night, if it's a genuine one."

"No," I agreed.

"And if it *is* omitted," Godfrey went on, "it will be pretty conclusive evidence that it isn't genuine. Although," he went on hurriedly, "I don't need any proof of that—anything else would be unbelievable." He glanced at his watch. "It's ten minutes to twelve," he said. "Come along."

I followed him out of the house and through the grove with very mixed sensations. If the star *didn't* fall, it would tend to prove that it was, as Godfrey had said, merely a fake arranged to impress a credulous old man; but suppose it *did* fall! That was a part of the test concerning which Godfrey had said nothing. Suppose it *did* fall! What then?

So it was in silence that I followed Godfrey up the ladder and took my place on the limb. But Godfrey seemed to have no uneasiness.

"We won't have long to wait," he said. "We'll wait till five minutes after twelve, just to make sure. It must be twelve now. I wish I could persuade that fellow to show me how the fake was worked, for it was certainly a good one—one of the best...."

He stopped abruptly, staring out into the darkness. I was staring, too, for there, against the sky, a light began to glow and brighten. It hung for a moment motionless, and then began slowly to descend, steadily, deliberately, as of set purpose. Lower and lower it sank, in a straight line, hovered for an instant, and burst into a million sparks.

In the flare of light, a white-robed figure stood, gazing upwards, its arms strained toward the sky.

As we went silently down the ladder, a moment later, it seemed to me that I could hear Godfrey's theory crashing about his ears.



CHAPTER XIII

FRANCISCO SILVA

It was not quite ten o'clock when Godfrey and I turned in at the gates of Elmhurst, next morning, and made our way up the drive to the house, but in the library we found a considerable company already assembled. Goldberger was there, with Freylinghuisen his physician, his clerk, his stenographer, and the men who were to constitute the jury; Simmonds was there, and with him was an alert little man in glasses, who, Godfrey told me in an aside, was Sylvester, the head of the Identification Bureau, and the greatest expert on finger-prints in America. The district attorney had sent up an assistant, also with a stenographer, and altogether the room was decidedly crowded.

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It became impossible a moment later, when a string of automobiles puffed up the drive and disgorged a mob of reporters and photographers. As many as the room would hold pushed into it, and the others stood outside in the drive and complained loudly. The complaints of the photographers were especially varied and forceful. Goldberger looked around him in despair, mopping his face angrily, for the crowded room was very hot.

"You fellows will have to get out of here," he said to the reporters. "There's no room. I'll give you a transcript of the proceedings after they're over."

The protests redoubled. How were they to get any human interest out of a transcript? Besides, there were the photographers. What did he expect them to do—photograph the transcript? And finally, the law required that the hearing be public, so they had a right to be present. It was a tense moment, the more so since Goldberger was by no means insensible of the value of newspaper popularity to a man in public life.

"Why not go out on the lawn?" Godfrey suggested. "It's only a question of moving some chairs and tables, and the boys will all lend a hand."

The boys applauded, almost forgiving Godfrey his scoop, protested their entire willingness to lend two hands if necessary, and, when Goldberger nodded his approval, fell to work with a will. The lower floor of the house was denuded, the garden seats pressed into service, and at the end of five minutes, the court was established amid the circle of trees, the reporters had their coats off and their pipes lighted, the photographers ditto and their cameras placed. Good humour was restored; peace reigned; and Goldberger smiled again, for he knew that the adjectives with which the reporters would qualify his name would be complimentary ones!

He took his place, rapped for order, and instructed his clerk to swear the jury. Nobody paid much attention to the jury, for it was a recognised device for paying small political debts, and its verdict was usually in strict accord with the wishes of the presiding officer. Then Goldberger looked at the vacant chair which I had kept beside me.

"By the way, Mr. Lester," he said, "I don't see Mr. Swain."

"He had to go back to the city last night," I explained, "to get some fresh clothes. He had an errand or two to do this morning, and may have been detained. I left word at the house for him to come over here at once."

"You seem to have a good deal of confidence in him," Goldberger remarked.

"I have," I answered quietly. "A great deal."

Goldberger frowned a little, but proceeded to open the case without further delay. Godfrey was the first witness, and told his story much as he had told it the night before.

I followed him, but contributed no new details. Both of us were excused without cross-examination.

To my great satisfaction, Swain arrived while I was testifying, and I could not deny myself a triumphant glance at Goldberger, but he was studying some memoranda and affected not to notice it. As soon as I left the stand, Swain came and sat down beside me and gave me a letter. It was addressed to Miss Vaughan.

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"It's from Mrs. Royce," he said. "She's a tramp! She's determined that Marjorie shall come to her. She says if you don't bring her, she'll come after her herself. Do you know how she is this morning?"

"No," I said; "I haven't seen Hinman. But how are you?"

"Oh, I'm all right again—head a little sore yet where I bumped it—but otherwise as fit as a fiddle."

"You look it!" I said; and I was glad, because I wanted him to make a good impression on the stand. I knew what weight appearances often had; and no jury, I told myself, would believe that this bright-eyed, fresh-coloured boy could have had any hand in a brutal murder.

Just then Hinman's name was called, and an officer hurried away to the house after him. They returned together almost at once, and Hinman was placed on the stand. He told of being summoned by Godfrey, and of the events which followed. He said that the murder had been committed about midnight, that death had been due to strangulation; and identified the cord and the blood-stained handkerchief which the coroner submitted to him. I fancied that Swain lost a little of his colour when he saw the handkerchief and learned where it had been found, but he made no remark.

"Will Miss Vaughan be able to testify?" Goldberger inquired, just before the doctor stepped down.

"Unless it is absolutely necessary, I think she would better be excused," Hinman answered. "She is still very nervous. The ordeal might cause a serious collapse."

"We will try to get along without her," assented Goldberger. "If necessary, I can take her deposition. Is she in bed?"

"Yes; I am keeping her as quiet as possible."

"Very well; we won't disturb her," said Goldberger, and Hinman was excused, and Freylinghuisen called. He merely testified to the cause of death and that the autopsy had shown that the deceased was in fair health and without organic disease.

Then the servants were called, but their evidence was unimportant. They had gone to bed about ten o'clock, and had not awakened until the coroner himself had pounded at the door. They had heard no unusual sound. Yes, they had slept with their doors locked and windows shuttered because that was the rule of the house. Yes, even in the hottest weather; that made no difference, since each of their rooms was fitted with a ventilator.

Questioned as to the manner of life of the other inmates of the house, the German and his wife were non-committal. They had been with the family a long time; had taken care of the place when their master was abroad; only after his return had it been necessary to get another servant. He had been at home for a year, and the Hindus had arrived about six months later. Yes, they knew their master was studying some strange religion, but that was no affair of theirs, and they had never seen anything wrong. He had always treated them well; was a little strange and absent-minded at times;

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but neither of them really saw much of him. He never interfered in the household affairs, Miss Vaughan giving such instructions as were necessary. The man spent most of his time in the grounds, and the woman in the kitchen. She was a little petulant over the fact that one of the Hindus—the “ugly one”—refused to eat her cooking, but insisted on preparing his own food. Also, the housemaid had told her that there was a snake, but she had never seen it.

From the Irish housemaid a little more information was obtained. Neither Mr. Vaughan nor the yogi ate any breakfast; indeed, they rarely left their rooms before noon. The other Hindu mixed himself up some sort of mess over the kitchen stove. Miss Vaughan breakfasted alone at nine o'clock. At such times, she was accustomed to talk over household affairs with the maid, and after breakfast would visit the kitchen and make a tour of the grounds and garden. The remainder of her day would be spent in reading, in playing the piano, in doing little household tasks, or in walking about the grounds with her father. Yes, sometimes the yogi would join them, and there would be long discussions. After dinner, in the library, there would also be long discussions, but the girl had no idea what they were about. She heard a fragment of them occasionally, but had never been able to make anything of them. In fact, from the way they dressed and all, she had come to the conclusion that Mr. Vaughan and the yogi were both a little crazy, but quite inoffensive and harmless.

“And how about Miss Vaughan?” asked the coroner.

“Miss Vaughan, bless her heart, wasn't crazy,” said the girl quickly; “not a bit of it. She was just sad and lonely,—as who wouldn't be! She never went out—in the five months I've been here, she's never been off the place; and them front gates was never opened to let anybody in. The only people who come in were the grocer and milk-man and such-like, through the little door at the side.”

“You say you have been here five months?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How did you come to apply for the place?”

“I didn't apply for it. I was sent here by an employment bureau. Miss Marjorie engaged me. I didn't see the Hindus till afterwards, or I don't think I'd have took it. After that, I stayed for Miss Marjorie's sake.”

“You thought she needed you?”

“Yes, I did. With her father moonin' round in a kind of trance, and the yogi lookin' at her with eyes like live coals, and a snake that stood on its tail, and the other naygur going

around with nothin' on but a diaper, I thought she needed somebody to look after her; and says I, 'Annie Crogan, you're the girl to do it!'"

There was a ripple of laughter and the pencils of the reporters flew across their paper. It was the first gleam to enliven a prosaic and tiresome hearing.

"Were the Hindus obtrusive in any way?" asked the coroner.

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“Oh, no; they minded their business; I’ve no complaint on that score.”

“Did you see any of their religious practices?”

“I wouldn’t call them religious—quite the contrary. I’ve seen them wavin’ their arms and bowin’ to the sun and settin’ in the dark starin’ at a glass globe with a light in it; that’s about all. I got used to it, after a while, and just went on about my work without takin’ any notice.”

There was little more to be got from her, and finally she was excused. The reporters yawned. The jury twitched nervously. Worthington Vaughan was dead; he had been strangled—so much was clear; but not a scintilla of evidence had as yet been introduced as to who had strangled him. Then a movement of interest ran through the crowd, for a policeman came from the direction of the house accompanied by two strange figures. One was the yogi, in robes of dazzling white; the other his attendant, wearing something more than a diaper, indeed, but with his thin brown legs bare.

The yogi bowed to Goldberger with grave courtesy, and, at a word from the attendant policeman, sat down in the witness-chair. Everybody was leaning forward looking at him, and the cameras were clicking in chorus, but he seemed scarcely aware of the circle of eager faces.

“Hold up your right hand, please,” began Goldberger, after contemplating him for a moment.

“For what purpose?” asked the yogi.

“I’m going to swear you.”

“I do not understand.”

“I’m going to put you on oath to tell nothing but the truth,” explained the coroner.

“An oath is unnecessary,” said the yogi with a smile. “To speak the truth is required by my religion.”

There was something impressive in the words, and Goldberger slowly lowered his arm.

“What is your name?” he asked.

“Francisco Silva.”

“You are not a Hindu?”

“I am of their faith.”

“But by birth?”

“I am a Portuguese.”

“Born in India?”

“Born at Goa.”

The coroner paused. He had never heard of Goa. Neither had I. Neither, I judged, had any one else present. In this, however, I was wrong. Godfrey had heard of it, and afterwards referred me to Marryat’s “Phantom Ship” as his source of information.

“Goa,” Silva explained, seeing our perplexity, “is a colony owned by Portugal on the Malabar coast, some distance below Bombay.”

“How does it come that you speak English so well?”

“I was educated at Bombay, and afterwards at Oxford and at Paris.”

“But you are by religion a Hindu?”

“I am a Saiva—a follower of Siva, the Lord of life and death.”

As he spoke, he touched his forehead with the fingers of his left hand. There was a moment’s silence. Goldberger’s moustache, I noted with a smile, was beginning to suffer again.

“You are what is called an adept?” he asked, at last.

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"Some may call me that," said Silva, "but incorrectly. Among my fellow Saivas, I am known as a White Priest, a yogi, a teacher of the law."

"Mr. Vaughan was your pupil?"

"Yes; for six months he was my pupil."

"In what way did you come to accept this position?"

"Two years ago, Mr. Vaughan visited the monastery of our order in Crete. He was at that time merely a student of Orientalism, and came to us from curiosity. But his interest grew; and after a year spent in studying the holy books, he asked that a teacher be sent to him. There was none at that time who could be spared; but six months ago, having completed a task which had occupied me in Paris, I was assigned to this."

"Do you always go to so much trouble to secure converts?" questioned Goldberger, a little cynically.

"Usually we require that the period of study be passed at one of our monasteries. But this case was exceptional."

"In what way?"

"It was our hope," explained the yogi, calmly, "that Mr. Vaughan would assist us in spreading the Great Truth by endowing a monastery for us in this country."

"Ah!" and Goldberger looked at him. "Did he agree to do so?"

"He did," answered the yogi, still more calmly. "This estate was to have been given to us for that purpose, together with an endowment sufficient to maintain it. Mr. Vaughan himself hoped to gain the White Robe and become a teacher."

"What was to become of his daughter?"

"It was his hope that she would become a priestess of our order."

"You hoped so, too, no doubt?" inquired Goldberger sweetly.

"I did. It is an office of high honour and great influence. She would walk all her days in the shadow of the Holy One. So sweet a cup is offered to few women. The number of priestesses is limited to nine."

Goldberger pulled at his moustache helplessly. Evidently the witness's calm self-control was not to be broken down, or even ruffled.

“Please tell me where you were night before last,” said the coroner, finally.

“I was in this house.”

“Did you see Mr. Vaughan?”

“I did not.”

“How did you spend the night?”

“In contemplation. It was, as I have told you, the White Night of Siva, sacred to him from sunset to sunrise.”

“Do you mean that you spent the whole night sitting before that crystal?” asked the coroner, incredulously.

“That is my meaning.”

“You know nothing, then, of the death of Mr. Vaughan?”

“I saw his soul pass in the night. More than that I know not.”

Again Goldberger twitched at his moustache. He was plainly at a loss how to proceed.

“Was your attendant with you?” he asked, at last.

“He was in his closet.”

“At his devotions too, perhaps?”

“The White Night of Siva is also the Black Night of Kali,” said the yogi, gravely, as one rebuking an unworthy levity.

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"What do you mean by that?" Goldberger demanded.

"Mahbub is of the cult of Kali, who is the wife of Siva," said the yogi, touching his forehead reverently as he spoke the words. "He spent the night in adoration of her attributes."

Goldberger's stenographer was having his difficulties; the pencils of the reporters were racing wildly in unison; everyone was listening with strained attention; there was, somehow, a feeling in the air that something was about to happen. I saw Godfrey write a line upon a sheet of paper, fold it, and toss it on the table in front of Goldberger. The coroner opened it, read the line, and stared at the impassive Mahbub, who stood beside his master with folded arms, staring over the heads of the crowd.

"In other words," said Goldberger, slowly, "your attendant is a Thug."

The yogi bowed.

"Yes," he said, calmly; "Mahbub is Thuggee."

CHAPTER XIV

THE FINGER-PRINTS

A shiver ran through the crowd, like a gust of wind across a field of wheat. The words, "Mahbub is Thuggee," seemed to rend the veil which obscured the tragedy. Surely it was clear enough, now: here was a man killed by Thuggee's peculiar method, and here was the Thug. It was as simple as two and two!

Every eye was on the bare-legged Hindu, impassive as ever, staring straight before him. The camera-men hastily pushed in fresh plates and trained their machines upon him. Two policemen edged close to his side.

But Francisco Silva looked about him with scornful eyes, and presently he opened his lips as though to speak, and then he closed them.

Goldberger seemed perplexed. He looked as though, while rolling smoothly along the road toward a well-understood goal, he had suddenly struck an unforeseen obstacle. The possibility of Mahbub's guilt seemed to interfere with some theory of his own. He called Simmonds and the district attorney to him, and they exchanged a few low words. Then he turned back to the witness.

"I should like to question your attendant," he said. "Will you translate for me? I have not been able to find a Hindu interpreter."

Silva bowed his consent.

“Ask him, please, where he spent Thursday night.”

There was a brief interchange between Silva and Mahbub, then the former turned to Goldberger.

“It was as I thought,” he said. “He spent the night in the worship of the attributes of Kali.”

The coroner opened an envelope which lay on the table at his elbow and took out a piece of knotted cord.

“Ask him if he ever saw this before,” he said, and passed it to the witness.

“I notice that it is stained,” said Silva, looking at it. “Is it with blood?”

“Yes.”

“Then Mahbub will not touch it. For him to do so, would be to defile himself.”

“He doesn’t need to touch it. Show it to him.”

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Silva spoke to his servant, holding up the cord. The latter glanced at it and shook his head. Without a word, Silva handed the cord back to the coroner.

“Are there any further questions?” he asked.

Goldberger pulled at his moustache impatiently.

“There are a lot of questions I’d like to ask,” he said, “but I feel a good deal as though I were questioning the Sphinx. Isn’t it a little queer that a Thug should be so particular about a few blood-stains?”

“I fear that you are doing Mahbub an injustice in your thoughts,” Silva said, gravely. “You have heard certain tales of the Thugs, perhaps—tales distorted and magnified and untrue. In the old days, as worshippers of Kali, they did, sometimes, offer her a human sacrifice; but that was long ago. To say a man is a Thug is not to say he is also a murderer.”

“It will take more than that to convict him, anyway,” assented Goldberger, quickly. “That is all for the present, professor.” I bit back a smile at the title which came so unconsciously from Goldberger’s lips.

Silva bowed and walked slowly away toward the house, Mahbub following close behind. At a look from Simmonds, two of his men strolled after the strange couple.

Goldberger stared musingly after them for a moment, then shook his head impatiently, and turned back to the business in hand.

“Will Mr. Swain please take the stand?” he said; and Swain took the chair. “Now, Mr. Swain,” Goldberger began, after swearing him, “please tell us, in your own way, of what part you had in the incidents of Thursday night.”

Swain told his story much as he had told it to Godfrey and me, and I noticed how closely both Goldberger and the district attorney followed it. When he had finished, Goldberger asked the same question that Godfrey had asked.

“While you were having the altercation with Mr. Vaughan, did you grasp hold of him?”

“No, sir; I did not touch him.”

“You are quite sure?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You didn’t touch him at any time, then or afterwards?”



"No, sir. I didn't see him afterwards."

"What were your feelings when he took his daughter away?"

"I was profoundly grieved."

"And angry?"

"Yes, I suppose I was angry. He was most unjust to me."

"He had used very violent language to you, had he not?"

"Yes."

"He had threatened your life if you tried to see his daughter again?"

"Yes."

"Now, Mr. Swain, as you stood there, angry and humiliated, didn't you make up your mind to follow him to the house and have it out with him?"

Swain smiled.

"I'm lawyer enough to know," he said, "that a question like that isn't permissible. But I'll answer it. I may have had such an impulse—I don't know; but the sight of the cobra there in the arbour put it effectually out of my head."

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"You still think there was a cobra?"

"I am sure of it."

"And you ran out of the harbour so fast you bumped your head?"

"I suppose that's what happened. It's mighty sore, anyway," and Swain put his hand to it ruefully.

"Mr. Swain," went on the coroner, slowly, "are you prepared to swear that, after you hurt your head, you might not, in a confused and half-dazed condition, have followed your previous impulse to go to the house and see Mr. Vaughan?"

"Yes," answered Swain, emphatically, "I am. Although I was somewhat dazed, I have a distinct recollection of going straight to the wall and climbing back over it."

"You cut your wrist as you were crossing the wall the first time?"

[Illustration: "I'm lawyer enough to know," he said, "that a question like that is not permissible"]

"Yes," and Swain held up his hand and showed the strip of plaster across the wound.

"Your right wrist?"

"Yes."

"It bled freely, did it not?"

"Very freely."

"What became of the clothes you took off when you changed into those brought by Mr. Godfrey?"

"I don't know. Mr. Lester told me they were left here. I intended to inquire for them."

At a sign from Goldberger, Simmonds opened a suit-case and placed a bundle on the table. Goldberger unrolled it and handed it to Swain.

"Are these the clothes?" he asked.

"Yes," said Swain, after a moment's examination.

"Will you hold the shirt up so the jury can see it?"



Swain held the garment up, and everybody's eyes were fixed upon the blood-soaked sleeve.

"There seems to have been a good deal of blood," remarked Goldberger. "It must have run down over your hand."

"It did. It was all over my fingers."

"So that it would probably stain anything you touched?"

"Yes, very probably."

"Did you think of that when you were in the arbour with Miss Vaughan?"

Swain's face suddenly crimsoned and he hung his head.

"I'm afraid not," he said.

"How was she dressed?"

"In a white robe of some silk-like material."

"A robe that would show a blood-stain?"

"Undoubtedly."

Goldberger paused for an instant, and then produced a pad, such as one uses for inking rubber stamps, opened it and placed it on the table before him.

"Have you any objection to giving me a set of your finger-prints?" he asked.

"None whatever," and Swain stepped toward the table and placed the tips of his fingers on the pad. Then he pressed each one carefully upon the pad of paper which the coroner placed before him. Goldberger watched him curiously, until all ten impressions had been made.

"You did that as though you had done it before," he remarked.

"I made a set once for Mr. Vaughan," said Swain, sitting down again. "He had a most interesting collection."

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Goldberger passed the prints over to the head of the Bureau of Identification, then he turned back to the witness.

“Mr. Swain,” he said, “have you ever seen this cord before?” and he handed him the knotted cord.

Swain took it and examined it curiously, without hesitation or repugnance.

“No,” he answered, finally, “I never saw it before.”

“Do you know what it is?” and Goldberger watched him closely.

“I infer that it is the cord with which Mr. Vaughan was strangled.”

“That is so. You did not see it around his neck?”

“I have no recollection of having done so.”

“Please look at the cord again, Mr. Swain,” said Goldberger, still watching him. “You will see that it is knotted. Can you describe those knots for me?”

Swain looked at the knots, and I was glad to see that his hands were absolutely steady and his face free from fear. No murderer could handle so unconcernedly the instrument of his crime! Surely the jury would see that!

“The knots,” said Swain, at last, “seem to be an ordinary square knot with which the cord was made into a noose, and then a double bowline to secure it.”

“A double bowline? Can you tie such a knot?”

“Certainly. Anyone who has ever owned a boat can do so. It is the best knot for this purpose.”

The coroner reached out for the cord and replaced it in the envelope. Then he produced the handkerchief.

“Can you identify this?” he asked, and handed it to the witness.

Swain changed colour a little as he took it.

“I cannot identify it,” he said, in a low voice; “but I will say this: when Miss Vaughan found that my wrist was bleeding, she insisted upon tying her handkerchief around it. This may be the handkerchief.”

Again a little shiver ran through the crowd, and Goldberger’s eyes were gleaming.

"You notice that two corners of the handkerchief are free from stain," he said, "and are crumpled as though they had been tied in a knot. The handkerchief Miss Vaughan used would probably be in that condition, would it not?"

"Yes," Swain answered, his voice still low.

"You heard Dr. Hinman testify that he found the handkerchief beside the chair in which Mr. Vaughan was murdered?"

"Yes."

"Can you explain its presence there?"

"I cannot, unless it dropped from my wrist when I stooped to raise Miss Vaughan."

Goldberger looked at the witness for a moment, then he glanced at Sylvester, who nodded almost imperceptibly.

"That is all for the present, Mr. Swain," the coroner said, and Swain sat down again beside me, very pale, but holding himself well in hand.

Then Simmonds took the stand. His story developed nothing new, but he told of the finding of the body and of its appearance and manner of death in a way which brought back the scene to me very vividly. I suspected that he made his story deliberately impressive in order to efface the good impression made by the previous witness.

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Finally, the coroner dipped once more into the suit-case, brought out another bundle and unrolled it. It proved to be a white robe with red stains about the top. He handed it to Simmonds.

"Can you identify this?" he asked.

"Yes," said Simmonds; "it is the garment worn by Mr. Vaughan at the time of his murder."

"How do you identify it?"

"By my initials in indelible ink, on the right sleeve, where I placed them."

"There are stains on the collar of the robe. What are they?"

"Blood-stains."

"Human blood?"

"Yes, sir."

"How do you know?"

"I have had them tested."

"Did any blood come from the corpse?"

"No, sir; the skin of the neck was not broken."

"Where, then, in your opinion, did this blood come from?"

"From the murderer," answered Simmonds, quietly.

There was a sudden gasp from the reporters, as they saw whither this testimony was tending. I glanced at Swain. He was a little paler, but was smiling confidently.

Goldberger, his face hawklike, stooped again to the suit-case, produced a third bundle, and, unrolling it, disclosed another robe, also of white silk. This, too, he handed to Simmonds.

"Can you identify that?" he asked.

"Yes," said Simmonds. "It is the robe worn by Miss Vaughan on the night of the tragedy. My initials are on the left sleeve."

"That also has blood-marks on it, I believe?"

“Yes, sir;” and, indeed, we could all perceive the marks.

“Human blood?”

“Yes, sir. I had it tested, too.”

“That is all,” said Goldberger, quickly, and placed on the stand the head of the Identification Bureau.

“Mr. Sylvester,” he began, “you have examined the marks on these garments?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What did you make of them?”

“They are all unquestionably finger-marks, but most of them are mere smudges. However, the fabric of which these robes are made is a very hard and finely-meshed silk, with an unusually smooth surface, and I succeeded in discovering a few marks on which the lines were sufficiently distinct for purposes of identification. These I have photographed. The lines are much plainer in the photographs than on the cloth.”

“Have you the photographs with you?”

“I have,” and Sylvester produced them from a pocket. “These are the prints on the robe belonging to the murdered man,” he added, passing four cards to the coroner. “You will notice that two of them show the right thumb, though one is not very distinct; another shows the right fore-finger, and the fourth the right middle-finger.”

“You consider these plain enough for purposes of identification?”

“Undoubtedly. Any one of them would be enough.”

Goldberger passed the photographs to the foreman of the jury, who looked at them vacantly.

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"And the other photographs?" he asked.

"I got only two prints from the other robe," said Sylvester. "All but these were hopelessly smudged, as though the hand had moved while touching the garment."

"You mean they were all made by one hand?" asked Goldberger.

"Yes, sir; by the right hand. Again I have a print of the thumb and one of the third finger."

He passed the photographs over, and again Goldberger handed them on to the jury.

"Mr. Sylvester," said the coroner, "you consider the finger-print method of identification a positive one, do you not?"

"Absolutely so."

"Even with a single finger?"

"Perhaps with a single finger there may be some doubt, if there is no other evidence. Somebody has computed that the chance of two prints being exactly the same is one in sixty-four millions."

"And where there is other evidence?"

"I should say that a single finger was enough."

"Suppose you have two fingers?"

"Then it is absolutely certain."

"And three fingers?"

Sylvester shrugged his shoulders to indicate that proof could go no further. Goldberger took back the photographs from the foreman of the jury and ranged them before him on the table.

"Now, Mr. Sylvester," he said, "did you notice any correspondence between these prints?"

"Yes," answered the witness, in a low voice; "the thumb-prints on both robes were made by the same hand."

The audience sat spell-bound, staring, scarce breathing. I dared not glance at Swain. I could not take my eyes from that pale-faced man on the witness-stand, who knew that with every word he was riveting an awful crime to a living fellow-being.

“One question more,” said Goldberger. “Have you any way of telling by whom these prints were made?”

“Yes,” said Sylvester again, and his voice was so low I could scarcely hear it. “They were made by Frederic Swain. The prints he made just now correspond with them in every detail!”

CHAPTER XV

THE CHAIN TIGHTENS

An instant's silence followed Sylvester's words, and then a little murmur of interest and excitement, as the reporters bent closer above their work. I heard a quick, deep intaking of the breath from the man who sat beside me, and then I was on my feet.

“Your Honour,” I said to Goldberger, “it seems that an effort is to be made to incriminate Mr. Swain in this affair, and he should therefore be represented by counsel. I myself intend to represent him, and I ask for an hour's adjournment in order to consult with my client.”

Goldberger glanced at his watch.

“I intended to adjourn for lunch,” he said, “as soon as I had finished with Mr. Sylvester. We will adjourn now, if you wish—until one-thirty,” he added.

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The battery of cameras was clicking at Swain, and two or three artists were making sketches of his head; there was a great bustle as the reporters gathered up their papers and hurried to their cars to search for the nearest telephone; the jury walked heavily away in charge of an officer to get their lunch at some near-by road-house; Sylvester was gathering up his prints and photographs and putting them carefully in his pocket; Simmonds was replacing the blood-stained clothing in the suit-case, to be held as evidence for the trial; but Swain sat there, with arms folded, staring straight before him, apparently unconscious of all this.

Goldberger looked at him closely, as he came down to speak to me, but Swain did not glance up.

"I can parole him in your custody, I suppose, Mr. Lester?" the coroner asked.

"Yes; certainly," I assented.

"Sylvester's evidence makes it look bad for him."

"Will you introduce me to Sylvester? I should like to go over the prints with him."

"Certainly;" and, a moment later, with the prints spread out before us, Sylvester was showing me their points of similarity.

Godfrey came forward while he was talking and stood looking over his shoulder.

I had heard of finger-print identification, of course, many times, but had made no study of the subject, and, I confess, the blurred photographs which Sylvester offered for my inspection seemed to me mighty poor evidence upon which to accuse a man of murder. The photographs showed the prints considerably larger than life-size, but this enlargement had also exaggerated the threads of the cloth, so that the prints seemed half-concealed by a heavy mesh. To the naked eye, the lines were almost indistinguishable, but under Sylvester's powerful glass they came out more clearly.

"The thumb," said Sylvester, following the lines first to the right and then to the left with the point of a pencil, "is what we call a double whorl. It consists of fourteen lines, or ridges. With the micrometer," and he raised the lid of a little leather box which stood on the table, took out an instrument of polished steel and applied it to one of the photographs, "we get the angle of these ridges. See how I adjust it," and I watched him, as, with a delicate thumbscrew, he made the needle-like points of the finder coincide with the outside lines of the whorl. "Now here is a photograph from the other robe, also showing the thumb," and he applied the machine carefully to it. "It also is a double whorl of fourteen lines, and you see the angles are the same. And here is the print of the right thumb which your client made for me." He applied the micrometer and drew back that I might see for myself.

“But these photographs are enlarged,” I objected.

“That makes no difference. Enlargement does not alter the angles. Here are the other prints.”

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He compared them one by one, in the same manner. When he had finished, there was no escaping the conviction that they had been made by the same hand—that is, unless one denied the theory of finger-print identification altogether, and that, I knew, would be absurd. As he finished his demonstration, Sylvester glanced over my shoulder with a little deprecating smile, as of a man apologising for doing an unpleasant duty, and I turned to find Swain standing there, his face lined with perplexity.

“You heard?” I asked.

“Yes; and I believe Mr. Sylvester is right. I can’t understand it.”

“Well,” I said, “suppose we go and have some lunch, and then we can talk it over,” and thanking Sylvester for his courtesy, I led Swain away. Godfrey fell into step beside us, and for some moments we walked on in silence.

“There is only one explanation that I can see,” said Godfrey, at last. “Swain, you remember, got to the library about a minute ahead of us, and when we reached the door he was lifting Miss Vaughan to the couch. In that minute, he must have touched the dead man.”

Swain shook his head doubtfully.

“I don’t see why I should have done that,” he said.

“It isn’t a question of why you did it,” Godfrey pointed out. “It’s a question of whether you did it. Go over the scene in your mind, recalling as many details as you can, and then we’ll go over it together, step by step, after lunch.”

It was a silent meal, and when it was over, Godfrey led the way into his study.

“Now,” he began, when we were seated, “where was Miss Vaughan at the moment you sprang through the door?”

“She was lying on the floor by the table, in front of her father’s chair,” Swain replied.

“You are sure of that?”

“Yes; I didn’t see her until I ran around the table.”

“I was hoping,” said Godfrey, “that she had fainted with her arms clasped about her father’s neck, and that, in freeing them, you made those marks on his robe.”

But Swain shook his head.

“No,” he said; “I’m positive I didn’t touch him.”

"Then how did the marks get there?"

"I don't know," said Swain helplessly.

"Now, see here, Swain," said Godfrey, a little sternly, "there is only one way in which those finger-prints could have got on that garment, and that is from your fingers. If you didn't put them there consciously, you must have done so unconsciously. If they aren't explained in some way, the jury will very probably hold you responsible for the crime."

"I understand that," Swain answered thickly; "but how can they be explained? I don't see why I should put my hands on Mr. Vaughan's throat, even unconsciously. And then there's the fact that at no time during the evening was I really unconscious—I was only confused and dazed."

"Goldberger's theory is plain enough," said Godfrey, turning to me; "and I must say that it's a good one. He realises that there wasn't provocation enough to cause a man like Swain to commit murder, with all his senses about him; but his presumption is that the crime was committed while Swain was in a dazed condition and not wholly self-controlled. Such a thing is possible."

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"No, it isn't!" cried Swain, his face livid. "It isn't possible! I'm not a murderer. I remember everything else—do you think I wouldn't remember a thing like that!"

"I don't know what to think," Godfrey admitted, a straight line between his brows. "Besides, there's the handkerchief."

"I don't see any mystery about that," said Swain. "There's only one way that could have come there. It dropped from my wrist when I stooped over Miss Vaughan."

Godfrey looked at me, and I nodded. Swain might as well know the worst.

"That would be an explanation, sure enough," said Godfrey, slowly, "but for one fact—you didn't have any bandage on your wrist when you came back over the wall. Both Lester and I saw your wrist and the cut on it distinctly. Therefore, if you dropped the handkerchief there, it must have been before that."

The blood had run from Swain's cheeks, as though drained by an open artery, and for a moment he sat silent, staring at the speaker. Then he raised his trembling right hand and looked at it, as though it might bear some mark to tell him whether it were indeed guilty.

"But—but I don't understand!" he cried thickly. "You—you don't mean to intimate—you don't believe—but I wasn't unconscious, I tell you! I wasn't near the house until after we heard the screams! I'm sure of it! I'd stake my soul on it!"

"Get a grip of yourself, Swain," said Godfrey, soothingly. "Don't let yourself go like that. No, I don't believe you killed Worthington Vaughan, consciously or unconsciously. I said Goldberger's theory was a good one, and it is; but I don't believe it. My belief is that the murder was done by the Thug; but there's nothing to support it, except the fact that he was on the ground and that a noose was used. There's not a bit of direct evidence to connect him with the crime, and there's a lot of direct evidence to connect you with it. It's up to us to explain it away. Now, think carefully before you answer my questions: Have you any recollection, however faint, of having seen Mahbub before this morning?"

Swain sat for quite a minute searching his consciousness. Then, to my great disappointment, he shook his head.

"No," he said; "I am sure I never saw him before."

"Nor Silva?"

"No, nor Silva—except, of course, the time, three or four months ago, when he gave me Mr. Vaughan's message."

"Have you a distinct recollection that the library was empty when you sprang into it?"



"Yes; very distinct. I remember looking about it, and then running past the table and discovering Miss Vaughan."

"You saw her father also?"

"Yes; but I merely glanced at him. I realised that he was dead."

"And you also have a distinct recollection that you did not approach him or touch him?"

"I am quite certain of that," answered Swain, positively.

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"Then I give it up," said Godfrey, and lay back in his chair.

There was a queer boiling of ideas in my mind; ideas difficult to clothe with words, and composed of I know not what farrago of occultism, mysticism, and Oriental magic; but at last I managed to simmer them down to a timid question:

"I know it sounds foolish, but wouldn't it be possible, Godfrey, to explain all this by hypnosis, or occult influence, or something of that sort?"

Godfrey turned and looked at me.

"Silva seems to have impressed you," he said.

"He has. But isn't such an explanation possible?"

"I don't think so. I don't deny that the Orientals have gone farther along certain paths of psychology than we have, but as to their possessing any occult power, it is, in my opinion, all bosh. As for hypnosis, the best authorities agree that no man can be hypnotised to do a thing which, in his normal condition, would be profoundly repugnant to him. Indeed, few men can be hypnotised against their will. To be hypnotised, you have to yield yourself. Of course, the more you yield yourself, the weaker you grow, but that doesn't apply to Swain. I shouldn't advise you to use that line of argument to a jury," he added, with a smile. "You'd better just leave the whole thing up in the air."

"Well," I said, "I'll make the best fight I can. I was hoping Swain could help me; since he can't, we'll have to trust to luck."

Godfrey left us to get his story of the morning hearing into shape, and I fell into a gloomy reverie. I could see no way out of the maze; either Swain had touched Vaughan's body, or it had been touched by another man with the same finger-markings. I sat suddenly upright, for if there was such a man, he must be one of two....

"What is it?" Swain asked, looking at me.

"A long shot," I said. "An exceedingly long shot—a three-hundred-million to one shot. How many people are there in the world, Swain?"

"I'm sure I don't know," and he stared at me in bewilderment.

"I think it's something like a billion and a half. If that is true, then it's possible that there are four people in the world, beside yourself, with the thumb and two fingers of the right hand marked exactly as yours are."

"We must have a reunion, some day," Swain remarked, with irony.

But I refused to be diverted.

“Allowing for imperceptible differences,” I went on, “I think it is safe to assume that there are ten such people.”

“Well,” said Swain, bitterly, “I know one thing that it *isn’t* safe to assume, and that is that either of those Hindus is one of those ten. I suppose that is the assumption you will make next?”

“It’s an assumption I intend to put to the proof, anyway,” I answered, somewhat testily, “and if it fails, I’m afraid you’ll have to go to jail till I can dig up some more evidence.”

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He turned toward me quickly, his face working.

“See here, Mr. Lester,” he said, “don’t misunderstand me. I’m awfully grateful for all you’re doing for me; but I don’t mind going to jail—not on my own account. I’m innocent, and I’ll be able to prove it in time. But Marjorie mustn’t be left alone. I’d be ready to face anything if I knew that she was safe. She mustn’t be left in that house—not a single night. Promise me that you’ll take her with you as soon as the inquest’s over!”

“I’ll promise that, Swain, gladly,” I said, “provided, of course, the doctor consents.”

“We must get him,” and Swain sprang to his feet. “We must explain to him how important it is.”

“Perhaps I can get him on the ’phone,” I said; but the person who answered told me that he had already started for the inquest. And, a moment later, Mrs. Hargis tapped at the door of the study and said that the doctor was outside. I told her to show him in at once.

“The truth is,” said Hinman, shaking hands with both of us, “I thought I’d drop in to find out if there was anything I could do. No reasonable person,” he went on, turning to Swain, “believes you killed that defenceless old man; but those finger-prints certainly do puzzle me.”

“They puzzle me, too,” said Swain; “but I’ll prove my innocence—though it will take time.”

“It looks to me,” said the doctor, slowly, “that about the only way you can prove your innocence is to catch the real murderer.”

“That’s exactly what we’re going to try to do,” I assented.

“And meanwhile Mr. Swain will be in jail?” asked the doctor.

“I’m afraid there’s no help for it,” I admitted ruefully.

“I was just telling Mr. Lester that I didn’t mind that,” said Swain earnestly, “that I could stand anything, if I was only sure that Miss Vaughan was safe. She isn’t safe in that house. Mr. Lester has arranged to place her with the family of his partner, Mr. Royce, where she will be properly taken care of. Is there any reason why she can’t be taken there to-day?”

The doctor considered for a moment.

“Ordinarily,” he said, at last, “I would advise that she be left where she is for a few days; but, under the circumstances, perhaps she would better be moved. You can get an

easy-riding carriage—or a car will do, if you drive carefully. The nurses, will, of course, go along. The only thing is, she will probably wish to attend her father's funeral, which takes place to-morrow."

Swain bit his lips nervously.

"I have a horror of her staying in that house another night," he said; "but I hadn't thought of the funeral. There is one nurse on duty all the time, isn't there, doctor?"

"Yes."

"All right, then; we'll risk one night more. But you promise me that she shall be taken away immediately after the funeral?"

"Yes," I said, "I promise."

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"And I," said the doctor. Then he looked at his watch. "It's time we were getting back," he added.

He took us over in his car, and we found the jury, under the guidance of Simmonds, just coming out of the house, each member smoking a fat black cigar at the expense of the State. They had been viewing the body and the scene of the crime, but as they filed back into their seats, I noted that they seemed anything but depressed. The lunch had evidently been a good one.

Sylvester was recalled to finish his testimony. He explained the system of curves and angles by which finger-prints are grouped and classified, and the various points of resemblance by which two prints could be proved to have been made by the same finger. There was, first of all, the general convolution, whether a flexure, a stria, a sinus, a spiral, a circle, or a whorl; there was, secondly, the number of ridges in the convolution; and there was, thirdly, the angles which these ridges made. If two prints agreed in all these details, their identity was certain. He then proceeded to show that the prints made that morning by Swain did so agree with the photographs of the prints on the garments. Finally the witness was turned over to me for cross-examination.

"Mr. Sylvester," I began, "are you willing to assert that those finger-prints could have been made by no man in the world except Mr. Swain?"

Sylvester hesitated, just as I hoped he would do.

"No," he answered, at last, "I can't assert that, Mr. Lester. There may be three or four other men in the world with finger-prints like these. But the probabilities against any of these men having made these prints are very great. Besides, it is a thing easily proved—the number of persons who might have committed the crime is limited, and it is an easy thing to secure prints of their fingers."

"That is what I was about to propose," I agreed. "I should like the finger-prints taken of every one who was in the house Thursday night."

"Do I understand that your case stands or falls upon this point?" asked the coroner.

"Your Honor," I answered, "my client cannot explain how the prints of his fingers, if they are his, came to be upon that robe. The one thing he is certain of is that they were not placed there by him. Not once, during the entire evening, was my client near enough to Mr. Vaughan to touch him; not once did he so far lose consciousness as to be unable to remember what occurred. We have racked our brains for an explanation, and the only possible one seems to be that the prints of the real murderer resemble those of my client. And when I say the real murderer," I added, "I do not necessarily mean one of the persons whom we know to have been in the house. Outside of these finger-prints,

there has been absolutely no evidence introduced here to prove that the crime might not have been committed by some person unknown to us.”

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"You can scarcely expect the jury to believe, however," Goldberger pointed out, "that this supposititious person had finger-tips like your client's."

"No," I agreed, "I make no such assertion; my hope is that we shall soon have the prints of the real murderer; and when I say the real murderer," I added, looking at the jury, "I believe every one present understands who I mean."

The coroner rapped sharply; but I had said what I wished to say, and sat down. The witnesses of the morning were ordered to be brought out. Sylvester arranged his ink-pad and sheets of paper.

"It seems to me," remarked the coroner, with a smile, "that you and Mr. Godfrey would better register, too. You were within striking distance."

"That is right," I agreed, and was the first to register; but Sylvester, after a glance at my prints, shook his head.

"Your thumb is a left sinus," he said. "You're cleared, Mr. Lester."

Godfrey came forward and registered, too, and after him the three servants. In each case, a shake of Sylvester's head told the result.

Then Simmonds came from the house, with Silva and Mahbub after him, and the coroner explained to Silva what was wanted. I fancied that the yogi's brow contracted a little.

"The registration of the fingers," he said, "of the foot or of the palm, is with us a religious ceremony, not to be lightly performed. By some, it is also held that the touch of ink, unless compounded by a priest of the temple according to a certain formula, is defiling; and, above all, it is impossible for a believer to permit such relics of himself to remain in the hands of an infidel."

"The relics, as you call them," Goldberger explained, "won't need to remain in our hands. My expert here can tell in a minute whether your prints resemble those of his photographs. If they do not, they will be returned to you."

"And if they do?"

Goldberger laughed.

"Well, you can have them back, anyway. In that case, I guess we can persuade you, later on, to make another set."

The yogi flushed angrily, but controlled himself.

"I rely upon your promise, sir," he said, and laid his fingers first upon the pad and then upon the paper.

He stood with closed eyes and moving lips, his inked fingers held carefully away from him, during the breathless moment that Sylvester bent above the prints. Then the expert looked up and shook his head.

"No resemblance at all," he said, and held out the sheet of paper on which the prints were.

Silva accepted it silently, and rolled it into a ball in the palm of his hand.

"Now for the other fellow," said Goldberger.

Silva glanced at his follower doubtfully.

"I am not sure that I can make him understand," he said, and for some moments talked energetically to Mahbub in a language which I suppose was Hindu. Mahbub listened, scowling fiercely, speaking a brief sentence now and then. "He would know," Silva asked, at last, turning to the coroner, "whether blood is a constituent of that ink."

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"It is a purely chemical compound," Sylvester explained. "There is no blood in it, nor any other animal matter."

This was repeated to Mahbub, and, after some further hesitation, he advanced to the table.

A moment later, Sylvester was bending above the prints. Then he looked up, his face red with astonishment, and motioned me to approach.

"Look at that!" he said, and laid the prints before me.

My heart was leaping with the hope that the incredible had happened; that here lay the clue to the mystery. But the first glance told me that such was not the case. The prints resembled Swain's not at all. And then, when I looked at them again, I perceived that they resembled no other prints which I had ever seen.

For the prints of all ten fingers were exactly alike, and consisted, not of whorls and spirals, but of straight lines running right across the finger. Sylvester was staring at them in bewilderment.

"These," he said, when he could find his voice, "are the most remarkable prints I ever saw."

"Do they resemble those on the robe?" asked the coroner.

"Not in the least."

"Then that settles that point," said Goldberger, with what seemed to me a sigh of relief.

"There is one thing, though," said Sylvester, eyeing Mahbub curiously; "I wish I knew the secret of these extraordinary prints."

"I can tell it to you," said Silva, with a little smile. "It is not at all extraordinary. The system of finger-print identification has been in use among the Hindus for many centuries, and was adopted by the English courts in India nearly a hundred years ago, after every other method had failed. The caste of Thuggee, which was at war with all other castes, and especially at war with the English, evaded it by stimulating on the fingers of their male children the formation of these artificial ridges. It became a sacred rite, performed by the priests, and has been maintained by the more devout members of the caste, although the need for it has ceased."

Sylvester looked at the prints again.

"I should like to keep these," he said. "They would be a great addition to my collection."

Silva bowed.

“Mahbub will have no objection,” he said. “To him, they are of no importance, since there are many hundreds of men in the world with finger-tips identical with his. That is all?”

Goldberger nodded, and the two strange figures walked slowly away toward the house.

CHAPTER XVI

MISS VAUGHAN’S STORY

Sylvester was still bending in ecstasy over those strange finger-prints—the absorbed ecstasy of the collector who has come unexpectedly upon a specimen wonderful and precious.

“Well,” he said, looking up, at last, “I’ve learned something new to-day. These prints shall have the place of honour. They might not be a means of identification among the Thugs, but I’ll wager there’s no collection in America has a set like them! They’re unique!”

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"But not in the least like the photographs," put in Goldberger, drily.

"No," and Sylvester flushed a little as he felt himself jerked from his hobby. "None of the prints we have taken this afternoon resemble the photographs in any way."

"But those made by Mr. Swain *do* resemble them?"

"It is more than a resemblance. They are identical with them."

"What inference do you draw from that?"

"It is more than an inference," Sylvester retorted. "It is a certainty. I am willing to swear that the finger-prints on the robe worn by the murdered man were made by Frederic Swain."

"You realise the serious nature of this assertion?" asked the coroner, slowly.

"I realise it fully."

"And that realisation does not cause you to modify it in any way?"

"It cannot be modified," said Sylvester, firmly, "however serious it may be, however reluctant I may be to make it—it cannot be modified because it is the truth."

There was a moment's silence, then Goldberger turned to me.

"Have you any questions to ask the witness, Mr. Lester?"

"No," I answered; "I have none."

Sylvester bent again above his prints, while the coroner and the prosecutor held a brief consultation. Then Goldberger turned back to me.

"Have you anything further, Mr. Lester?" he asked. "Our evidence is all in, I believe."

I was driven to my last entrenchment.

"I should like to call Miss Vaughan," I said, "if Dr. Hinman thinks she is strong enough."

Swain's chair creaked as he swung toward me.

"No, no!" he whispered, angrily. "Don't do that! Spare her that!"

But I waved him away, for it was his honour and welfare I had to consider, not Miss Vaughan's convenience, and turned to Dr. Hinman, who was evidently struggling

between two duties. One was his duty to his patient; the other his duty to a man cruelly threatened, whom his patient's testimony might save.

"Well, what do you say, doctor?" asked the coroner.

"Miss Vaughan is no doubt able to testify," said the doctor, slowly, "but I should like to spare her as much as possible. Couldn't her deposition be taken privately? I think you mentioned something of the sort."

Goldberger looked at me.

"I shall be satisfied," I said, "to question her in the presence of Mr. Goldberger, reserving the right to put her on the stand, should I deem it necessary to do so."

"Very well," agreed the doctor. "I will prepare her," and he hurried away toward the house.

Swain was gripping my arm savagely.

"See here, Mr. Lester," he said in my ear, his voice shaking with anger, "I'm in deadly earnest about this. Take Miss Vaughan's deposition if you wish, but under no circumstances shall she be hauled before this crowd, in her present condition, and compelled to testify."

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"Why not?" I asked, surprised at his vehemence.

"Because, in the first place, her testimony can't help me; and, in the second place, I won't have her tortured."

"She wouldn't be tortured."

"Look around at these reporters and these photographers, and then tell me she wouldn't be tortured!"

"How do you know her evidence won't help you?"

"How can it?"

"It will confirm your story."

"Can it explain away the finger-prints?"

At the words, I suddenly realised that there was one person within striking distance of the murdered man whose prints we had not taken—his daughter. Not that they were necessary ...

Dr. Hinman appeared at the edge of the lawn and beckoned. As I arose from my chair, Swain gave my arm a last savage grip.

"Remember!" he said.

But I kept my lips closed. If Miss Vaughan really loved him, and could help him, I would not need to urge her to the stand!

Goldberger joined me and together we followed Hinman into the house and up the stairs. He opened the door at the stair-head, waited for us to precede him, followed us into the room, and closed the door gently.

Miss Vaughan was half-sitting, half-reclining in a large chair. The blinds were drawn and the room in semi-darkness, but even in that light I could see how changed she was from the girl of whom I had caught a glimpse two days before. Her face was dead white, as though every drop of blood had been drained from it; her eyes were heavy and puffed, as from much weeping, and it seemed to me that there still lingered in their depths a shadow of horror and shrinking fear.

"This is Mr. Goldberger," said the doctor, "and this is Mr. Lester."

She inclined her head to each of us, as we took the chairs the doctor drew up, and I fancied that her cheeks flushed a little as her eyes met mine.

"I have explained to Miss Vaughan," the doctor continued, "that an inquiry is in progress, as the law requires, to determine the manner of her father's death, and that her story of what happened that night is essential to it."

"It will, at least, be a great help to us," said Goldberger gently, and I saw how deeply the girl's delicate beauty appealed to him. It was a beauty which no pallor could disguise, and Goldberger's temperament was an impressionable one.

"I shall be glad to tell you all I know," said Miss Vaughan, "but I fear it will not help you much."

"Will you tell us something, first, of your father's mental state?" I suggested.

"For many years," she began, "father had been a student of mysticism, and until quite recently he remained merely a student. I mean by that that he approached the subject with a detached mind and with no interest in it except a scientific interest."

"I understand," I said. "And that has changed recently?"

"It has changed completely in the last few months. He became a disciple, a convert anxious to win other converts."

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"A convert to what?"

"To Hinduism—to the worship of Siva."

"That is the cult to which Francisco Silva belongs?"

"Yes; he is a White Priest of Siva."

"And this change in your father has been since the coming of this man?"

"Yes."

"Do you know anything of him?"

"Only that he is a very wonderful man."

"You know nothing of his past?"

"No."

"Did your father wish you to become a convert?"

"Yes, he desired it deeply."

"A priestess of Siva, I believe it is called?"

"Yes."

"And the yogi also desired it?"

"He believed it would be a great destiny. But he urged it only for my father's sake."

"So you determined to appeal to Mr. Swain?"

The colour deepened in her cheeks again.

"I decided to ask his advice," she said.

"Please tell us what happened that evening."

"Mr. Swain met me at the arbour in the corner of the grounds, as I had asked him to, and convinced me that my father's mind had given way under his long study of the occult. We decided that he should be placed in a sanitarium where he could have proper attention, and Mr. Swain was to make the necessary arrangements. All I would have to do would be to sign some papers. We were just saying good-night, when my father appeared at the entrance of the arbour."

"This was about midnight, was it not?"

"Yes."

"Why did you choose that hour for the meeting?"

"Because at that hour my father and the yogi were always engaged in invoking an astral benediction."

Even I, who knew the significance of the words, paused a little at them. The doctor and Goldberger were hopelessly at sea. After all, the words were a very good description of the weird ceremony.

"Well," I said, "and after your father appeared, what happened?"

"He was very excited and spoke to Mr. Swain in a most violent manner. Mr. Swain attempted to take me away from him, not knowing, at first, who it was had seized me; but I pushed him back and led my father away toward the house."

"Did Mr. Swain touch your father?"

"No; I was between them all the time. I was determined that they should not touch each other. I was afraid, if they came together, that something terrible would happen."

Goldberger glanced at me.

"Something terrible to your father?" he asked.

"Oh, no," she answered, quickly; "Mr. Swain would not have harmed my father, but father did not know what he was doing and might have harmed Mr. Swain."

It was my turn to look at Goldberger.

"After you left the harbour," I asked, "did you see Mr. Swain again?"

"No, I did not see him again."

"You went straight to the house?"

"Yes; father was still very violent. He had forbidden me to see Mr. Swain or to write to him. He had taken a violent dislike to him."

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"Do you know why?"

"Yes," and she flushed a little, but went on bravely. "He believed that Mr. Swain wished to marry me."

"As, in fact, he did," I commented.

"Yes; or, at least, he did before his financial troubles came. After that, he wished to give me up."

"But you refused to be given up?"

"Yes," she said, and looked at me with eyes beautifully radiant. "I refused to be given up."

I felt that I was rushing in where angels would hesitate to enter, and beat a hasty retreat.

"Was your father always opposed to your marriage?" I asked.

"No; he has wanted me to wait until I was of age; but he never absolutely forbade it until a few months ago. It was at the time he first tried to persuade me to become a convert to Hinduism."

"What occurred after you and your father reached the house?"

"Father was very angry, and demanded that I promise never to see Mr. Swain again. When I refused to promise, he sent me to my room, forbidding me to leave it without his permission. I came up at once, more than ever convinced that father needed medical attention. I was very nervous and over-wrought, and I sat down by the window to control myself before going to bed. And then, suddenly, I remembered something the yogi had told me—that father was not strong, and that a fit of anger might be very serious. I knew the servants had gone to bed, and that he must be downstairs alone, since I had heard no one come up."

"You had heard no one in the hall at all?" I asked.

"No, I had heard no one. But I remember, as I started down the stairs, a curious feeling of dread seized me. It was so strong that I stood for some moments on the top step before I could muster courage to go down. At last, I *did* go down and—and found my father!"

She stopped, her hands over her eyes, as though to shut away the remembrance of that dreadful sight.

"Have you strength to tell me just what happened, Miss Vaughan?" I asked gently.

She controlled herself with an effort and took her hands from her face.

“Yes,” she said; “I can tell you. I remember that I stood for a moment at the door, looking about the room, for at the first glance I thought there was no one there. I thought, for an instant, that father had gone into the grounds, for the curtain at the other door was trembling a little, as though someone had just passed.”

“Ah!” I said, and looked at Goldberger.

“It might have been merely the breeze, might it not?” he asked.

“I suppose so. The next instant I saw my father huddled forward in his chair. I was sure he had had a seizure of some sort; I ran to him, and raised his head....”

Again she stopped, her eyes covered, and a slow shudder shook her from head to foot. I could guess what a shock the sight of that horrible face had been!

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"I do not remember anything more," she added, in a whisper.

For a moment, we all sat silent. The only portion of her evidence which could in any way help Swain was her discovery of the swaying curtain, and even that, as Goldberger had pointed out, might easily mean nothing.

"Miss Vaughan," I said, at last, "how long a time elapsed from the moment you left your father in the library until you found him?"

"I don't know. Perhaps fifteen minutes."

"Was he quite dead when you found him?"

"Yes, I—I think so."

"Then," I said to Goldberger, "the murder must have been committed very soon after Miss Vaughan came upstairs."

"Yes," agreed Goldberger, in a low tone, "and by somebody who came in from the grounds, since she met no one in the hall and heard no one."

Miss Vaughan leaned toward him, her hands clasping and unclasping.

"Do you know who it was?" she gasped. "Have you found out who it was?"

"We suspect who it was," answered Goldberger gravely.

"Tell me," she began.

"Wait a minute, Miss Vaughan," I broke in. "Tell me, first—did you hear anyone following you across the garden?"

"Yes," she answered thoughtfully; "once or twice I fancied that someone was following us. It seemed to me I heard a step, but when I looked back I saw no one."

"Did that fact make you uneasy?"

"No," she said, with a little smile. "I thought it was Mr. Swain."

I saw Goldberger's sudden movement. I myself could not repress a little shudder.

"You thought that would be the natural thing for Mr. Swain to do, did you not?" the coroner inquired.

"Yes—I thought he might wish to see me safe." Then she stopped, leaning forward in her chair and staring first at Goldberger and then at me. "What is it?" she whispered,

her hands against her heart. "Oh, what is it? You don't mean—you can't mean—oh, tell me! It isn't Fred you suspect! It can't be Fred!"

It was Dr. Hinman who laid a gentle and quieting hand upon her shoulder, and it was his grave voice which answered her.

"Yes," he said, "there are some things which seem to implicate Mr. Swain; but both Mr. Lester and I are certain he isn't guilty. We're going to prove it!"

She looked up at him with a grateful smile.

"Thank you!" she gasped. "I—wait a moment—I was silly to give way so. Of course you will prove it! It's absurd!" And then she stopped and looked at Goldberger. "Do *you* believe it?" she demanded.

Goldberger flushed a little under her gaze.

"I don't know what to believe, Miss Vaughan," he said. "I'm searching for the truth."

"So are we all," I said. "I am counsel for Mr. Swain, Miss Vaughan, and I have come to you, hoping that your story would help to clear him."

"Oh, I wish it might!" she cried.

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"You know Mr. Swain cut his wrist as he came over the wall that night?"

"Yes, he told me. He didn't know it was bleeding, at first; then he felt the blood on his hand, and I wrapped his wrist in my handkerchief."

"Was it this handkerchief?" asked Goldberger, and took from his pocket the blood-stained square and handed it to her.

She took it with a little shiver, looked at it, and passed it back to him.

"Yes," she said; "that is it."

Then she sat upright, her clenched hands against her breast, staring at us with starting eyes.

"I remember now!" she gasped. "I remember now! I saw it—a blotch of red—lying on the floor beside my father's chair! How did it get there, Mr. Lester? Had he been there? Did he follow us?" She stopped again, as she saw the look in Goldberger's eyes, and then the look in mine. With a long, indrawn breath of horror, she cowered back into the chair, shaking from head to foot. "Oh, what have I done!" she moaned. "What have I done?"

There could be no question as to what she had done, I told myself, bitterly: she had added another link to the chain of evidence about her lover. I could see the same thought in the sardonic gaze which Goldberger turned upon me; but before either of us could say a word, the doctor, with a peremptory gesture, had driven us from the room.

CHAPTER XVII

THE VERDICT

Goldberger paused at the stair-head and looked at me, an ironical light in his eyes. I knew he suspected that Miss Vaughan's story of the handkerchief was no great surprise to me.

"Well," he asked, "will you wish to put her on the stand?"

I shook my head and started down the stairs, for I was far from desiring an argument just then, but he stopped me with a hand upon the sleeve.

"You realise, Mr. Lester," he said, more seriously, "that it is plainly my duty to cause Swain's arrest?"

"Yes," I assented. "I realise that. Under the circumstances, you can do nothing else."

He nodded, and we went downstairs together. I saw Swain's eager eyes upon us as we came out upon the lawn, and his lips were at my ear the instant I had taken my seat.

"Well?" he whispered.

"She cannot help you," I said. I did not think it necessary to say how deeply she would hurt him when her testimony was called for in open court, as, of course, it would be.

"And you won't put her on the stand?"

"No," I answered, and he sank back with a sigh of relief. Then something in my face seemed to catch his eye, for he leaned forward again. "You don't mean that she believes I did it!" he demanded hoarsely.

"Oh, no," I hastened to assure him; "she says such an accusation is absurd; she was greatly overcome when she learned that you were even suspected; she said...."

But the coroner rapped for order.

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"Have you any other evidence to introduce, Mr. Lester?" he asked.

"No, Your Honour," I answered, and I saw the cloud of disappointment which fell upon the faces of reporters and photographers. To have been able to feature Miss Vaughan would have meant an extra column. I could also see, from the expression on the faces of the jury, that my failure to put her on the stand made an unfavourable impression. There was, indeed, only one inference to draw from it.

Goldberger turned aside for a few words with the prosecutor, and I suspected that he was telling him of Miss Vaughan's discovery of the blood-stained handkerchief; but there was no way to get the story before the jury without calling her. They seemed to agree, at last, that they had evidence enough, for the jury was instructed to prepare its verdict. Its members withdrew a little distance under the trees, and gathered into a group to talk it over.

I watched them for a moment, and then I turned to Swain.

"I suppose you know," I said, "that they're certain to find against you? Even if they don't, the district attorney will cause your arrest right away."

He nodded.

"I'm not worrying about that. I'm worrying about Miss Vaughan. You won't forget your promise?"

"No."

"She'll have no one but you," he went on rapidly. "Neither will I! You mustn't fail us!"

"I shan't," I promised. "But you'd better think about yourself a little, Swain."

"Plenty of time for that when I'm sure that Marjorie's safe. The minute you tell me she's at the Royces', I'll begin to think about myself. I'm not afraid. I didn't kill that man. No jury would convict me."

I might have told him that convictions are founded on evidence, and that the evidence in this case was certainly against him, but I thought it better to hold my peace. The more confident he was, the less irksome he would find imprisonment. So I sat silent until the members of the jury filed back into their places.

"Have you reached a verdict, gentlemen?" the coroner asked, after his clerk had polled them.

"Yes, Your Honour," the foreman answered.

“What is the verdict?”

The foreman held out a folded paper to the clerk, who took it, opened it, and read:

“We, the jury in the inquest held this thirteenth day of June, 1908, into the death of one Worthington Vaughan, residing in the Borough of the Bronx, City of New York, do find that the deceased came to his death by strangulation at the hands of one Frederic Swain.”

There was an instant’s silence, and then Goldberger turned to the jury.

“Is this your verdict, gentlemen?” he asked quietly; and each jurymen replied in the affirmative as his name was called. “I thank you for your services,” Goldberger added, directed his clerk to give them their vouchers on the city treasurer, and dismissed them.

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Simmonds and the assistant district attorney came toward us, and I arose to meet them. Swain got up, also, and when I glanced at him I saw that he was smiling.

"I don't know whether you have met Mr. Blake, Mr. Lester," said Simmonds, and the prosecutor and I shook hands. I introduced him to Swain, but Swain did not offer his hand.

"I suppose you've come to take me along?" he said, the smile still on his lips.

"I'm afraid we'll have to."

"Would bail be considered?" I asked.

"I'm afraid not," and Blake shook his head. "It isn't aailable offence."

I knew, of course, that he was right and that it was of no use to argue or protest. Swain turned to me and held out his hand.

"Then I'll say good-bye, Mr. Lester," he said. "I'll hope to see you Monday."

"You shall," I promised.

"And with good news," he added.

"Yes—and with good news."

"Can we give you a lift?" Blake asked.

"No," I said, "thank you; but I'm staying out here for the present."

I watched them as they climbed into a car—Goldberger, Blake, Simmonds and Swain; I saw the latter take one last look at the house; then he waved to me, as the car turned into the highroad—at least, he was taking it bravely! The coroner's assistants climbed into a second car, and the four or five policemen into a third. Then the reporters and photographers piled into the others, the few stragglers who had straggled in straggled on again, and in five minutes the place was deserted. As I looked around, I was surprised to see that even Godfrey had departed. There was something depressing about the jumble of chairs and tables, the litter of paper on the grass—something sordid, as of a banquet-hall deserted by the diners.

I turned away and started for the gate; and then, suddenly, I wondered who was in charge of the house. Who would give orders to clear away this litter? Who would arrange for the funeral on the morrow? How could Miss Vaughan do it, ill as she was? With quick resolution, I turned back toward the house. As I did so, I was surprised to see a man appear at the edge of the lawn and run toward me. It was Hinman.

"I was afraid I'd missed you," he said. "Miss Vaughan wishes to see you. She's all alone here and needs some help."

"I'd thought of that," I said. "I was just coming to offer it. Is she better?"

"Yes, much better. I think she has realised the necessity of conquering her nerves. Of course, we must still be careful."

I nodded, and followed him into the house. Then I stopped in astonishment, for Miss Vaughan was sitting in a chair in the library. She rose as I entered, came a step toward me and held out her hand.

"You must not think too badly of me, Mr. Lester," she said. "I won't give way again, I promise you."

"You have had a great deal to bear," I protested, taking her hand in mine. "I think you have been very brave. I only hope that I can be of some service to you."

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"Thank you. I am sure you can. Let us all sit down, for we must have quite a talk. Dr. Hinman tells me that I shall need a lawyer."

"Undoubtedly," I assented. "Your father's estate will have to be settled, and that can only be done in the courts. Besides, in the eyes of the law, you are still a minor."

"Will you be my lawyer, Mr. Lester?"

"It will be a great privilege," I answered.

"Then we will consider that settled?"

"Yes," I agreed, "we will consider that settled."

"But it is not business I wish to discuss to-day," she went on, quickly. "There are other things more urgent. First, I wish to get acquainted with you. Have you not wondered, Mr. Lester, why it was that I chose you to deliver my letter?"

"I suppose it was because there was no one else," I answered, looking at her in some astonishment for the way she was rattling on. The colour was coming and going in her cheeks and her eyes were very bright. I wondered if she had escaped brain fever, after all.

"No," she said, smiling audaciously, "it was because I liked your face—I knew you could be trusted. Of course, for a moment I was startled at seeing you looking down at me from a tree. I wondered afterwards how you came to be there."

"Just idle curiosity," I managed to stammer, my face very hot. "I am sorry if I annoyed you."

"Oh, but it was most fortunate," she protested; "and a great coincidence, too, that you should be Mr. Swain's employer, and able to get hold of him at once."

"It didn't do much good," I said, gloomily; "and it has ended in putting Swain in jail."

I happened to glance at her hands, folded in her lap, and saw that they were fairly biting into each other.

"In jail!" she whispered, and now there was no colour in her face.

"Forgive me, Miss Vaughan," I said, hastily. "That was brutal. I forgot you didn't know."

"Tell me!" she panted. "Tell me! I can stand it! Oh, you foolish man, didn't you see—I was trying to nerve myself—I was trying to find out..."

I caught the hands that were bruising themselves against each other and held them fast.

“Miss Vaughan,” I said, “listen to me and believe that I am telling you the whole truth. The coroner’s jury returned a verdict that Swain was guilty of your father’s death. As the result of that verdict, he has been taken to the Tombs. But the last words he said to me before the officers took him away were that he was innocent, and that he had no fear.”

“Surely,” she assented, eagerly, “he should have no fear. But to think of him in prison—it tears my heart!”

“Don’t think of it that way!” I protested. “He is bearing it bravely—when I saw him last, he was smiling.”

“But the stain—the disgrace.”

“There will be none; he shall be freed without stain—I will see to that.”

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"But I cannot understand," she said, "how the officers of the law could blunder so."

"All of the evidence against him," I said, "was purely circumstantial, except in one particular. He was in the grounds at the time the murder was committed; your father had quarrelled with him, and it was possible that he had followed you and your father to the house, perhaps not knowing clearly what he was doing, and that another quarrel had occurred. But that amounted to nothing. Young men like Swain, even when half-unconscious, don't murder old men by strangling them with a piece of curtain-cord. To suppose that Swain did so would be absurd, but for one thing—no, for two things."

"What are they?" she demanded.

"One is that the handkerchief which you had tied about his wrist was found beside your father's chair—but it was not upon that the jury made its finding."

"What was it, then?"

"It was this: Swain swore positively that at no time during the evening had he touched your father."

"Yes, yes; and that was true. He could not have touched him."

"And yet," I went on slowly, "prints of Swain's blood-stained fingers were found on your father's robe."

"But," she gasped, pulling her hands away from me and wringing them together, "how could that be? That is impossible!"

"I should think so, too," I agreed, "if I had not seen the prints with my own eyes."

"You are sure they were his—you are sure?"

"I am afraid there can be no doubt of it," and I told her how Sylvester had proved it.

She listened motionless, mute, scarce-breathing, searching my face with distended eyes. Then, suddenly, her face changed, she rose from her chair, flew across the room, opened a book-case and pulled out a bulky volume bound in vellum. She turned the pages rapidly, giving each of them only a glance. Suddenly she stopped, and stared at a page, her face livid.

"What is it?" I asked, and hastened to her.

"It is the book of finger-prints," she gasped. "A great many—oh, a great many—my father collected and studied them for years. He believed—I do not know what he believed."

She paused, struggling for breath.

“Well,” I said; “what then?”

“Mr. Swain’s was among them,” she went on, in the merest whisper. “They were here—page two hundred and thirty—see, there is an index—’Swain, F., page two hundred and thirty.”

She pointed at the entry with a shaking finger.

“Well,” I said again, striving to understand, “what of it?”

“Look!” she whispered, holding the book toward me, “that page is no longer there! It has been torn out!”

Then, with a convulsive shudder, she closed the book, thrust it back into its place, and ran noiselessly to the door leading to the hall. She swept back the curtain and looked out.

“Oh, is it you, Annie?” she said, and I saw the Irish maid standing just outside. “I was about to call you. Please tell Henry to bring those tables and chairs in from the lawn.”

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"Yes, ma'am," said the girl, and turned away.

Miss Vaughan stood looking after her for a moment, then dropped the curtain and turned back again into the room. I saw that she had mastered her emotion, but her face was still dead white.

As for me, my brain was whirling. What if Swain's finger-prints *were* missing from the book? What connection could that have with the blood-stains on the robe? What was the meaning of Miss Vaughan's emotion? Who was it she had expected to find listening at the door? I could only stare at her, and she smiled slightly as she saw my look.

"But what is it you suspect?" I stammered. "I don't see...."

"Neither do I," she broke in. "But I am trying to see—I am trying to see!" and she wrung her hands together.

"The disappearance of the prints seems plain enough to me," said Hinman, coming forward. "Mr. Vaughan no doubt tore them out himself, when he took his violent dislike to Swain. The act would be characteristic of a certain form of mania. Nobody else would have any motive for destroying them; in fact, no one else would dare mutilate a book he prized so highly."

Miss Vaughan seemed to breathe more freely, but her intent inward look did not relax.

"At least that is an explanation," I agreed.

"It is the true explanation," said Hinman, confidently. "Can you suggest any other, Miss Vaughan?"

"No," she said, slowly; "no," and walked once or twice up and down the room. Then she seemed to put the subject away from her. "At any rate, it is of no importance. I wish to speak to you about my father's funeral, Dr. Hinman," she went on, in another tone. "It is to be to-morrow?"

"Yes—at eleven o'clock. I have made such arrangements as I could without consulting you. But there are some things you will have to tell me."

"What are they?"

"Do you desire a minister?"

"No. He would not have wished it. If there is any priest, it will be his own."

"You mean the yogi?"

“Yes.”

“Are there any relatives to inform?”

“No.”

“Where shall the body be buried?”

“It must not be buried. It must be given to the flames. That was his wish.”

“Very well. I will arrange for cremation. Will you wish to accompany it?”

“No, no!” she cried, with a gesture of repugnance.

“That is all, then, I believe,” said Hinman slowly. “And now I must be going. I beg you not to overtax yourself.”

“I shall not,” she promised, and he bowed and left us.

The afternoon was fading into evening, and the shadows were deepening in the room. I glanced about me with a little feeling of apprehension.

“The nurses are still here, are they not?” I asked.

“Yes; but I shall dismiss them to-morrow.”

I hesitated a moment. I did not wish to alarm her, and yet....

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"After they are gone, it will be rather lonesome for you here," I ventured.

"I am used to being lonesome."

"My partner's wife, Mrs. Royce, would be very glad if you would come to her," I said. "I have a letter from her," and I gave it to her.

She stood considering it with a little pucker of perplexity between her brows. She did not attempt to open it.

"She is very kind," she murmured, and her tone surprised and disappointed me.

"May I see you to-morrow?"

"If you wish."

"I shall come some time during the afternoon," I said, and took up my hat. "There is nothing else I can do for you?"

"No, I believe not."

She was plainly preoccupied and answered almost at random, with a coldness in sharp contrast to the warmth of her previous manner.

"Then I will say good-bye."

"Good-bye, Mr. Lester; and thank you."

She went with me to the door, and stood for a moment looking after me; then she turned back into the house. And I went on down the avenue with a chill at my heart.

CHAPTER XVIII

BUILDING A THEORY

I was surprised, when I came down for dinner an hour later, to find Godfrey awaiting me.

"I always try to make it, Saturday night," he explained. "The chief throws the work on the other fellows, if he can. That's the reason I hustled away after the inquest. The story's all in, and now we'll have a good dinner—if I do say it myself—and then a good talk. I feel the need of a talk, Lester."

"So do I," I said; "though I'm afraid talking won't help us much."

"The funny thing about this case is," mused Godfrey, "that the farther we get into it the thicker it grows."

"Yes," I agreed, "and the more one thinks about it, the less one understands."

"Well, suppose we get away from it for a while," said Godfrey, and turned the talk to other things. No man could talk more delightfully of music, of art, of letters. How he managed it I could never guess, but he seemed to have read everything, to have seen everything, to have heard everything. Marryat, for instance; who reads Marryat nowadays? And yet he had read the "Phantom Ship," and so knew something of Goa. An hour passed very quickly, but at last he rose and led the way into his study.

"A friend of mine dropped in to see me to-day at the office," he remarked, "a Cuban planter who comes up to New York occasionally, and whom I happened to help out of a rather serious difficulty a few years ago. Perhaps some day I'll tell you about it. He always brings me a bundle of his own special cigars. I didn't see him to-day, but he left the cigars, and I want you to try one. Perhaps it will give you an inspiration."

He went to his desk, opened a tin-foiled package that lay there, and carefully extracted two long cigars of a rich and glowing brown.

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"Perhaps you've heard of the special cigars that are made for Pierpont Morgan," he went on, as he handed one to me, after carefully replacing the wrappings of the bundle. "Well, I smoked one of Morgan's cigars once—it was good, mighty good; but it wasn't in the same class with these. Light up."

I did. Never before had I drawn between my lips a breath so satisfying—so rich, so smooth, so full of flavour. I exhaled the fragrant smoke slowly.

"Godfrey," I said, "I never knew what tobacco was before. Are these cigars purchasable? I'm only a poor lawyer, but even one a month would be a thing to look forward to and dream about."

But Godfrey shook his head.

"I've felt like that," he said; "but they're not to be had for money. And now about Swain."

"Let's postpone it a little longer," I begged. "I don't want my mind distracted."

Godfrey laughed, but fell silent; and for the next half hour, no sound was heard.

"Now," I said, at last, "I'm ready to listen, so fire ahead whenever you want to."

"I haven't much to tell," he began; "nothing new about the case. But I stopped at the Tombs, before I started back, to make sure that Swain had everything he wanted. They'd given him an upper cell, and sent over to the Marathon and got him his things, and I arranged to have his meals sent in to him from Moquin's."

"I ought to have thought of that," I said, contritely. "I'm much obliged to you, Godfrey. Did you see him?"

"Only for a minute. He seemed fairly cheerful. He'd had them bring some of his law books to him, and remarked that he'd have plenty of time to study. I like the way he's taking it. He gave me a message for you."

"What was it?"

"That you are not to forget your promise."

I smoked on for a few moments in silence.

"I promised him I'd get Miss Vaughan away from that house," I said at last. "I had Mrs. Royce write her a note, inviting her to stay with her. I gave it to her this afternoon."

"What did she say?"



“She didn’t say anything, but I could see the idea didn’t impress her. And I had thought all along that she would jump at it.”

Godfrey gave a little grunt, whether of surprise or satisfaction I could not tell.

“Why didn’t you put her on the stand to-day, Lester?” he asked. “Afraid of upsetting her?”

“I wouldn’t have stopped for that, if her evidence would have helped Swain. But it would only have put him deeper in the hole.”

“In what way?”

“Well, in the first place, she says that as she and her father returned to the house, she heard footsteps behind them and thought it was Swain following them, because that would be a natural thing for him to do; and, in the second place, she saw that blood-stained handkerchief on the floor beside her father’s chair when she came into the room and found him dead.”

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"So," said Godfrey slowly, "it couldn't have been dropped there by Swain when he stooped to pick her up."

"No; besides, we know perfectly well that it wasn't about his wrist when he came back over the wall. Goldberger knows it, too, and we'll be asked about it, next time."

"It might have been pushed up his sleeve—we weren't absolutely certain. But this new evidence settles it."

I assented miserably and Godfrey smoked on thoughtfully. But my cigar had lost some of its flavour.

"How did Miss Vaughan come to find the body?" he asked at last, and I told him the story as she had told it to me. He thought it over for some moments; then he leaned forward and laid his hand on my knee.

"Now, Lester," he said, "let's review this thing. It can't be as dark as it seems—there's light somewhere. Here is the case, bared of all inessentials: Swain crosses the wall about eleven o'clock, cutting his wrist as he does so; Miss Vaughan meets him about eleven-thirty, and after a time, finds that his wrist is bleeding and ties her handkerchief about it; they agree to have her father examined for lunacy, arrange a meeting for the next night, and are about to separate, when her father rushes in upon them, savagely berates Swain and takes his daughter away. That must have been about twelve o'clock.

"Swain, according to his story, sits there for ten or fifteen minutes, finally sees the cobra, or thinks he does, and makes a dash for safety, striking his head sharply against a tree. He tumbles over the wall in a half-dazed condition. The handkerchief is no longer about his wrist. That, you will remember, was about twelve-twenty.

"Almost at once we heard Miss Vaughan's screams. After that, Swain isn't out of our sight for more than a minute—too short a time, anyway, for anything to have happened we don't know about.

"Meanwhile, Miss Vaughan has returned with her father to the house, hearing steps behind her and taking it for granted that it is Swain following at a distance. She goes to her room, stays there fifteen minutes or so, and comes downstairs again to find her father dead.

"Now let us see what had happened. You were right in saying that her father must have been strangled immediately after she left him. Otherwise he would still have been twitching in such a way that she must have noticed it. No doubt he dropped into the chair exhausted by his fit of rage; the murderer entered through the garden door, stopped to cut off the end of the curtain-cord and make a noose of it—that would have taken at least a minute—and then strangled his victim. Then he heard her coming down

the stairs, and escaped through the garden-door again just as she entered at the other. She saw the curtain still shaking. Then she fainted.

“Now, what are the clues to the murderer? A string tied with a peculiar knot, the blood-stained handkerchief, and the finger-prints on the dead man’s robe.”

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Godfrey paused for a moment. Freed of its inessentials, in this way, the case was beautifully clear—and beautifully baffling. It was a paved way, smooth and wide and without obstruction of any kind; but it ended in a cul-de-sac!

“One thing is certain,” Godfrey went on, at last; “the murder was committed by somebody—either by Swain, or by one of the Hindus, or by some unknown. Let us weigh the evidence for and against each of them.

“Against Swain it may be urged that he was on the ground, that he had time to do it, and some provocation, though the provocation, as we know it, seems to be inadequate, provided Swain was in his right mind; a handkerchief which was tied about his wrist is found beside the body, and his finger-prints are found upon it. Miss Vaughan believed he was following them; he admits that he thought of doing so.

“In his favour, it may be urged that a man like Swain doesn’t commit murder—though, as a matter of fact, this is a dangerous generalisation, for all sorts of men commit murder; but if he should do so, it would be only under great provocation and in the heat of anger, certainly not in cold blood with a noose; and, finally, if the motion of the curtain Miss Vaughan noticed was made by the murderer, it couldn’t possibly have been Swain, because he was with us at that moment. You will see that there is a mass of evidence against him, and practically the whole defence is that such a crime would be impossible to one of his temperament. You know yourself how flimsy such a defence is.

“Against the Hindus, on the other hand, practically the only basis for suspicion is that such a crime might be temperamentally possible to them. They may have been on the ground, and the method of the murder savours strongly of Thuggee—though don’t forget that Swain admitted he could have tied that knot. Besides, if it was the Thug who followed them, he wouldn’t have made any noise, and most certainly he couldn’t have left the prints of Swain’s fingers on the body. But if Swain is right in his assertion that he saw the snake in the arbour, it is probable that the Thug wasn’t far away.

“Against an unknown it may be urged that neither Swain nor the Hindus could have committed the crime; but I don’t see how an unknown could either, unless he happened to be one of the three or four people in the world with finger-tips like Swain’s. And that is too far-fetched to be believable.

“But this I am sure of, Lester,” and Godfrey leaned forward again: “the murder was committed either by Swain or by someone anxious to implicate Swain. We agree that it wasn’t Swain. Very well, then: the person who committed the murder made a noise in following Miss Vaughan and her father so that she should think it was Swain who was following them; he picked up the blood-stained handkerchief, which Swain had dropped perhaps when he fled from the arbour, and placed it beside the body; and in some way inconceivable to me he pressed the prints of Swain’s fingers on the dead man’s robe. Now, to do that, he must have known that Swain was injured—the blood-stained

handkerchief would tell him that; but he must also have known that it was his right hand that was injured. There was no blood on Swain's left hand."

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Again Godfrey paused. I was following his reasoning with such absorbed attention that I could feel my brain crinkle with the effort.

“Now, listen,” said Godfrey, and I could have smiled at the uselessness of the admonition—as if I were not already listening with all my faculties! “There is only one way in which the murderer could have known that it was Swain’s right hand, and that was by overhearing the conversation in the arbour. But if he overheard that much, he overheard it all, and he knew therefore what it was Swain proposed to do. He knew that Vaughan’s sanity was to be questioned; he knew that he would probably be placed in a sanitarium; he knew that Miss Vaughan would probably marry Swain. Presuming that it was Silva, he knew that, unless something was done to stop it, a very few days would place both Vaughan and his daughter beyond his reach.”

“That is true,” I admitted; “but Vaughan was beyond his reach a good deal more certainly dead than he would have been in a sanitarium. Besides, it isn’t at all certain that he would have been sent to a sanitarium.”

“That’s an objection, surely,” Godfrey agreed; “but I must find out if Vaughan is really beyond his reach dead.”

I stared at him.

“You don’t mean....”

“I don’t know what I mean, Lester. I can feel a sort of dim meaning at the back of my mind, but I can’t get it out into the light.”

“Besides,” I went on, “if the yogi did it, how did he get back into the house before we got there?”

“He peeped in at the door, saw the coast was clear, and went back through the library. Remember, Miss Vaughan was unconscious. That doesn’t bother me. And another thing, Lester. How did Miss Vaughan’s father come to burst in on her and Swain like that? How did he know they were in the arbour? It was dark and he couldn’t have seen either of them.”

“He might have been walking about the grounds and overheard them.”

“I don’t believe it. I believe somebody told him they were there. And only one person could have told him—that is Silva. No—there’s only one point I can’t get past—that’s the finger-prints.”

And then I remembered.

“Godfrey,” I cried, “there’s one thing—I forgot to tell you. You heard Swain remark that Vaughan was a collector of finger-prints?”

“Yes.”

“And that he had a set of Swain’s?”

“Yes.”

“Well, when I told Miss Vaughan about the prints on her father’s robe, she ran to a book-case and got out a book. It had Vaughan’s collection in it, all bound together. But the page on which Swain’s were had been torn out.”

Godfrey sat for a moment, staring at me spell-bound. Then he began pacing up and down the study, like a tiger in its cage; up and down, up and down.

“I’m bound to add,” I went on finally, “that Hinman suggested a very plausible reason for their disappearance.”

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"What was it?"

"He said they were probably destroyed by Vaughan himself, because of his dislike of Swain. He said that would be characteristic of Vaughan's form of insanity."

Godfrey took another turn up and down, then he stopped in front of my chair.

"What did Miss Vaughan think of that explanation?" he asked.

"It didn't seem to impress her, but I don't remember that she made any comment."

He stood a moment longer staring down at me, and I could feel the intense concentration of his mind; then he ran his fingers impatiently through his hair.

"I can't get it, Lester!" he said. "I can't get it. But I *will* get it! It's there! It's there, just out of reach." He shrugged his shoulders and glanced at his watch. "I'm getting dippy," he added, in another tone. "Let's go out and get a breath of air."

I followed him out into the yard—I knew where he was going—among the trees and up the ladder. Silently we took our places on the limb; silently we stared out into the darkness.

And there, presently, the strange star glowed and burned steel-blue, and floated slowly down, and burst above a white-robed figure, standing as though carved in marble, its arms extended, its head thrown back.

"That fellow is certainly an artist," Godfrey muttered, as he led the way back to the house.

CHAPTER XIX

THE YOGI CONQUERS

The events of the day that followed—Sunday—I shall pass over as briefly as may be. It was for me a day of disappointment, culminating in despair, and, looking back at it, I remember it as a grey day, windy, and with gusts of rain.

Dr. Hinman stopped for us, and Godfrey and I accompanied him to the service over the body of the murdered man. We were the only outsiders there, besides the undertaker and his assistants, and they were not admitted to the ceremony. This was witnessed only by Miss Vaughan, Mahbub and us three. The servants were not there, and neither were Miss Vaughan's nurses.

I have never seen a more impressive figure than Silva made that morning. His robes were dead black, and in contrast to them and to his hair and beard, his face looked white as marble. But, after the first moments, the ceremony failed to interest me; for Silva spoke a language which I supposed to be Hindustani, and there was a monotony about it and about his gestures which ended in getting on my nerves. It lasted half an hour, and the moment it was over, Miss Vaughan slipped away. The yogi and Mahbub followed her, and then we three stepped forward for a last look at the body.

It was robed all in white. The undertaker had managed to compose the features, and the high stock concealed the ugly marks upon the neck. So there was nothing to tell of the manner of his death, and there was a certain majesty about him as he lay with hands crossed and eyes closed.

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We left the room in silence, and Hinman signed to the undertaker that the service was ended.

"I am going with the body to the crematory," he said, and presently drove away with the undertaker, ahead of the hearse. Godfrey and I stood gazing after it until it passed from sight, then, in silence, we walked down the drive to the entrance. The gardener was standing there, and regarded us with eyes which seemed to me distinctly unfriendly. He made no sign of recognition, and, the moment we were outside, he closed the gates and locked them carefully, as though obeying precise instructions.

"So," said Godfrey, in a low tone, as we went on together, "the lock has been repaired. I wonder who ordered that done?"

"Miss Vaughan, no doubt," I answered. "She wouldn't want those gates gaping open."

"Perhaps not," Godfrey assented; "but would she want the barrier intact? Remember, Lester, it's as much a barrier from one side as from the other."

"Well, she won't be inside it much longer," I assured him. "I'm going to get her out this afternoon."

The words were uttered with a confidence I was far from feeling, and I rather expected Godfrey to challenge it, but he walked on without replying, his head bent in thought, and did not again speak of Miss Vaughan or her affairs.

He drove into the city shortly after lunch, and it was about the middle of the afternoon when I presented myself again at the gates of Elmhurst and rang the bell. I waited five minutes and rang again. Finally the gardener came shuffling down the drive and asked me what I wanted. I told him I had an appointment with his mistress; but, instead of admitting me, he took my card and shuffled away with it.

I confess that I grew angry, as I stood there kicking my heels at the roadside, for he was gone a long time, and all these precautions and delays were incomprehensible to me. But he came back at last, unlocked the gate without a word, and motioned me to enter. Then he locked it again, and led the way up the drive to the house. The housemaid met us at the door of the library, as though she had been stationed there.

"If you will wait here, sir," she said, "Miss Vaughan will see you."

"I hope she is well," I ventured, thinking the girl might furnish me with some clue to all this mystery, but she was already at the door.

"Quite well, sir," she said, and the next instant had disappeared.



Another ten minutes elapsed, and then, just as I was thinking seriously of putting on my hat and leaving the house, I heard a step coming down the stair. A moment later Miss Vaughan stood on the threshold.

I had taken it for granted that, relieved of her father's presence, she would return to the clothing of every day; but she still wore the flowing white semi-Grecian garb in which I had first seen her. I could not but admit that it added grace and beauty to her figure, as well as a certain impressiveness impossible to petticoats; and yet I felt a sense of disappointment. For her retention of the costume could only mean that her father's influence was still dominant.

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"You wished to see me?" she asked; and again I was surprised, for I had supposed she would apologise for the delay to which I had been subjected. Instead, she spoke almost as to a stranger.

"I had an appointment for this afternoon," I reminded her, striving to keep my vexation from my voice.

"Oh, yes," and she came a few steps into the room, but her face lost none of its coldness. "I had forgotten. It is not to speak of business?"

"No," I said; "it is to speak of your going to friends of Mr. Swain and me—for a time, at least."

"You will thank your friends for me," she answered, calmly; "but I have decided to remain here."

"But—but," I stammered, taken aback at the finality of her tone, "do you think it wise?"

"Yes—far wiser than going to people I do not know and who do not know me."

"And safe," I persisted; "do you think it safe?"

"Safe?" she echoed, looking at me in astonishment. "Certainly. What have I to fear?"

I had to confess that I myself did not know very clearly what she had to fear, so I temporised.

"Are you keeping the nurses?"

"No; I do not need them. They left an hour ago."

"But the servants," I said, in a panic, "they are here? They are going to stay?"

Again she looked at me.

"Your questions seem most extraordinary to me, Mr. Lester. Of course the servants will stay."

"And—and the Hindus?" I blurted out.

"Yes, and the Hindus, as you call them. This is their home. It was my father's wish."

I gave it up; her manner indicated that all this was no concern of mine, and that my interference was a mere impertinence. But I tried one parting shot.

"Mr. Swain is very anxious you should not stay here," I said. "He will be deeply grieved when he learns your decision."

To this she made no answer, and, finding nothing more to say, sore at heart, and not a little angry and resentful, I started to leave the room.

"There is one thing more," I said, turning back at the threshold. "I shall have to go in to the city to-morrow, but I shall come out again in the evening. Would it be convenient to have our business conference after dinner?"

"Yes," she agreed; "that will do very well."

"At eight o'clock, then?"

"I shall expect you at that time," she assented; and with that I took my leave.

It was in a most depressed state of mind that I made my way back to Godfrey's; and I sat down on the porch and smoked a pipe of bitter meditation. For I felt that, somehow, Miss Vaughan was slipping away from me. There had been a barrier between us to-day which had not been there before, a barrier of coldness and reserve which I could not penetrate. Some hostile influence had been at work; in death, even more than in life, perhaps, her father's will weighed upon her. I could imagine how a feeling of remorse might grow and deepen, and urge her toward foolish and useless sacrifice.

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And just then Mrs. Hargis came out and told me that someone wanted me on the 'phone. It was Swain.

"They let me come out here to the office to 'phone to you," he said, as he heard my exclamation of surprise. "Simmonds happened in and told them it would be all right. He's here now."

"And they're treating you all right?"

"They're treating me like the star boarder," he laughed. And then his voice grew suddenly serious. "Have you seen Miss Vaughan?"

"Yes," I answered; for I knew of course that the question was coming.

"Well?"

"Miss Vaughan refuses to go to the Royces', Swain."

There was a moment's silence.

"Then where will she go?"

"She won't go anywhere."

"You don't mean," he cried, panic in his voice, "that she's going to stay out there?"

"Yes; she laughed when I mentioned danger. There's one consolation—the servants will stay."

"Did you tell her how anxious I was for her?"

"Yes; I did my best, Swain."

"And it made no difference?"

"No; it made no difference. The fact is, Swain, I fancy she's a little remorseful about her father—his death has unnerved her—and there was the funeral to-day—and, as a sort of atonement, she's trying to do what she imagines he would wish her to do."

"He wished her to become a priestess," said Swain, his voice ghastly.

"Oh, well, she won't go that far," I assured him cheerfully; "and no doubt in a few days, when the first impression of the tragedy has worn off, she will be ready to go to the Royces'. I'll keep suggesting it, and I'm going to have Mrs. Royce call on her."



"Thank you, Mr. Lester," he said, but his voice was still shaking. "I—this sort of knocks me out—I hadn't foreseen it. I'll have to think it over. But there's one thing you *can* do."

"What is it?"

"Watch the house!" he cried. "Watch the house! And be ready if she screams again."

"All right," I said, soothingly, "I'll do that. But tell me, Swain, what is it you fear?"

"I fear Silva!" said Swain, in a voice husky with emotion. "It isn't remorse for her father—it's Silva who's working on her. I feel it, some way—I'm sure of it. God knows what he'll try—any villainy. You must watch the house, Mr. Lester—day and night you must watch the house!"

"All right," I said, again, strangely impressed by his words. "You may count on me."

"Thank you," he said. "Remember, we've only you. Good-bye."

Swain's words gave me plenty to think over, and left me so troubled and uneasy that I made a trip to the top of the ladder to take a look over Elmhurst. But everything appeared as usual. Perhaps Swain was right—perhaps it *was* Silva who was using every minute to increase his influence; but what could I do? So long as he committed no overt act, there was no excuse for interference, and Miss Vaughan would undoubtedly resent it. As Swain had said, there was nothing that I could do but watch.

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Two hours later, just as I was getting up from a dinner to which, in my perturbed condition, I had done small justice, I heard a ring at the bell, and presently Mrs. Hargis entered to tell me that there was a gentleman asking for me. I went out to meet him, and was astonished to find that it was Simmonds.

"I don't wonder you're surprised," he said, as we sat down. "Fact is, I'm surprised myself, for I don't know exactly what I'm to do out here. But Swain, after he got back to his cell, was like a crazy man; he was sure something dreadful was going to happen to Miss Vaughan if she stayed in the house with those Hindus. In the end, he got me kind of scared, too, and made me promise to come out and help you keep watch. I went down to the *Record* office and had a talk with Godfrey before I started. I half expected him to laugh at me; but he seemed to think I'd better come. The fact is," concluded Simmonds, shifting his cigar to the other side of his mouth, "he was so serious about it, that I brought two men along. One of them's patrolling the road in front of the house, and the other the road along the side. I've arranged for two others to relieve them at midnight. Now, what's it all about, anyway?"

"Well," I said, "in the first place, neither Godfrey nor I believes that Swain strangled that man."

"I can't hardly believe it myself," agreed Simmonds, "for he seems a nice young feller; but it's a clear case: there's the motive, he was on the ground, and there's the fingerprints. How can you explain them away?"

"I can't explain them away. But, just the same, Godfrey believes the murder was committed by one of those Hindus."

"He intimated something of the sort to me," said Simmonds; "but there's no evidence against them."

"No," I conceded; "that's what we've got to find."

"Where are we going to look for it?"

"There's only one place to look for it, and that's in the house where the murder was committed. I only wish we could get Miss Vaughan out of it—that would give us a freer hand."

"What's the matter with the fool girl, anyway?" demanded Simmonds. "I should think she'd jump at a chance to get away."

"So should I—but she isn't reasonable, just now. I can't make her out. Perhaps she'll come round in a day or two, but meanwhile, if she should happen to need help, I don't see how your men out on the road, on the other side of a twelve-foot wall, could do any good."

Simmonds rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“What would you suggest?” he asked, at last.

“Why not put them in the grounds, as soon as it is dark, and let them conceal themselves near the house? They can get over the wall on this side. We’ve got ladders. Besides,” I added, “it would be a great mistake to give Silva any reason to suspect he’s being watched. He’d see the men out on the road, sooner or later; but they could keep out of sight among the shrubbery.”

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Simmonds considered this for a moment.

"I don't know but what you're right," he agreed, at last. "We'll arrange it that way, then," and he went away presently to call in his men. He soon came back with them, and gave them careful and detailed instructions as to what he wanted them to do, dwelling especially upon the importance of their keeping carefully concealed. Then we got the ladders and put them in place.

"Be careful not to touch the top of the wall," I cautioned them; "there's broken glass on top, and the merest touch may mean a bad injury."

"When you get down on the other side," Simmonds added, "take down the ladder and hide it in the shrubbery at the foot of the wall. Somebody might see it if you left it standing there. But for heaven's sake, don't get mixed up so you can't find it again. Be back here at eleven-thirty, and your relief will be ready. You've got your whistles? Well, blow them good and hard if there's any trouble. And be mighty careful not to let anyone see you, or you may get snake-bit!"

The men mounted the ladder, crossed the wall and disappeared on the other side, and Simmonds and I turned back to the house. I felt as though a great load had been lifted from my shoulders. With those two men so close at hand, surely nothing very serious could happen to Miss Vaughan!

Simmonds and I spent the remainder of the evening in discussing the case, but neither of us was able to shed any new light upon it. Shortly after eleven, the two men who were to form the relief arrived, and just as we started for the wall, Godfrey drove in from the highway. It needed but a moment to tell him of our arrangements, which he heartily approved. He joined us, and we were soon at the foot of the ladder. While we waited, Simmonds gave the new men the same minute instructions he had given the others; and presently we heard a slight scraping against the wall, and the men who had been on duty recrossed it.

They had nothing of especial interest to report. The yogi and Miss Vaughan had taken a stroll through the grounds early in the evening; and my heart sank as the detective added that they seemed to be talking earnestly together. Then they had re-entered the house, and Miss Vaughan had remained in the library looking at a book, while her companion passed on out of sight. At the end of an hour, she had closed the book, shut and locked the outer door, and turned out the light. Another light had appeared shortly afterwards in a room upstairs. It, too, had been extinguished half an hour later, and the detectives presumed that she had gone to bed. After that, the house had remained in complete darkness. The servants had spent the evening sitting on a porch at the rear of the house, talking together, but had gone in early, presumably to bed.

When the men had finished their report, Simmonds dismissed them, and the two who were to take up the watch crossed the wall and passed from sight.



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"And now, Simmonds," said Godfrey, "come along and I'll show you what started me to watching that house, and caused me to get Lester out here."

Simmonds followed him up the ladder without a word, and I came along behind. We were soon on the limb.

"Of course," Godfrey added, when we were in place, "it is just possible that nothing will happen. But I think the show will come off as usual. Look straight out over the trees, Simmonds—ah!"

High in the heavens that strange star sprang suddenly into being, glowed, brightened, burned steel-blue; then slowly and slowly it floated down, straight down; hovered, burst into a thousand sparks....

And, scarcely able to believe my eyes, I saw standing there against the night two white-robed figures, with arms extended and faces raised; and then they vanished again into the darkness.

For an instant we sat there silent, still staring. Then Godfrey drew a deep breath.

"I feared so!" he said. "Miss Vaughan has become a convert!"

And he led the way down the ladder.

CHAPTER XX

CHECKMATE!

I was honestly glad to get back to the office, next morning, for I felt the need of work—absorbing work—to take my mind off the problem of Worthington Vaughan's death, and especially to relieve me from the depression into which his daughter's inexplicable conduct had plunged me. When I thought of her, it was with impatience and aversion, for I felt that she had deserted to the enemy and turned her back upon the man who loved her, in the hour of his utmost need.

As I saw it, her conduct was little short of heartless. She had summoned her lover to her side, and he had come; instantly and without hesitation, without pausing to consider the danger to himself, he had answered her call; in consequence of that high devotion, he was now in prison, charged with a dreadful crime; but, instead of hastening to him, instead of standing by his side and proclaiming to the whole world her belief in his innocence, she deliberately stood aloof. It was almost as if she herself believed in his guilt! The world, at least, could draw no other inference.

But she had done more than that. She had abandoned herself to the fate from which he had tried to save her. Her presence at Silva's side could have only one meaning—she had become his disciple, had accepted his faith, was ready to follow him. The thought turned me sick at heart, for her as well as for Swain, but for Swain most of all, for he had done nothing to merit such misfortune, while she, at least, had chosen her road and was following it with open eyes. Small wonder that I thought of her with anger and resentment, yes, and with a vague distrust, for, at the very back of my mind was the suspicion that she had been a decoy to lure Swain to his destruction.

I threw myself feverishly into the work which had accumulated at the office, in order to tear my mind away from thoughts like these; but when Mr. Royce arrived, I had to go over the case with him, and I have seldom seen a man more puzzled or astonished.

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"I shall defend Swain, of course," I concluded, "and I'm hoping that something in his favour will turn up before long, but I haven't the remotest idea what it will be. He can't be tried till fall, and meanwhile I'm afraid he'll have to stay in jail."

"Yes; I see no way of getting him out," agreed my partner. "But the girl's danger is much more serious. Can't we do something for her?"

"It's difficult to do anything against her will," I pointed out. "Besides, I've lost interest in her a little."

"Don't blame her too much—we must do everything we can. Since she isn't of age, she'll have to have a guardian appointed. He might do something."

"I had thought of that; I'll suggest to her to-night that she let me arrange for a guardian. But if we wait for a court to take action, I'm afraid we'll be too late. Swain seems to think that the danger is very pressing."

"At least we can make one more effort," said Mr. Royce. "I'll have my wife drive out to see her this afternoon. Perhaps she can do something," and he went to the 'phone to make the arrangements.

I turned back to my work, but found myself unable to take it up, for my conscience told me that I ought to see Swain, make sure that he was comfortable, and do what I could to relieve his anxiety. It was not a pleasant task, for I should have to admit my failure, but at last I put my work aside, made my way reluctantly to the Tombs, and asked to see him.

They had given him a well-lighted cell on the upper tier, and some of his own things had been brought in to soften its bareness, but my first glance at Swain told me that he was in a bad way.

"Is she all right?" was his first question, and his eyes seemed to burn into me.

"Yes," I answered a little testily, "she's all right—that is, if you mean Miss Vaughan. For heaven's sake, Swain, be a little sensible. What's the use of working yourself up into a state like this! Did you sleep any last night?"

"No," said Swain, after thinking a minute. "No, I believe not."

"How about breakfast?"

"I don't seem to remember about breakfast," he answered, after another moment's thought.

I stepped to the door, called the guard, and, putting a bill into his hand, asked him to send up the prison barber and to have a good meal sent in in the course of half an hour. When the barber arrived, I had him take Swain in hand, give him a shave and shampoo and general freshening up. Then I saw that he got into clean things; and then the breakfast arrived, and I made him sit down and eat. He obeyed passively, and I could see the food did him good. When he had finished his coffee, I handed him a cigar.

“Now, Swain,” I began, sitting down opposite him, “I’m going to talk to you seriously. In the first place, Miss Vaughan is in no danger. Simmonds had two men in the grounds watching the house all last night, ready to interfere at the least sign of anything wrong. That watch will be kept up as long as Miss Vaughan remains there.”

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"That's good," he said. "I didn't know that. But just the same, she mustn't remain there. Even with the men on guard, you may be too late."

"Just what is it you're afraid of?" I asked him, curiously. "Do you think her life's in danger?"

"Worse than that!" said Swain thickly, his face suddenly livid. "Oh, worse than that!"

I confess that I caught something of his horror; but I shook myself impatiently.

"I can't believe that," I said. "But, in any case, our men will be at hand. At the least outcry they will burst into the house. And remember, the three servants are there."

"They cut no figure. If they didn't hear those screams the other night, do you think they would hear any others? You must get her away from there, Mr. Lester," he went on rapidly. "If she won't come of her own accord, you must use force."

"But, my dear Swain," I objected, "I can't do that. Do you want me to kidnap her?"

"Just that—if it's necessary."

"Then I'd soon be occupying a cell here, too. I don't see what good that would do."

"It would save her," he asserted, doggedly. "It would save her. That's the only thing to consider."

But I rose to my feet in sudden impatience; what consideration was she showing for him or for me or for anyone?

"You're talking foolishly," I said. "You'd much better be thinking of your own danger; it's much more real than hers." I had an impulse to add that, since she had chosen her path, it was folly to waste pity upon her, but I managed to check the words. "Has any new light on the case occurred to you?"

"No," he answered, listlessly, "I haven't thought about it. When do you see her again, Mr. Lester?"

"I'm to see her to-night."

"Will you give her a note from me?"

"Yes," I agreed.

His face lighted again at that, and he cleared a corner of his table and sat down to write the note. It was evidently difficult to compose, for he tore up two drafts before he got

one to suit him. But at last it was done, and he folded it, rummaged an envelope out of a pile of papers on a chair, slipped the note into it, and handed it to me.

"There," he said, and his face was bright with hope. "I think that will settle it."

I was far from sharing his certainty, but I put the envelope in my pocket, assured myself that there was nothing more I could do for him, and returned to the office. Just as I was getting ready to leave, Mr. Royce came in, a chagrined look on his face.

"Mrs. Royce just telephoned me," he said. "She drove out there, as I asked her to, but Miss Vaughan refused to see her."

I had expected it, but the certainty that we had failed again did not add to my cheerfulness.

"Swain wants us to kidnap her," I said, with a twisted smile.

"I'm not sure but that he's right," said my partner, and went thoughtfully away.

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I went to my rooms, changed, had dinner at a quiet restaurant, and then took the elevated for the long trip to the Bronx. It was after eight o'clock when I pulled the bell beside the tall gates to Elmhurst. The gardener was evidently expecting me, for he appeared almost at once and admitted me. Without waiting for him, I walked up the drive toward the house. The lights were on in the library, and I stepped up to the open door.

Then I stopped, and my heart fell. For there were two white-robed figures in the room. One was Miss Vaughan and the other was Francisco Silva. The girl was sitting at his feet.

They had evidently heard my footsteps, for they were looking toward the door, and Miss Vaughan arose as soon as I came within the circle of light. But if I expected her to show any embarrassment, I was disappointed.

"Come in, Mr. Lester," she said. "I believe you have not met Senor Silva."

The yogi had risen, and now he bowed to me.

"Our encounters heretofore have been purely formal," he said, smiling. "I am happy to meet you, Mr. Lester."

His manner was friendly and unaffected, and imperceptibly some of my distrust of him slipped away.

"I have told Senor Silva," Miss Vaughan continued, when we were seated, "that you have consented to act as my man of business."

"And it is my intention," broke in Silva, "to beseech Mr. Lester to consent to act as my man of business also. I am sure that I shall need one."

I was not at all sure of it, for he seemed capable of dealing with any situation.

"It would not be possible for me to represent divergent interests," I pointed out.

"My dear sir," protested the yogi, "there will be no divergent interests. Suppose we put it in this way: you will represent Miss Vaughan, and will dispose of my interests from that standpoint. There could be no objection to that, I suppose?"

"No," I answered, slowly; "but before we go into that, let me understand exactly what these interests are. Mr. Vaughan's estate I understand, is a large one."

Silva shrugged his shoulders.

"I have understood so," he said, "but I know nothing about it, beyond what Mr. Vaughan himself told me."

"What was that?"

"That it was his intention to give this place as a monastery for the study of our religion, and to endow it."

"Did he mention the amount of the endowment?"

"He asked me, not long ago, if a million dollars would be sufficient."

"Had he drawn up a deed of gift?"

"I do not know."

"Or made a will?"

Again Silva shrugged indifferently to indicate that he was also ignorant on that point, and I turned to Miss Vaughan.

"If there is a will," I asked, "where would it probably be?"

"There is a safe here," she said, "in which my father kept his papers of value," and she went to the wall and swung out a hinged section of shelving. The door of a safe appeared behind it.

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I approached and looked at it, then tried the door, but it was locked.

"To open this, we must know the combination," I said; "or else we shall have to get an expert."

"I know the combination," she broke in; "it is ..."

But I stopped her.

"My dear Miss Vaughan," I laughed, "one doesn't go around proclaiming the combination of a safe. How do you happen to know it?"

"My father often had me open the safe for him."

"Does anyone else know it?"

"I do not think so."

"Well, suppose we see what is in the safe," I suggested, and, as she knelt before it, turned away. I, at least, did not wish to know the combination. That Silva already knew it I accepted as certain.

I heard the twirling of the knob, and a sharp click as the bolts were thrown back. Then I walked to Miss Vaughan's side and knelt beside her. The interior of the safe was divided into the usual compartments, one of them equipped with a Yale lock. The key was in the lock, and I turned it, swung the little door open, and drew out the drawer which lay behind it.

"If there is a will, it is probably here," I said; "let us see," and I carried the drawer over to the light.

Miss Vaughan followed me, but Silva had sunk back into his chair, and was staring abstractedly through the open door out into the darkness, as though our proceedings interested him not at all. Then, as I looked into the drawer, I gave a little gasp of astonishment, for it was almost filled with packets of bills. There were five of them, neatly sealed in wrappers of the National City Bank, and each endorsed to contain ten thousand dollars.

"Why did your father require all this money?" I asked, but Miss Vaughan shook her head.

"He always kept money there," she said, "though I never knew the amount."

[Illustration: "Oh, Master, receive me!"]

I glanced at the yogi, but his revery remained unbroken. Then I laid the packets on the table and dipped deeper into the drawer. There were two bank-books, some memoranda of securities, a small cash-book, and, at the very bottom, an unsealed envelope endorsed, "Last will and testament of Worthington Vaughan."

"Here we are," I said, took it out, and replaced the rest of the contents. "Shall we read it now?"

"Yes, I should like to read it," she answered quietly.

The document was a short one. It had evidently been drawn by Vaughan himself, for it was written simply and without legal phrases. It had been witnessed by Henry and Katherine Schneider, and was dated only a week previously—but three days before the murder.

"Who are these witnesses?" I asked.

"They are the cook and the gardener."

"Do you recognise your father's writing?"

"Oh, yes; there can be no question as to that."

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It was a peculiar writing, and a very characteristic one; not easy to read until one grew accustomed to it. But at the end of a few minutes I had mastered it. The provisions of the will were simple: Elmhurst and the sum of one million dollars in negotiable securities were left absolutely to "my dear and revered Master, Francisco Silva, Priest of the Third Circle of Siva, and Yogi of the Ninth Degree, to whom I owe my soul's salvation," the bequest to be used for the purpose of founding a monastery for the study of the doctrines of Saivism, and as an asylum for all true believers. The remainder of his estate was left absolutely to his daughter, to dispose of as she saw fit. "It is, however, my earnest wish", the will concluded, "that my daughter Marjorie should enter upon the Way, and accept the high destiny which the Master offers her as a Priestess of our Great Lord. May the All-Seeing One guide her steps aright!"

There was a moment's silence as I finished; then I glanced at Miss Vaughan. Her eyes were fixed; her face was rapt and shining.

She felt my gaze upon her, and turned to face me.

"As your attorney, Miss Vaughan," I said, "it is my duty to advise you that this will would probably not hold in law. I think it would be comparatively easy to convince any court that your father was not of sound mind when he drew it. You see, Senor Silva," I added, "that there is at once a conflict of interests."

But Silva shook his head with a little smile.

"There is no conflict," he said. "If Miss Vaughan does not approve her father's wishes, they are as though they were not!"

"I do approve them" the girl cried passionately, her hands against her heart. "I do approve them!"

"All of them?" I asked.

She swung full upon me, her eyes aflame.

"Yes, all of them!" she cried. "Oh, Master, receive me!" and she flung herself on her knees by Silva's chair.

CHAPTER XXI

THE VISION IN THE CRYSTAL

Silva laid a hand tenderly upon the bowed head, as though in benediction, but I could have sworn there was unholy triumph in his eyes. I caught but a glimpse of it, for he veiled them instantly and bowed his head, and his lips moved as if in prayer. The

kneeling figure was quivering with sobs; I could hear them in her throat; and my heart turned sick as I saw how she permitted his caressing touch. Then, suddenly, she sprang, erect, and, without a glance at me, hurried from the room.

There was silence for a moment, then Silva arose and faced me.

"You see how it is, Mr. Lester," he said.

"Yes," I answered drily, "I see how it is."

I refolded the will, slipped it back into its envelope, restored it to the drawer, made sure that all the packets were there, too, replaced the drawer in the safe, closed the door, twirled the knob, swung the shelves into place in front of it, and finally, my self-control partially regained, turned back to Silva.

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"Well," I said, and my voice sounded very flat, "let us sit down and talk it over."

He wheeled his chair around to face me and sat down. I looked at him in silence for a moment. The man was virile, dominant; there was in his aspect something impressive and compelling. Small wonder this child of nineteen had found herself unable to stand against him!

"I know what is in your mind," he said, at last. "But, after all, it was her father's wish. That should weigh with you."

"Her father was mad."

"I deny it. He was very sane. He found the Way, and he has set her feet upon it."

"What way?" I demanded. "Where does it lead?"

"The Way of life. It leads to peace and happiness."

He uttered the words as with finality; but I shrugged them impatiently away.

"Don't float off into your mysticism," I said. "Let us keep our feet on the earth. You may be sincere, or you may not—it is impossible for me to say. But I know this—it is not fair to that child to take her at her word. She doesn't realise what she is doing. I don't know what it is you plan for her, but before you do anything, she must have a chance to find herself. She must be taken out of this atmosphere into a healthier one, until she has rallied from the shock of her father's death, and emerged from the shadow of his influence. She must have time to get back her self-control. Then, if she chooses to return, well and good."

"To all your 'musts,' Mr. Lester," retorted Silva, "I can only say that I am willing. I have not lifted a finger to detain her. But what if she will not go?"

"Then she must be made to go."

"Another 'must'!" he rejoined lightly. "I would remind you that she is mistress of her own actions. Neither you nor I can compel her to do anything she does not wish to do. It has been a great happiness to me that she has chosen as she has; it would have been a great sorrow to me had she decided differently. But I should have acquiesced. Now it is for you to acquiesce. After all, what claim have you upon her?"

"I admit that I have no claim," I said, more calmly. "But there is one who has a claim, and to whom she is bound to listen."

"You refer, no doubt, to that misguided young man who is now in prison."

"I refer to Frederic Swain, yes," I retorted hotly. "It is true he is in prison. And how did he get there? By coming when she called him; by trying to assist her."

"Was it assisting her to kill her father?" queried Silva, and his lips were curled with scorn.

I paused a moment to make sure of my self-control, for it seemed to be slipping from me.

"Senor Silva," I said, at last, "how her father came to his death I do not know; but I do know that Swain had no hand in it."

"Yet he is in prison," he reminded me.

"Innocent men have been in prison before this. I will get him out."

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"By what means?"

"By finding the real murderer!" I said, and looked at him with eyes which I know were bloodshot.

He returned my gaze steadily.

"So you think I am the murderer?" he asked, quietly.

I got a grip of myself—I saw that I had gone too far.

"I do not know what to think," I answered. "I am seeking light. In any event, Swain merits some consideration. Miss Vaughan should, at least, listen to what he has to say. She promised to marry him."

"She has withdrawn that promise."

"She has never said so."

"She has withdrawn it in choosing as she has chosen. They who serve in the temple of Siva turn their backs on marriage."

I put the words away from me with a gesture.

"That means nothing to me," I said. "I know nothing of the temple of Siva. I wish to know nothing, for mysticism repels me. But I do know that she gave her word; I do know that she loved him."

"Earthly love fades and passes," said the yogi, solemnly. "She has given her heart to the Master," and he made his gesture of reverence.

There was anger in my eyes as I looked at him. How was one to reply to such jargon?

"I would point out to you, Senor Silva," I said, "that Miss Vaughan is not yet of legal age, and so not quite her own mistress."

"Does your law interfere in matters of the heart?" he inquired blandly; "or in matters of religion?"

"No," I said, flushing at his irony; "but the law demands that, until she is of age, she have a guardian to protect her interests. I shall ask that one be appointed at once."

"To that," said the yogi, mildly, "I have not the least objection. In fact, Mr. Lester, I do not know why you should tell me your plans. But, for some reason, you seem to regard me as an adversary. I am not—I am no man's adversary. I object to nothing; I have no right

to object to anything. I am simply Miss Vaughan's friend and well-wisher, and seek her happiness. I should like to be your friend also."

"And Swain's?" I queried, a little brutally.

"The friend of all men," said the yogi, simply. "They are all my brothers. We are children of the same Great Spirit."

I was silent for a moment. Then I took Swain's letter from my pocket.

"If you are sincere," I said, "you can easily prove it. I have a letter here from Swain. He gave it to me to-day, and I promised to give it to Miss Vaughan to-night."

Without a word, he crossed to the bell and rang it. The maid answered.

"Mr. Lester has a letter which you will give to your mistress," he said.

"And you will wait for an answer," I added.

The girl took the letter and went away. Silva sat down again, and when I glanced at him, I saw that his eyes were closed. Five minutes passed, and the girl appeared again at the door.

"Miss Vaughan says there is no answer, sir," she said, and let the curtain fall into place again.

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I made a gesture of despair; I felt that the game was lost.

"After all, Mr. Lester," said Silva, kindly, "what is this fate that you would prepare for her? You seek her marriage with a young man who, when I saw him, appeared to me merely commonplace. Admitting for the moment that he is innocent of this crime, you would nevertheless condemn her to an existence flat and savourless, differing in no essential from that of the beasts of the field."

"It is the existence of all normal people," I pointed out, "and the one which they are happiest in."

"But Miss Vaughan would not be happy. She has too great a soul; that young man is not worthy of her. You yourself have felt it!"

I could not deny it.

"Few men are worthy of a good woman," I said lamely.

"Faugh! Good woman!" and he snapped his fingers. "I abhor the words! They are simply cant! But a great woman, a woman of insight, of imagination—ah, for such a woman the Way that I prepare is the only Way. There she will find joy and inspiration; there she will grow in knowledge; there she will breathe the breath of life! Mr. Lester," and he leaned forward suddenly, "have you the courage to consult the sphere?"

"What do you mean?"

"You saw how I spent the White Night of Siva," and he made his gesture of reverence. "Will you gaze for an hour on the crystal?"

"For what purpose?"

"I do not know what may be revealed to you," he answered. "That is in the keeping of the Holy One. Perhaps nothing; perhaps much. Will you make the trial?"

His eyes were distended with excitement, his lips were trembling with eagerness.

"I feel that it will not be in vain!" he added.

There was something compelling in his gaze. After all, why not? I struggled to my feet.

With a strange smile, he held back the curtain, and I passed before him into the hall and up the stairs. As I hesitated at the top, he opened the door into the entry, and again my senses were assaulted by a heavy, numbing odour. In the middle of the room the crystal sphere glowed softly.

“Take your place upon the couch,” he said; “sit thus, with your legs crossed, and your hands folded before you. But first, listen to me. There is in this no magic; this sphere is merely a shell of crystal, in which a small lamp burns. It serves only to concentrate the mind, to enable it to forget the world and to turn in upon itself. The visions which will come to you, if any come, will come from within and not from without. They will be such visions as the Holy One may will; and by the Holy One I mean that Spirit which pervades the universe, even to its farthest bound; the Spirit which is in all of us alike; the Spirit which is in good men and in bad, men like you and me, and men like the one who slew my pupil. It is with this Spirit, if the Holy One so wills, that you will commune, so that you will see no longer with the poor eyes of the body, but with eyes from which nothing is concealed, either in the past or in the future. Do you understand?”

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"I think so," I murmured, unable to take my eyes from the glowing circle.

"Then to the Holy One I commend thee!" said the yogi, and sat down on the couch opposite me.

I felt that his eyes were upon me, but mine were upon the sphere, and in a moment I was no longer aware of him. I was aware only of the glowing circle, which seemed to widen and widen until the whole universe revolved within it. The sun and the moon and the stars were there, and I gazed at them as from a great distance. I saw stars glow and fade; I saw great nebulae condense to points of light, and disintegrate to dust; then, slowly, slowly, a single planet swung into view, a million miles away, at first, but growing clearer and more clear, until I was looking down upon its seas and continents; and suddenly, as it turned before me, I recognised the earth. Europe, Asia, the broad Pacific swung below me; then land again—America! I saw great mountains, broad plains, and mighty rivers.

The motion ceased. I was gazing down upon a great city, built upon a narrow spur of land between two rivers, a city of towering buildings and busy streets; then upon a single house, set in the midst of lofty elms; then I was in a room, a room with books against the walls, and a door opening upon a garden. From the garden the light faded, and the darkness came, and a clock somewhere struck twelve. Then, suddenly, at the door appeared two white-robed figures, an old man and a girl. The man was talking violently, but the girl crossed the room without a backward glance, and passed through a door on its farther side. The man stood for a moment looking after her, then flung himself into a chair, and put his hands before his face.

With creeping flesh, I looked again at the outer door, waiting who would enter. And slowly, slowly, the drapery was put aside, and a face peered in. I could see its flashing eyes and working mouth. A hand, in which a knife gleamed, was raised cautiously to the cord, and when it was lowered, it held a piece of the cord within its grasp. I could see the eager fingers fashioning a knot; then, with head bent, the figure crept forward, foot by foot; it was at the chair-back, and even as the old man, conscious at last of the intruder, raised his head, the cord was cast about his throat and drawn tight. There was a moment's struggle, and I saw that the hand which held the cord was red with blood. From the wrist, a stained handkerchief fell softly to the floor.

And then the assassin turned to steal away; but as he went, he cast one awful glance over his shoulder. The light fell full upon his face—and I saw that it was Swain's!

* * * * *

I opened my eyes to find myself extended full length on the divan, with Silva standing over me, a tiny glass of yellow liquid in his hand.



“Drink this,” he said, and I swallowed it obediently.

It had a pungent, unpleasant taste, but I could feel it running through my veins, and it cleared my mind and steadied my nerves as though by magic. I sat up and looked at the crystal. The other lights in the room had been switched on, and the sphere lay cold and lifeless. I passed my hand before my eyes, and looked at it again; then my eyes sought Silva’s. He was smiling softly.

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"The visions came," he said. "Your eyes tell me that the visions came. Is it not so?"

"Yes," I answered; "strange visions, Senor Silva. I wish I knew their origin."

"Their origin is in the Universal Spirit," he said, quietly. "Even yet you do not believe."

"No," and I looked again at the crystal. "There are some things past belief."

"Nothing is past belief," he said, still more quietly, "You think so because your mind is wrapped in the conventions amid which you exist. Free it from those wrappings, and you will begin really to live. You have never known what life is."

"How am I to free it, Senor Silva?" I questioned.

He took a step nearer to me.

"By becoming a disciple of the Holy One," he said, most earnestly.

But I was myself again, and I rose to my feet and shook my head, with a smile.

"No," I said. "You will get no convert here. I must be going."

"I will open the gate for you," he said, in another tone, and led the way down the stairs, through the library, and out upon the gravelled walk.

After the drugged atmosphere of his room, the pure night air was like a refreshing bath, and I drew in long breaths of it. Silva walked beside me silently; he unlocked the gate with a key which he carried in his hand, and pulled it open.

"Good-night, Mr. Lester," he said. "The sphere is at your service should you desire again to test it. Think over what I have said to you."

"Good-night," I answered, and stepped through into the road.

The gate swung shut and the key grated in the lock. Mechanically I turned my steps toward Godfrey's house; but I seemed to be bending under a great burden—the burden of the vision.

CHAPTER XXII

THE SUMMONS

I was confused and shaken; I had no idea of the hour; I did not know whether that vision had lasted a minute or a thousand years. But when I blundered up the path to Godfrey's house, I found him and Simmonds sitting on the porch together.

"I had Godfrey bring me out," said Simmonds, as he shook hands, "because I wanted another look at those midnight fireworks. Did you come up on the elevated?"

"Yes," I answered; and I felt Godfrey turn suddenly in his chair, at the sound of my voice, and scrutinise my face. "I had dinner in town and came up afterwards."

"What time was that?" asked Godfrey, quietly.

"I got up here about eight o'clock. I had an engagement with Miss Vaughan."

"You have been with her since?"

"With her and Silva," and I dropped into a chair and mopped my face with my handkerchief. "The experience was almost too much for me," I added, and told them all that had occurred.

They listened, Godfrey motionless and intent, and Simmonds with a murmur of astonishment now and then.

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"I'm bound to confess," I concluded, "that my respect for Silva has increased immensely. He's impressive; he's consistent; I almost believe he's sincere."

"Have you considered what that belief implies?" asked Godfrey.

"What does it imply?"

"If Silva is sincere," said Godfrey, slowly; "if he is really what he pretends to be, a mystic, a priest of Siva, intent only on making converts to what he believes to be the true religion, then our whole theory falls to the ground; and Swain is guilty of murder."

I shivered a little, but I saw that Godfrey was right.

"We are in this dilemma," Godfrey continued, "either Silva is a fakir and charlatan, or Swain is a murderer."

"I wish you could have witnessed that horrible scene, as I did," I broke in; "it would have shaken your confidence, too! I wish you could have seen his face as he glanced back over his shoulder! It was fiendish, Godfrey; positively fiendish! It made my blood run cold. It makes it run cold now, to remember it!"

"How do you explain all that crystal sphere business, anyway?" asked Simmonds, who had been chewing his cigar perplexedly. "It stumps me."

"Lester was hypnotised and saw what Silva willed him to see," answered Godfrey. "You'll remember he sat facing him."

"But," I objected, "no one remembers what happens during hypnosis."

"They do if they are willed to remember. Silva willed you to remember. It was cleverly done, and his explanation of the origin of the vision was clever, too. Moreover, it had some truth in it, for the secret of crystal-gazing is that it awakens the subjective consciousness, or Great Spirit, as Silva called it. But you weren't crystal-gazing, to-night, Lester—you were simply hypnotised."

"You may be right," I admitted; "I remember how his eyes stared at me. But it was wonderful—I'm more impressed with him than ever."

"It isn't the fact that he hypnotised you that bothers me," said Godfrey, after a moment. "It's the fact that he has also hypnotised Miss Vaughan."

The words startled me.

"You think that's the reason of her behaviour?" I asked, quickly.

“What other reason can there be?” Godfrey demanded. “Here we have a girl who thinks herself in danger and summons to her aid the man who loves her and whom, presumably, she loves. And two days later, when he has been imprisoned for a crime of which she declares it is absurd to suspect him, instead of hastening to him or trying to carry out his wishes, she turns her back on him and deliberately walks into the danger from which, up to that moment, she had shrunk with loathing. Contrast her behaviour of Saturday, when she declared her faith in Swain and begged your assistance, with her behaviour of yesterday and to-day, when she throws you and Swain aside and announces that she is going to follow Silva—to become a priestess of Siva. Do you know what that means, Lester—to become a priestess of Siva?”

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"No," I answered, slowly; "I don't know. Silva said it was a great destiny; yes, and that it meant turning one's back on marriage."

"That is right," said Godfrey, in an indescribable tone, "there is no marriage—there are only revolting, abominable, unspeakable rites and ceremonies. I ran across Professor Sutro, the Orientalist, to-day, and had a talk with him about it. He says the worship of Siva is merely the worship of the reproductive principle, as it runs through all creation, and that the details of this worship are inconceivably disgusting. That is the sort of destiny Miss Vaughan has chosen."

My hands were clammy with the horror of it.

"We must save her!" I said, hoarsely. "Of course she doesn't know—doesn't suspect! We must get her away from Silva!"

"Undoubtedly we must do something," Godfrey agreed. "I don't know how we can get her away from Silva, but we might get Silva away from her. Couldn't you arrest him on suspicion and keep him locked up for two or three days, Simmonds?"

"I might," Simmonds grunted.

"And while he's away, you can work with her, Lester; take Mrs. Royce to see her, give her a hint of what Saivism really is—or get Mrs. Royce to. If that doesn't have any effect, we can try stronger measures; but I believe, if we can get her away from Silva's influence for a few days, she will be all right again."

"I hope so," I agreed, "but I'm not at all certain. She didn't behave like a hypnotised person, Godfrey; she seemed to be acting of her own free will. I couldn't see that Silva was trying to influence her in any way. She said she was trying to carry out her father's wish. And it certainly was his wish—the will proves that. If anybody is hypnotising her, I should say it was he."

"Well, I can't arrest him," said Simmonds, with a grin.

"Her father's wishes may have had some weight with her at the outset," admitted Godfrey, "but they couldn't have driven her to the length to which she has gone. And about the will. If Vaughan had not been killed, if he had been found insane, the will would have been at once invalidated. Don't you get the glimmer of a motive for his murder there, Lester?"

"It can be invalidated now, if Miss Vaughan contests it," I pointed out.

"Yes; but unless she *does* contest it, it will stand. But if Vaughan had been declared insane, the will could never have been probated—no contest would have been necessary. Do you see the difference?"

"I see what you mean; but I don't think it amounts to much. Silva declares that if Miss Vaughan contests the will, he will not defend it."

"But he knows perfectly well that she will not contest it. The surest way to prevent a contest is by adopting just such an attitude. Besides, if we don't save her, he'll get her share, too. Vaughan's estate and Vaughan's daughter and everything else that was Vaughan's will disappear into his maw. Oh, he's playing for a big stake, Lester, and it looks to me as though he were going to win it!"

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It looked so to me, too, and I fell into gloomy thought.

"You've got your men watching the house, I suppose?" I asked, at last, turning to Simmonds.

"Yes; and we managed to score one little point to-day."

"What was that?"

"I found out that Annie Crogan, the housemaid over there, had a cousin on the force, so I got him out here and he managed to have a talk with her. He didn't find out anything," he added; "that is, anything we don't know; but she promised to leave the door of her bedroom open at night, and, if anything happened, to show a light at her window."

"Splendid!" I said. "And of course she'll keep her eyes open in the daytime."

"Sure she will. She's a bright girl. The only thing I'm afraid of is that the Hindu will get on to her and fire her. But she's been warned to be mighty careful. If they don't suspect her, maybe she'll have something to tell us, in a day or two."

"Perhaps she will," I agreed; and I drew a breath of relief. Surely with all these guardians, inside the house and out, Miss Vaughan was safe. The least outcry would bring swift assistance. Besides, I could not bring myself to believe that Silva was such a brute as Godfrey seemed to think him. I had been attracted by him, not repelled, and I have always believed in the accuracy of these instinctive feelings.

And Godfrey himself, I reflected, did not seem to be very clear in the matter. If Silva was merely a fakir and a charlatan, there was no reason why he should wish to induct Miss Vaughan into the mysteries of a religion which he wore only as a cloak, to be dropped as soon as his plans were accomplished. On the other hand, if he was sincere and really wished to convert the girl, it was only reasonable to suppose that he was sincere in other things as well.

"It reduces itself to this," I said finally to Godfrey. "If Silva is a charlatan, there is no reason why he should hypnotise Miss Vaughan; but if he really wishes to make a priestess of her, then, by the same token, he is sincere and not a charlatan at all."

Godfrey nodded.

"There's a twist there which I can't seem to get straight," he admitted. "We'll have to watch Silva a little longer to find out what his game really is. Of course, it's just possible that he'd be glad to get rid of the girl, but that she really is obsessed by the idea of carrying out her father's wish. If that's the case, Silva is rather up a tree."

“That’s where *we’d* better be getting,” broke in Simmonds, who had taken out his watch and held it up to the light. “It’s nearly twelve o’clock, and I don’t want to miss the fireworks. Besides, you fellows don’t gain anything by all this jawing. You’ve been at it for an hour, and you’re more tangled up now than when you started. My motto with a case of this kind is just to sit quiet and watch it; and pretty soon the rat thinks the coast is clear, and pokes out his head, and you nab him.”

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"There's a good deal in that," agreed Godfrey, with a little laugh. "I admit that our arguing doesn't seem to lead anywhere. Come along," and he led the way out among the trees.

"Now take these fireworks," went on Simmonds, in a low tone, when we were sitting side by side on the limb. "I don't understand what they mean; but they must mean something. Am I laying awake nights worrying about them? Not me! I'm just going to keep on watching till I find out what the meaning is. I know you're a great fellow for theory and deduction, and all that sort of thing, Godfrey, and I know you've pulled off some mighty clever stunts; but, after all, there's nothing like patience."

"Yes—it's dogged as does it," agreed Godfrey. "Patience is a great thing. I only wish I had more of it."

"It would be a good thing," assented Simmonds, candidly; and then we fell silent, gazing out into the darkness.

"Surely," said Godfrey, at last, "it must be twelve o'clock."

Simmonds got out his watch and flashed upon it a ray from his electric torch.

"Yes," he said, "it's four minutes after."

I felt Godfrey's hand stiffen on my arm.

"Then there's something wrong," he whispered. "You remember, Lester, what happened the other time that light failed to appear. A man was murdered!"

The darkness into which I stared seemed suddenly to grow threatening and sinister, full of vague terrors. Even Simmonds grew uneasy, and I could feel his arm twitching.

Godfrey put his foot on the ladder, and began to descend. Simmonds and I followed him silently.

"I'm going over the wall," he said, when we were on the ground. "Something's wrong, and we've got to find out what it is."

"How will we get down?" asked Simmonds. "There's no ladder there."

Godfrey considered a moment.

"We can stand on the top of the wall," he said, at last, "and lift this ladder over. It won't be easy, but it can be done. Go ahead, Lester, and be careful of the glass."



I mounted the ladder, felt cautiously along the top of the wall and found a place where I could put my feet; Simmonds followed me, and then came Godfrey. His was the difficult part, to draw up the ladder and lower it again. As for me, it was all I could do to keep from falling. I felt absurdly as though I were standing on a tremulous tight-rope, high in the air; but Godfrey managed it somehow and started down.

And at that instant, there shrilled through the night the high, piercing note of a police-whistle. It rose and fell, rose and fell, rose and fell; and then came poignant silence. The sound stabbed through me. Without hesitation or thought of peril, I let myself go and plunged downward into the darkness.

CHAPTER XXIII

DEADLY PERIL



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There must be a providence which protects fools and madmen, for I landed in a heavy clump of shrubbery, and got to my feet with no injury more serious than some scratches on hands and face, which at the time I did not even feel. In a moment, I had found the path and was speeding toward the house. Ahead of me flitted a dark shadow which I knew to be Godfrey, and behind me came the pad-pad of heavy feet, which could only belong to Simmonds. And then, from the direction of the house, came the crash of broken glass.

I reached the lawn, crossed it, and traversed the short avenue which ended at the library door. Three men were there, and Simmonds came panting up an instant later. The detectives had their torches in their hands, and I saw that they had broken one of the glass panels of the doors, and that one of them had passed a hand through the opening and was fumbling about inside. There was a sharp click, and the hand came back.

"There you are," he said, threw the door open, and stood aside for his superior officer to lead the way.

"What's wrong?" Simmonds asked.

"I don't know—but the girl showed a light at her window."

"You heard nothing?"

"Not a sound."

Simmonds hesitated. No doubt the same thought occurred to him as to me; for the lawyer-Tartarin in me suggested that we scarcely had warrant to break our way into a sleeping house in the middle of the night.

But no such doubts seemed to disturb Godfrey. Without a word, he caught the torch from Simmonds's hand, and passed through the doorway. Simmonds followed, I went next, and the two other men came last, their torches also flaring. Three beams of light flashed about the library and showed it to be empty. One of them—Godfrey's—lingered on the high-backed chair, but this time it had no occupant.

Then Godfrey switched on the light, passed into the hall and switched on the light there. The hall, too, was empty, and only the ticking of a tall clock disturbed the silence. I was faltering and ready to turn back, but, to my amazement, Godfrey crossed the hall at a bound and sprang up the stair, three steps at a time.

"Make all the noise you can!" he shouted over his shoulder, and the clatter of our feet seemed enough to wake the dead.



The upper hall was also empty; and then my heart gave a sudden leap, for the circle of light from Godfrey's torch had come to rest upon a white-robed figure, which had stolen half-way down the stair from the upper story. It was the maid, holding her night-dress about her; and her face was as white as her gown.

Godfrey sprang to her side.

"What is it?" he asked. "What is wrong?"

"I heard a cry," gasped the girl. "Down here somewhere. And a scuffle in the dark. A woman's cry. It was choked off short."

Godfrey leaped down among us, and, as the light of a torch flashed across it, I saw that his face was livid.

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"Who's got an extra gun?" he demanded, and one of the detectives pressed one into his hand. "Ready, now, men," he added, crossed the hall, threw open the outer door into Silva's room, and flung back the drapery beyond.

My heart was in my throat as I peered over Godfrey's shoulder at what lay within; and then a gasp of amazement from my companions mingled with my own.

For the crystal sphere was glowing softly, and seated cross-legged on the divan, his hands folded, his eyes fixed in meditation, was Silva.

We all stood for a moment staring at him, then Godfrey passed his hand dazedly before his eyes.

"You two men stay on guard here," he said. "One of you keep your torch on this fellow, and the other keep his torch on the floor. There's a cobra around somewhere."

An arc of light swept shakingly across the floor, as one of the men turned his torch toward it. But I saw no sign of Toto.

"Lester, you and Simmonds come with me," Godfrey added, stepped back into the hall, and tapped at the door of Miss Vaughan's bedroom.

There was no response, and he tapped again. Then he tried the door, found it unlocked, and opened it. He sent a ray of light skimming about the room; then he found the switch, turned on the lights, and entered.

The room was empty, as were the dressing-room and bath-room adjoining. The covers of the bed had been turned back, ready for its occupant, but the bed was undisturbed.

Godfrey glanced about the room again, a sort of frenzied concentration in his gaze, and then went out, leaving the lights burning. It took but a moment or two to look through the other suites. They were all empty.

"If Miss Vaughan was anywhere about, and unharmed," said Godfrey, "the noise we made would have brought her out to investigate. There's only one place she can be," and he led the way resolutely back to the door of Silva's room.

The yogi had not moved.

Godfrey contemplated him for a moment, with his torch full on the bearded face. Then he crossed the threshold, his torch sweeping the floor in front of him.

"Let's see what the Thug is up to," he said, crossed the room, drew back the drapery, and opened the door into the little closet where we had seen Mahbub once before.

There was a burst of acrid smoke into the room, and Godfrey stepped back with a stifled exclamation.

“Come here, you fellows!” he cried, and Simmonds and I sprang to his side.

For a moment I could see nothing; the rolling clouds of smoke blinded and choked me; I could feel the tears running down my cheeks and my throat burned as though it had been scalded.

Then the smoke lifted a little, and I caught a glimpse of what lay within the room.

In the middle of the floor stood an open brazier, with a thin yellow flame hovering above it, now bright, now dim, as the smoke whirled about it. Before the brazier, sat Mahbub, his legs crossed with feet uppermost, his hands pressed palm to palm before his face.



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"But he'll suffocate!" I gasped, and, indeed, I did not see how any human being could breathe in such an atmosphere.

And then, as the smoke whirled aside again, I saw the snake. Its head was waving slowly to and fro, its horrible hood distended, its yellow, lidless eyes fixed upon us.

Simmonds saw it too, and retreated a step.

"We'd better keep out of there," he gasped, "till that little pet's put away in his basket."

But Godfrey seized his arm and dragged him back to the threshold of the door.

"Look, Simmonds," he cried, rubbing his dripping eyes fiercely, "there against the wall?—is there something there—or is it just the smoke?"

I looked, too, but at first saw nothing, for a cloud of smoke rolled down and blotted out the light from Godfrey's torch. Then it swirled aside, and against the farther wall I fancied I saw something—a shape, a huddled shape—grotesque—horrible, somehow....

I heard Godfrey's startled cry, saw his hand swing up, saw a tongue of yellow flame leap from his revolver.

And with the echo of the shot, came a scream—a scream piercing, unearthly, of terror unspeakable....

I saw the Thug spring into the air, his face distorted, his mouth open—I saw him tearing at something that swung from his neck—something horrible, that clung and twisted....

He tore the thing loose—it was only an instant, really, but it seemed an age—and, still shrieking, flung it full at us.

I was paralysed with terror, incapable of movement, staring dumbly—but Godfrey swept me aside so sharply that I almost fell.

And that foul shape swished past us, fell with a thud, and was lost in the darkness.

CHAPTER XXIV

KISMET!

Words cannot paint the nauseating horror of that moment. Fear—cold, abject, awful fear—ran through my veins like a drug; my face was clammy with the sweat of utter terror; my hands clutched wildly at some drapery, which tore from its fastenings and came down in my grasp....

Three shafts of lights swept across the floor, and almost at once picked up that horrid shape. It was coiled with head raised, ready to strike, and I saw that one side of its hood had been shot away.

I have, more than once, referred to Simmonds as hard-headed and wanting in imagination—not always, I fear, in terms the most respectful. For that I ask his pardon; I shall not make that mistake again. For, in that nerve-racking moment, he never lost his coolness. Revolver in hand, he crept cautiously forward, while we others held our breath; then the pistol spoke, one, twice, thrice, and the ugly head fell forward to the floor.

At the same moment, Godfrey sprang to the door from which volumes of heavy, scented smoke still eddied, and disappeared inside.

I scarcely noticed him; I was staring at that foul object on the floor; and then I stared at Francisco Silva, motionless on the divan, his eyes fixed on the crystal sphere, undisturbed amid all this terror and tumult. It is impossible for me to remember him, as he was in that moment, without admiration—yes, and a little awe.

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But Godfrey's voice, shrill with excitement, brought me around with a start.

"Lester!" he shouted. "Lend a hand here!"

Wondering what new horror lay in wait, I fought my way into the other room, stumbled over the body of the Thug, barely saved myself, my scalp prickling with terror, from falling upon it, and pitched forward to where Godfrey was bending above that huddled shape I had glimpsed through the smoke.

"Catch hold!" he panted; and choking, staggering, suffocating, we dragged it into the outer room. "Get a window open!" he gasped. "Get a window open!"

And Simmonds, whom nothing seemed to shake, groped along the wall until he found a window, pulled the hangings back, threw up the sash, and flung back the shutters.

"Quick!" said Godfrey. "Over there. Now hold the torch."

And as I took it and pressed the button with a trembling finger, the halo of light fell upon a bloodless face—the face of Marjorie Vaughan.

Simmonds was supporting her, and Godfrey, with frantic fingers, was loosening her robe at the throat. My terrified eyes, staring at that throat, half-expected to find a cruel mark there, but its smoothness was unsullied. The robe loosened, Godfrey snatched his cap from his head and began to fan the fresh air in upon her.

"Pray heaven it is not too late!" he murmured, and kept on fanning, watching the white lips and delicate nostrils, so drawn and livid. "We must try artificial respiration," he said, after a moment. "But not here—this atmosphere is stifling. Take her feet, Lester."

We staggered out with her, somehow, across the hall, into her room, and laid her on her bed. Godfrey, kneeling above her, began to raise and lower her arms, with a steady, regular rhythm.

"Open the windows wide," he commanded, without looking up. "Wet a towel, or something, in cold water, and bring it here."

Simmonds threw open the windows, while I went mechanically to the bath-room, wet a towel, and slapped it against her face and neck as Godfrey directed. The moments passed, and at last the lips opened in a fluttering sigh, the bosom rose with a full inhalation, and a spot of colour crept into either cheek.

"Thank God!" said Godfrey, in a voice that was almost a sob. "Now, Simmonds, go out and bring that Irish girl, and send one of your men to 'phone for Hinman."



Simmonds sent one of his men scurrying with a word, and himself dashed up the stairs to the other floor. He was back in a moment, almost dragging the frightened girl with him. Her teeth were chattering and she started to scream when she saw that still form on the bed, but Simmonds shook her savagely.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” Godfrey assured her. “Your mistress isn’t dead—she’ll soon come around. But you must get her undressed and to bed. And then keep bathing her face with cold water till the doctor comes. Understand?”

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"Ye—yes, sir," faltered the girl. "But—oh!" and a burst of hysterical sobbing choked her.

Simmonds shook her again.

"Don't be a fool, Annie Crogan!" he said. "Get hold of yourself!"

Godfrey stepped off the bed and picked up one of the limp wrists.

"Her pulse is getting stronger," he said, after a moment. "It will soon—hello, what's this!"

Clasped tight in the slender fingers was something that looked like a torn and crumpled rubber glove. He tried to unclasp the fingers, but when he touched them, they contracted rigidly, and a low moan burst from the unconscious girl. So, after a moment, he desisted and laid the hand down again.

"You understand what you're to do?" he asked the maid, and she nodded mutely. "Then come along, boys," he added, and led the way back to the hall. His face was dripping with perspiration and his hands were shaking, but he managed to control them. "And now for Senor Silva," he said, in another tone, taking the torch from my hand. "I fear he will have a rude awakening."

"He sat there like a statue, even when I shot the snake," remarked Simmonds. "He's a wonder, he is."

"Yes," agreed Godfrey, as he stepped into the entry, "he's a wonder." Then he stopped, glanced around, and turned a stern face on Simmonds. "Where's the man I left on guard here?" he asked.

"Why," faltered Simmonds, "I remember now—he helped us carry the young lady. But we were all right there in the hall—you don't mean ..."

Godfrey stepped to the inner door and flashed his torch about the room. The divan was empty.

Simmonds paused only for a single glance.

"He can't be far away!" he said. "He can't get away in that white robe of his. Come along, Tom!" and, followed by his assistant, he plunged down the stairs.

I saw Godfrey half-turn to follow; then he stopped, ran his hand along the wall inside the door, found the button, and turned on the lights. His face was pale and angry.

"It's my fault as much as anyone's," he said savagely. "I might have known Silva would see the game was up, and try to slip away in the excitement. I ought to have kept an eye on him."

“Your eyes were fairly busy as it was,” I remarked. “Besides, maybe he hasn’t got away.”

Godfrey’s face, as he glanced about the room, showed that he cherished no such hope.

“Let’s see what happened to Mahbub,” he said. “Maybe he got away, too,” and he crossed to the inner door.

The flame in the brazier had died away, and the smoke came only in fitful puffs, heavy with deadening perfume. The Thug had not got away. He lay on the floor—a dreadful sight. He was lying on his back, his hands clenched, his body arched in a convulsion, his head drawn far back. The black lips were parted over the ugly teeth, and the eyes had rolled upward till they gleamed, two vacant balls of white. At the side of his neck, just under the jaw, was a hideous swelling.



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Godfrey's torch ran over the body from head to foot, and I sickened as I looked at it.

"I'm going out," I said. "I can't stand this!" and I hurried to the open window.

Godfrey joined me there in a moment.

"I'm feeling pretty bad myself," he said, putting the torch in his pocket and mopping his shining forehead. "It's plain enough what happened. I caught a glimpse of Miss Vaughan on the floor there, realised that we couldn't do anything with the snake in the way, and shot at it, but I only ripped away a portion of the hood, and the thing, mad with rage, sprang upon the Hindu. Nothing on earth could have saved him after it got its fangs in his neck. Ugh!"

He shivered slightly, and stood gazing for a moment down into the garden. Then he turned back to me with a smile.

"It's a good night's work, Lester," he said, "even if we don't catch Silva. I fancy Miss Vaughan will change her mind, now, about becoming a priestess of Siva!"

"But, Godfrey," I asked, "what happened? What was she doing in there? What ..."

He stopped me with a hand upon my arm.

"I don't know. But she'll tell us when she comes around. I only hope they'll get Silva. That would make the victory complete."

He paused, for the hum of a motor-car came up the drive, and an instant later we caught the glare of the acetylenes. Then a voice hailed us.

"Hello, there," it called. "Shall I come up?"

"Is it you, doctor?" asked Godfrey, leaning out.

"Yes."

"Come right up, then, to Miss Vaughan's room."

We met him at the stair-head.

"Oh, it's you!" he said, recognising us. "What has happened now?"

"It's Miss Vaughan—she's been half-suffocated. But how did you get in?"

"The gates were open," Hinman answered, "so I drove right through. Is Miss Vaughan in here?" and when Godfrey nodded, he opened the door and closed it softly behind him.

“Open!” repeated Godfrey, staring at me. “Open! Then that is the way Silva went!”

“Yes, yes,” I agreed. “He had the key. It was he who let me out.”

“And locked the gate after you?”

“Yes—I heard the key turn.”

Without a word, Godfrey hurried down the stairs. At the foot we met Simmonds.

“We’ve searched the grounds,” he said, “but haven’t found anyone. I’ve left my men on guard. I ’phoned for some more men, and notified headquarters.”

“He’s not in the grounds,” said Godfrey. “He went out by the gate,” and he told of Hinman’s discovery.

“I’ll stretch a net over the whole Bronx,” said Simmonds. “I don’t see how a fellow dressed as he is can get away,” and he hastened off to do some more telephoning.

“Well, we can’t do anything,” said Godfrey, “so we might as well rest awhile,” and he passed into the library and dropped into a chair.

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I followed him, but as I sat down and glanced about the room I saw something that fairly jerked me to my feet.

A section of the shelving had been swung forward, and behind it the door of the safe stood open.

In an instant, I had flung myself on my knees before it, groped for the locked drawer, pulled it out, and hurried with it to the table.

The five packets of money were gone.

"What is it, Lester?" asked Godfrey, at my side.

"There was—fifty thousand dollars—in money in—this drawer," I answered, trying to speak coherently.

Godfrey took the drawer from my hands and examined its contents.

"Well, it isn't there now," he said, and replaced the drawer in the safe. "Sit down, Lester," and he pressed me back into my chair and flung himself into another. "I wish I knew where Vaughan kept his whiskey!" he murmured, and ran his fingers furiously through his hair. "This is getting too strenuous, even for me!"

He fell silent for a moment, and sat looking at the open safe.

"What astonishes me," he mused, "is the nerve of the man, stopping at such a moment to work that combination. Think what that means, Lester; to work a combination, a man has to be cool and collected."

"A man who could sit without stirring through that scene upstairs," I said, "has nerve enough for anything. Nothing Silva does can surprise me after that!"

"I wonder how he knew the combination?"

"I was sure he knew it. I had to stop Miss Vaughan to keep her from telling it to me."

"Well, he lessened his chance of escape by just that much. Every minute he spent before that safe was a minute lost. Ah, here's Simmonds. What do you think of that, Simmonds?" he added, and pointed to the safe. "Senor Silva stopped on his way out to gather up fifty thousand dollars in cash to pay his travelling expenses."

Simmonds walked over to the safe and looked at it.

"Fifty thousand?" he repeated. "But Vaughan must have been a fool to keep that much money here."



“Oh, I don’t know. It’s a fireproof safe, and mighty well concealed.”

“I’ll tell you what I think,” I said; “I think he intended to give the money to Silva. He was going to give him a million—left him that in his will, you know.”

“So Silva was only taking what belonged to him, eh?” and Godfrey laughed. “Well, I hope you’ll get him, Simmonds.”

It was at this moment that Dr. Hinman entered, a curious, repressed excitement in his face, and his eyes shining strangely.

“How is she, doctor?” Godfrey asked.

“She’ll be all right in the morning. She is still pretty nervous, so I gave her a sleeping-draught and waited till it took effect.”

Godfrey looked at him more closely.

“Did she tell you anything?” he asked.

“Not much,” said Hinman; “I wouldn’t let her talk. But she told me enough to let me guess one thing—she’s the bravest girl I ever knew or heard of!”

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"What do you mean?"

"I mean," cried Hinman, his eyes glowing more and more, "that she stayed in this house and faced the deadliest peril out of love for that man Swain; I mean that, if he's cleared, as he's certain to be now, it will be she who clears him; I mean that, if the real murderer is brought to justice, it will be because of the evidence she stayed here to get, and did get!"

His voice had mounted shrilly, and his face was working as though he could scarcely keep back the tears.

"Wait a minute, doctor," broke in Godfrey. "Don't go too fast. What evidence?"

For answer, Hinman flipped something through the air to him. Godfrey caught it, and stared at it an instant in bewilderment; then, with a stifled exclamation, he sprang to the light and held the object close under it.

"By all the gods!" he cried, in a voice as shrill as Hinman's own. "The finger-prints!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE BLOOD-STAINED GLOVE

I do not know what it was I expected to see, as I leaped from my chair and peered over Godfrey's shoulder; but certainly it was something more impressive than the soiled and ragged object he held in his hand. It was, apparently, an ordinary rubber glove, such as surgeons sometimes use, and it was torn and crumpled, as though it had been the subject of a struggle.

Then I remembered that I had seen it crushed in Miss Vaughan's unconscious fingers, and I recalled how the fingers had stiffened when Godfrey tried to remove it, as though some instinct in her sought to guard it, even in the face of death.

"But I don't understand," said Simmonds, who was staring over the other shoulder.

"What's that thing got to do with the finger-prints?"

"Look here," said Godfrey, and held the glove so that the ends of the fingers lay in the full light.

Then I saw that against the end of every finger had been glued a strip of rubber, about an inch in length and half as wide; and, bending closer, I perceived that the surface of each of these strips was covered with an intricate pattern of minute lines.

“Forged finger-prints! That’s a new idea in crime, isn’t it, Simmonds?” and Godfrey laughed excitedly.

Simmonds took the glove, got out his pocket-glass, and examined the finger-tips minutely.

“You think these reproduce Swain’s finger-prints?” he asked, sceptically.

“I’m sure they do! You see it’s the right hand; look at the thumb—you see it’s a double whorl. Wait till we put them side by side with Swain’s own, and you’ll see that they correspond, line for line. Yes, and look at those stains. Do you know what those stains are, Simmonds? They’re blood. Did you notice the stains, doctor?”

“Yes,” said Hinman. “I think they’re blood-stains. That will be easy enough to determine.”

“Whose blood is it?” asked Simmonds, and I could see that even his armour had been penetrated.

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"Well," answered Godfrey, smiling, "science isn't able, as yet, to identify the blood of individuals; but I'd be willing to give odds that it's Swain's blood. My idea is that Silva got the blood for the finger-prints from the blood-soaked handkerchief, which Swain probably dropped when he fled from the harbour, and which Silva picked up and dropped beside the chair, after he was through with it, as an additional bit of evidence."

"That's reasonable enough," agreed Hinman, with a quick nod, "but what I can't understand is how he made these reproductions."

Godfrey sat down again and contemplated the glove pensively for some moments. Then he turned to me.

"Where is that book of finger-prints you spoke about, Lester?" he asked.

I went to the book-case and got it out. Godfrey took it and began to turn the pages quickly.

"Swain's name is in the index," I said, and he glanced at it, and then turned to the place where the page had been.

"Which reminds me," said Hinman, with a rueful smile, "that I concocted a very pretty theory to account for that missing page. I felt quite chesty about it! I'm glad it didn't throw Miss Vaughan off the scent!"

"So am I!" agreed Godfrey, "for it must have been this missing page which gave Miss Vaughan her first suspicion of the truth. Perhaps it was pure inspiration—or perhaps she knew that Silva could reproduce finger-prints. We shall learn when we hear her story. In any event, it's a clever trick—and easy enough when you know how!"

"Like standing the egg on end," I suggested.

"Precisely. Every trick is easy when you work it backwards. But just think, Simmonds," he added, "what problems the police will have to face, if gloves like these become fashionable among cracksmen!"

Simmonds groaned dismally.

"You haven't told us yet how it's done," he said.

I bit back a smile, for Simmonds's tone was that of pupil to master.

"Well," said Godfrey, slowly, "it might be done in several ways. The first thing is to get a good set of the prints to be reproduced. That Silva got from this album. The moulds might be made by cutting them in wood or metal; but that would take an expert—and besides, I fancy it would be too slow for Silva. He had a quicker way than that—"



perhaps by transferring them to a plate of zinc or copper and then eating them out with acid. Once the mould is secured, it is merely a question of pressing india-rubber-mixture into it and then heating the rubber until it hardens—just as a rubber-stamp is made. The whole process would take only a few hours.”

Simmonds drew a deep breath.

“It may be simple,” he said, “but that fellow’s a genius, just the same. He’s much too clever to be at large. We’ve got to get him!”

“Be sure of one thing,” retorted Godfrey. “You’ll find it harder to catch him than it was to let him go! He won’t walk into your arms. Not that I blame you, Simmonds,” he added; “but I blame those muckle-headed men of yours—and I blame myself for not keeping my eyes open. Here’s the glove—take good care of it. It means Swain’s acquittal. And now there is one other thing I want to see before we go to bed. Suppose we make a little excursion to the roof.”

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"To the roof? What for?" demanded Simmonds, as he wrapped the glove in his handkerchief and put it in his pocket.

"You know how fond you are of fire-works!" retorted Godfrey, smiling, and started for the door.

"I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about," said Hinman, "but I'm as curious as an old woman,—and I like fire-works, too!"

"Come along, then," laughed Godfrey, and led the way up the stairs. "This time we'll go as quietly as we can!" he added, over his shoulder.

In the entry at the top of the stairs leading to the attic story was a heavy closed door, and Godfrey looked at it with a smile.

"Do you suppose those two German servants have slept on through all this excitement?" he asked; and we found afterwards that they had!

The flare of Godfrey's torch disclosed a third flight of stairs at the end of the entry, and, when we reached the foot of these and looked up, we found ourselves gazing at the stars.

"Ah!" said Godfrey; "I thought so! The stage was set, ready for the curtain, and then the leading lady failed to appear. So the villain went in search of her, found her with the glove in her hand, and started to suppress her, when our timely arrival interrupted him! Gentlemen, I think I can promise you a most interesting demonstration. What did Miss Vaughan call it, Lester?"

"An astral benediction," I said.

"That's it!" said Godfrey, and led the way up the steps.

There was a wide, hinged trap-door at the top, lying open, and we stepped through it out upon the roof. Here had been built a platform about eight feet square, with a low railing around it. I saw Godfrey's torch playing rapidly over the boards of the platform, then he marshalled us in the middle of it.

"Stand here in a row," he said, "facing the west. Extend your arms to the heavens and concentrate your gaze upon that big star up yonder. Go ahead, doctor," he urged, as Hinman hesitated. "We're trying to persuade an astral visitor to pay us a call, and it takes team-work."

We stood silent a moment, with our arms above our heads, and I could hear Godfrey shifting his feet cautiously along the boards of the floor.

“What’s that!” cried Simmonds, for, from the darkness at our feet, had come a soft whirr as of a bird taking flight.

“Look!” cried Hinman. “Look!”

High above our heads a point of flame appeared, brightened and burned steel-blue. For a moment it hung there, then it grew brighter and brighter, and I knew that it was descending. Lower and lower it came, until it hovered in the air just above us; then it burst into a million sparks and vanished.

For a moment, no one spoke; then I heard Hinman’s voice, and it was decidedly unsteady.

“What is this, anyway?” he demanded. “The Arabian Nights?”

“No,” said Godfrey, and in his voice was the ring of triumph. “It’s merely a device of one of the cleverest fakirs who ever lived. Take the torch, Simmonds, and let us see how it works.”

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He dropped to his knees, while Simmonds lighted him, and I saw that there was a hole in the floor about three inches in diameter. Godfrey felt carefully about it for a moment, and then, with a little exclamation of triumph, found a hold for his fingers, pulled sharply, and raised a hinged section of the floor, about eighteen inches square.

"Now give us the light," he said, and plunged it into the opening.

In line with the little hole was an upright metal tube about a foot long, ending in a small square box. Beside the tube, a slender iron rod ran from the platform down into the box.

"That's the lever that sets it off," remarked Godfrey, tapping the rod. "A pressure of the foot did it."

He pulled the rod loose, seized the tube, and lifted the whole apparatus out upon the platform.

"Let's take it down where we can look at it," he said, and, carrying it easily in one hand, led the way back to the library, cleared a place on the table and set it down. Then, after a moment's examination, he pulled back a little bolt and tilted the top of the box, with the tube attached, to one side.

A curious mechanism lay revealed. There was a powerful spring, which could be wound up with a key, and a drum wound with filament-like wire and connected with a simple clock-work to revolve it. Two small dry-batteries were secured to one side of the box, their wires running to the drum.

"Why, it's nothing but a toy catapult!" I said.

"That's all," and Godfrey nodded. "It remained for Silva to add a few trimmings of his own and to put it to a unique use. Instead of a missile, he loaded it with his little aerial shell, attached to the end of this wire. Then he shot it off with a pressure of the foot; when it reached the end of the wire, the pull brought this platinum coil against the battery wires and closed the circuit. The spark fired the shell, and the drum began to revolve and pull it down. That explains, Lester, why it descended so steadily and in a straight line. The fellow who could devise a thing like that deserves to succeed! Here's health to him!"

"He ought to be behind the bars," growled Simmonds. "The cleverer he is, the more dangerous he is."

"Well," retorted Godfrey, "I admire him, anyway; and he isn't behind the bars yet. No doubt you'll find some of his shells to-morrow about the house somewhere, and you might amuse yourself by shooting one off every night at midnight, on the chance that he sees it and comes back to see who's stealing his thunder!"

But this brilliant suggestion didn't seem to appeal to Simmonds, who merely grunted and continued his examination of the catapult.

"Silva had loaded it for to-night's performance," Godfrey went on, "but, as I remarked before, the leading lady failed to answer her cue, and it remained for us to touch it off. There it is, Simmonds; I turn it over to you. It and the glove will make unique additions to the museum at headquarters. And now," he added, with the wide yawn of sudden relaxation, "you fellows can make a night of it, if you want to, but I'm going to bed."

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I glanced at my watch. It was half-past four. Another dawn was brightening along the east.

Hinman ran upstairs, took a look at his patient, and came down to tell us that she was sleeping calmly.

"She'll be all right in the morning," he assured us; "and while I don't want to butt in, I'd certainly like to hear her story. Adventures like this don't happen very often to a country doctor! May I come?"

"Most surely!" I assented warmly. "I think we were very fortunate to have had you in this case, doctor."

"So do I!" echoed Godfrey, while Hinman flushed with pleasure. "And don't forget, Lester, that it was I who picked him out, with nothing better than the telephone-book to guide me! That was my infallible instinct!"

"Suppose we say ten o'clock, then?" I suggested, smiling at Godfrey's exuberance—but then, I was feeling rather exuberant myself!

"I'll be here!" said Hinman. "And thank you," and a moment later we heard his car chugging away down the drive.

We listened to it for a moment, then Godfrey yawned again.

"Come along, Lester," he said, "or I'll go to sleep on my feet. Can I give you a bed, Simmonds?"

"No, thanks," said Simmonds. "I'm not ready for bed. I'm going to comb this whole neighbourhood, as soon as it's light. Silva can't escape—unless he just fades away into the air."

"You've found no trace of him?"

"I've had no reports yet," and Simmonds walked beside us down the drive to the gate; "but my men ought to be coming in pretty soon. There's a thick grove just across the road, where he may be hiding...."

He stopped, for a man was hastening toward us, carrying under one arm a small white bundle.

Simmonds quickened his pace.

"What's that you've got?" he asked.

The man saluted.

"I found it just now, sir, in the bushes near the gate. Looks like a dress."

Simmonds unrolled it slowly. It was the robe of the White Priest of Siva.

Godfrey looked at it and then at Simmonds, whose face was a study. Then he took me by the arm and led me away.

"I'm afraid Simmonds has his work cut out for him," he said, when we were out of earshot. "I thought so from the first. A fellow as clever as Silva would be certain to keep his line of retreat open. He's far away by this time."

He walked on thoughtfully, a little smile on his lips.

"I'm not altogether sorry," he continued. "It adds an interest to life to know that he's running around the world, and that we may encounter him again some day. He's a remarkable fellow, Lester; one of the most remarkable I ever met. He comes close to being a genius. I'd give something to hear the story of his life."

That wish was destined to be gratified, for, three years later, we heard that story, or a part of it, from Silva's lips, as he lay calmly smoking a cigarette, looking in the face of death,—and without flinching. Perhaps, some day, I shall tell that story.

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"But, Godfrey," I said, as we turned in at his gate, "all this scheme of lies—the star, the murder, the finger-prints—what was it all about? I can't see through it, even yet."

"There are still a few dark places," he agreed; "but the outlines are pretty clear, aren't they?"

"Not to me—it's all a jumble."

"Suppose we wait till we hear Miss Vaughan's story," he suggested. "After that, I think, we can reconstruct the whole plot. There's one foundation-stone that's missing," he added, thoughtfully. "I wonder if Miss Vaughan uses a blotting-book? It all depends upon that!"

"A blotting-book?" I echoed. "But I don't see...."

He shook himself out of his thoughts with a little laugh.

"Not now, Lester. It's time we were in bed. Look, there's the sun!" and he led the way into the house. "I'll have you called at nine," he added, as he bade me good-night at my door.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE MYSTERY CLEARS

Godfrey's powers of recuperation have astonished me more than once, and never more so than when I found him at the breakfast-table, as fresh and rosy as though he had had a full night's sleep. But even I felt better by the time the meal was over. It is wonderful what a cup of coffee can do for a man!

"I 'phoned a message to Swain, as soon as I was up," Godfrey said, "telling him, in your name, that we had the evidence to clear him, and that Miss Vaughan was safe."

"I must go down to him," I said, "and start proceedings to set him free. I'll get Simmonds to go with me before Goldberger, and then before the magistrate. We ought to get an order of release at once."

"You've got something to do before that," Godfrey reminded me. "We're to hear Miss Vaughan's story at ten o'clock. I'm taking it for granted," he added, with a smile, "that I'll be welcome, as well as Hinman."

"That doesn't need saying," I retorted, and ten minutes later, we were on the way to Elmhurst.

There was a man on guard at the library door, but he allowed us to pass when we gave our names, having evidently had his instructions from Simmonds. In answer to Godfrey's question, he said that, so far as he knew, no trace had been found of Silva.

We went on into the room, and found that some one, Simmonds presumably, had closed the safe and swung the section of shelving back into place before it. It was not locked, however, and I opened it and went through its contents carefully, with the faint hope that the money might have been thrust into some other compartment. But I found no trace of it, and was replacing the contents, when a voice at the threshold brought me to my feet.

"Mr. Lester!" it said, and I turned to behold a vision which made me catch my breath—a vision of young womanhood, with smiling lips and radiant eyes—a vision which came quickly toward me, with hands outstretched.

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"Miss Vaughan!" I cried, and took the hands and held them.

"Can you forgive me?" she demanded.

"For what?"

"For treating you so badly! Oh, I could see what you thought of me, and I longed to tell you it was only make-believe, but I didn't dare! I could see your grimace of disgust, when I fell on my knees beside the chair yonder...."

"Miss Vaughan," I broke in, "whatever my sentiments may have been—and I was an idiot not to suspect the truth!—they have all changed into enthusiastic admiration. You were wiser and braver than all of us."

A wave of colour swept into her cheeks.

"I might add," I went on, "that I thought white robes becoming, but they were not nearly so becoming as this gown!"

"It is of the last century!" she protested. "But anything is better than that masquerade! And when—when...."

"I think I can get Swain free this afternoon," I answered. "I'm going to try, anyway. Mr. Godfrey 'phoned him the good news the first thing this morning. This is Mr. Godfrey, Miss Vaughan," I added, "and very eager to shake hands with you."

"Very proud, too," said Godfrey, coming forward and suiting the action to the word.

There was a step on the walk outside, and Dr. Hinman appeared at the door.

"Well!" he cried, coming in, his face beaming. "There's no need for me to ask how my patient's doing!"

"I'm afraid you haven't got any patient, any more, doctor," I laughed.

"I'm afraid not," agreed Hinman. "I'll have to go back to my office and wait for another one. But before I go, Miss Vaughan, I want to hear the story. Mr. Lester promised me I should."

Miss Vaughan looked at me.

"We all want to hear it," I said; "how you came to suspect—how you got the glove—everything."

Her face grew sober, and a shadow flitted across it.



"Suppose we sit down," she said, and just then the sentry at the door saluted and Simmonds stepped into the room.

I saw him shake his head in answer to Godfrey's questioning look and knew that Silva had not been found. Then I brought him forward to Miss Vaughan and introduced him.

"Mr. Simmonds," I explained, "has been in charge of this case; and it was he who arranged to watch the house, for fear some harm would befall you...."

"I know," broke in Miss Vaughan, clasping Simmonds's hand warmly. "Annie told me all about it this morning. I don't know how to thank you, Mr. Simmonds."

"Oh, it wasn't me, especially," protested Simmonds, red to the ears. "It was really Godfrey there, and Mr. Lester. They were worried to death."

"We *were* rather worried," Godfrey admitted; "especially after we saw you at that midnight fireworks party."

"You saw that?" she asked quickly; "but how...."

"Oh, we had seen the show every night for a week. It was its failure to come off last night which first told us something was wrong."

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"Well," said Miss Vaughan, with a deep breath, sitting down again and motioning us to follow her example, "it seems to me that you have a story to tell, too! But I'll tell mine first. Where shall I begin?"

"Begin," I suggested, "at the moment when you first suspected the plot."

"That was when you were telling me of Fred's arrest. When you told me of the handkerchief and then of the finger-prints, I knew that someone was plotting against him. And then, quite suddenly, I thought of something."

"You jumped up," I said, "as though you were shot, and ran to the book-case over there and got down that album of finger-prints, and found that Swain's were missing. That seemed to upset you completely."

"It did; and I will tell you why. My father, for many years, had been a collector of finger-prints. All of his friends were compelled to contribute; and whenever he made a new acquaintance, he got his prints, too, if he could. He believed that one's character was revealed in one's finger-prints, and he studied them very carefully. It was a sort of hobby; but it was, for some reason, distasteful to Senor Silva. He not only refused to allow prints to be made of his fingers, but he pooh-poohed my father's theories, and they used to have some terrific arguments about it. One night, after a particularly hot argument, Senor Silva made the assertion that he could, by hypnotic suggestion, cause his servant Mahbub to reproduce any finger-prints he desired. Mahbub's finger-tips had been manipulated in some way, when he was a child, so that they showed only a series of straight lines."

"Yes," I said, "his prints were taken at the inquest."

"Father said that if Senor Silva could show him proof of that assertion, he would never look at finger-prints again. Senor Silva asked for a week in which to make a study of the prints, in order to impress them upon his memory; at the end of that time, the test was made. It was a most extraordinary one. Senor Silva, father, and I sat at the table yonder, under the light, with the book of prints before us. Mahbub was placed at a little table in the far corner, with his back to us, and Senor Silva proceeded to hypnotise him. It took only a moment, for he could hypnotise Mahbub by pointing his finger at him. He said Mahbub was a splendid subject, because he had hypnotised him hundreds of times, and had him under perfect control. Then he placed an ink-pad on the table in front of him—nothing else. My father wrote his name and the date upon the top sheet of a pad of paper, and Senor Silva placed it before Mahbub. Then he sat down with us, selected a page of prints, and asked us to concentrate our minds upon it. At the end of a few moments, he asked me to bring the pad from before Mahbub. I did so, and we found the prints upon it to be identical with those on the page we had been looking at. My father touched them with his finger and found that they were fresh, as the ink smeared readily. His name was on the corner of the page, where he had written it.

There could be no doubt that in some way Mahbub had been able to duplicate the prints.

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“Senor Silva repeated the experiment with another set of prints and then with another. I think there were six altogether, and every one of them was successful.”

“Was Swain’s one of them?” asked Godfrey.

“No; but when Mr. Lester told me that Fred was suspected because of those fingerprints, the thought flashed into my mind that if Senor Silva and Mahbub could imitate those of other people, they could imitate Fred’s, too; and when I looked at the album and found that sheet torn out, I was sure that was what had happened.”

“And so you decided to stay in the house, to win Senor Silva’s confidence by pretending to become a convert, and to search for evidence against him,” I said. “That was a brave thing to do, Miss Vaughan.”

“Not so brave as you think,” she objected, shaking her head. “I did not believe that there would be any real danger, with the three servants in the house. Only at the last did I realise the desperate nature of the man....”

She stopped and shivered slightly.

“Tell us what happened,” I said.

“It was on Sunday afternoon,” she continued, “that I went to Senor Silva and told him that I had decided to carry out my father’s wish, renounce the world, and become a priestess of Siva. I shall never forget the fire in his eyes as he listened—they fairly burned into me.”

“Ah!” said Godfrey. “So that was it!”

She looked at him inquiringly.

“Except upon one hypothesis,” he explained, “that action on your part would have embarrassed Silva, and he would have tried to dissuade you. He had left him by your father’s will this valuable place and a million dollars. If money had been all he sought, that would have satisfied him, and he would have tried to get rid of you. That he did not—that his eyes burned with eagerness when you told him of your decision—proves that he loved you and wanted you also.”

A brighter colour swept into Miss Vaughan’s cheeks, but she returned his gaze bravely.

“I think that is true,” she assented, in a low voice. “It was my suspicion of that which made me hesitate—but finally I decided that there was no reason why I should spare him and let an innocent man suffer for him.”



“Especially when you loved the innocent man,” I added to myself, but managed to keep the words from my lips.

“As soon as I told him of my decision,” Miss Vaughan continued, “he led me to the room where the crystal sphere is, placed me on the divan, sat down opposite me, and began to explain to me the beliefs of his religion. Meditation, it seems, is essential to it, and it was by gazing at the crystal that one could separate one’s soul from one’s body and so attain pure and profound meditation.”

“Was that your first experience of crystal-gazing?” Godfrey asked.

“Yes; both he and my father had often tried to persuade me to join them. They often spent whole nights there. But it seemed to me that the breaking down of father’s will was due to it in some way; I grew to have a fear and horror of it, and so I always refused.”

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"The change in your father was undoubtedly directly traceable to it," Godfrey agreed. "During those periods of crystal-gazing, he was really in a state of hypnosis, induced by Silva, with his mind bare to Silva's suggestions; and as these were repeated, he became more and more a mere echo of Silva's personality. That was what Silva desired for you, also."

"I felt something of the sort, though I never really understood it," said Miss Vaughan; "and as I sat there on the divan that Sunday afternoon, with his burning eyes upon me, I was terribly afraid. His will was so much stronger than mine, and besides, I could not keep my eyes from the crystal. In the end, I had a vision—a dreadful vision."

She pressed her hands to her eyes, as though it was still before her.

"The vision of your father's death?" I questioned.

She nodded.

"With Swain as the murderer?"

"How did you know?" she asked, astonished.

"Because he induced the same vision in me the next evening. But don't let me interrupt."

"I don't know how long the seance lasted," she continued; "some hours, I suppose, for it was dark when I again realised where I was. And after dinner, there was another; and then at midnight he led me to the roof and invoked what he called an astral benediction—a wonderful, wonderful thing...."

Godfrey smiled drily.

"You were over-wrought, Miss Vaughan," he said, "and straight from a spell of crystal-gazing. No wonder it impressed you. But it was really only a clever trick."

"I realise, now, that it must have been a trick," she agreed; "but at the time it seemed an unquestionable proof of his divine power. When it was over, I had just sufficient strength of will remaining to tear myself away from him and gain my own room and lock the door."

"You mean he tried to detain you?"

"Not with his hands. But I could feel his will striving to conquer mine. Even after I was in my room, I could feel him calling me. In the morning, I was stronger. I lay in bed until nearly noon, trying to form some plan; but I began to fear that I must give it up. I realised that, after a few more nights like the night before, I should no longer have a will

of my own—that what I was pretending would become reality. I decided that I could risk one more day—perhaps two; but I felt very weak and discouraged. You see, I did not know what to look for, or where to look. I wanted evidence against him, but I had no idea what the evidence would be. I wanted to search his room, but I had not been able to, because he was scarcely ever out of it, except when he was with me; and, besides, Mahbub was always squatting in the little closet next to it.

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"I got up, at last, and after breakfast he met me here in the library. He suggested another seance, but I pleaded a headache, and he walked with me about the grounds. I remembered that you were to come in the evening, Mr. Lester, and I determined to leave you with him, on some pretext, and search his room then. I told him you were coming, that I had asked you to take charge of my affairs; and it was then he told me of the legacy he believed my father had left him, adding that whether the legacy should stand or not was entirely in my hands. Then I began to feel his influence again, and managed to excuse myself and go indoors.

"You know what happened in the evening, Mr. Lester. As soon as I left you, I flew to his room, determined to search it at any cost. But I was scarcely inside, when I heard the outer door open, and I had just time to get behind the curtains in one corner, when someone entered. Peering out, I saw that it was Mahbub. He looked about for a moment, and then sat down on the divan, folded his feet under him, and fell into a contemplation of the sphere. I scarcely dared to breathe. I was always afraid of Mahbub," she added; "far more so than of Senor Silva. About Senor Silva there was at least something warm and human; but Mahbub impressed me somehow as a brother to the snake, he seemed so cold and venomous."

"You knew he was dead?" I asked, as she paused.

"Yes; Annie told me," and she shuddered slightly.

"The cobra, too, is dead," added Godfrey. "I agree with you, Miss Vaughan. There was a kinship between them—though the cobra turned against him in the end. How long did he sit there?"

"I do not know—but it seemed an age to me. Finally, in despair, I had made up my mind to try to steal away, when I heard steps in the entry. Mahbub slipped from the divan and disappeared behind the curtains, and then the door opened and Senor Silva and Mr. Lester entered. I saw, at once, that there was to be another seance, and that I could not escape, for Senor Silva sat down facing the corner where I was. I could only brace myself against the wall and wait. It was a dreadful ordeal. But it had its reward," she added, with a smile.

"And that was?" I asked.

"The discovery of the glove. Senor Silva suddenly switched on the lights, and I knew that the seance was over; but he had some difficulty in arousing you—the trance must have been a very deep one—and finally, leaving you lying on the divan, he went to the wall, drew aside the hangings, and pressed his hand against a panel. A little door flew open, and I saw that there was a cupboard in the wall. He filled a glass with some liquid, pulled the hangings into place, and went back to you and made you drink it. It seemed to do you good."

“Yes,” I said; “it brought me around at once. And then?”

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“And then, as soon as you went out together, I ran to the cupboard and looked into it. But for a moment I was confused—I saw nothing which seemed of any importance—some bottles and decanters and glasses, a glass tray or two, a pile of rubber gloves. I couldn’t understand. I picked up one of the gloves and looked at it, but it was just an ordinary glove. Then farther back, I saw some others—their finger-tips were stained with ink—and then another, lying by itself. I looked at it, I saw the patches on the finger-tips—I saw the stains—and then I understood. I do not know how I understood, or why—it was like a flash of lightning, revealing everything. And then, as I stood there, with the glove in my hand, I heard Senor Silva returning.”

She paused a moment, and I could see the shiver which ran through her at the recollection.

“It was not that I was afraid,” she said; “it was that I seemed to be lost. I let the draperies fall, ran to the divan and sat down before the sphere. I could think of nothing else to do. I can still see his astonished face when he entered and found me sitting there.

“‘I was waiting for you,’ I said, trying to smile. ‘You remember I was to have another lesson to-night.’

“‘Yes,’ he said, and looked at me, his eyes kindling.

“I was trembling inwardly, for suddenly I began to fear him; I knew that I must keep my head, that I must not yield to his will, or I would be swept away.

“‘I thought Mr. Lester would never go,’ I said.

“He came to the divan and sat down close beside me, and looked into my eyes.

“‘Did the time really seem so long?’ he asked.

“‘It seemed very long,’ I said.

“He gazed at me for another moment, then rose quickly and turned on the light.

“‘Sit where you are,’ he said, ‘and I will sit here. Fix your eyes upon the sphere and your mind upon the Infinite Mind—so shall great wisdom come to you.’

“I felt my will crumbling to pieces; I closed my eyes and crushed the glove within my hand, and thought of this man’s villainy and of the part I must play, if I were to defeat him. His voice went on and on, but gradually I ceased to hear it—I was thinking of the glove, of escape, of Fred....”

Yea, love is strong, I told myself, and it giveth to the dove the wisdom of the serpent, else how had this child come victorious from such an ordeal!

“I do not know how long I sat there,” Miss Vaughan continued, “but Senor Silva rose suddenly with an exclamation of impatience and switched on the light.

“‘There is something wrong,’ he said, coming back and standing over me. ‘Some hostile influence is at work. What is it?’

“‘I do not know,’ I said. ‘I cannot lose myself as I did last night.’

“‘Something holds you to earth—some chain. Perhaps it is your own wish.’

“‘No, no!’ I protested. ‘Let us try again.’

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“He switched off the light and sat down facing me, and again I felt his will trying to enter and conquer me. And again I clasped the glove, and kept my mind upon it, thinking only of escape.”

You can guess how we were leaning forward, listening breathless to this narrative. I fancied I could see her sitting there in the darkness, with Silva’s evil influence visibly about her, but held at bay by her resolute innocence, as Christian’s shield of Faith turned aside the darts of Apollyon. It was, indeed, a battle of good and evil, the more terrible because it was fought, not with bodily weapons, but with spiritual ones.

“At last, Senor Silva rose again,” Miss Vaughan continued, “and turned on the lights, and I shivered when I met his gaze.

“‘You are defying me,’ he said, very low. ‘But I will break you yet,’ and he clapped his hands softly together.

[Illustration: “I knew that I was lost”]

“Mahbub appeared at the inner door, received a sharp order, and disappeared again. A moment later, there was a little swirl of smoke from the door of his room, and a sharp, over-powering odour, which turned me faint.

“And then Senor Silva, who had been pacing, up and down the room, stopped suddenly and looked at me, his face distorted.

“‘Is it that?’ he muttered. ‘Can it be that?’

“And he strode to the curtain which hung before his secret cupboard and swept it back.

“I knew that I was lost. I sprang for the outer door, managed to get it open and set a foot in the hall, before he seized me. I remember that I screamed, and then his hand was at my throat—and I suppose I must have fainted,” she added, with a little smile, “for the next thing I remember is looking up and seeing Dr. Hinman.”

I sat back in my chair with a long breath of relief. My tension during the telling of the story had been almost painful; and it was not until it was ended that I saw two other men had entered while Miss Vaughan was speaking. I was on my feet as soon as I saw them, for I recognised Goldberger and Sylvester.

“Simmonds telephoned me this morning that I was needed out here again,” Goldberger explained. “But first I want to shake hands with Miss Vaughan.”

“You have met Mr. Goldberger, Miss Vaughan,” I said, as he came forward, “but Dr. Hinman didn’t tell you that he’s the cleverest coroner in greater New York.”

“He doesn’t really think so, Miss Vaughan,” Goldberger laughed. “You ought to read some of the things he’s written about me! But I want to say that I heard most of your story, and it’s a wonder. About that glove, now, Simmonds,” he added, turning to the detective. “I’d like to see it—and Sylvester here is nearly dying to.”

“Here it is,” said Simmonds, and took it from his pocket and passed it over.

Goldberger looked at it, then handed it to Sylvester, who fairly seized it, carried it to the door, and examined it with gleaming eyes. Then, without a word, he took an ink-pad from his pocket, slipped the glove upon his right hand, inked the tips of the fingers and pressed them carefully upon a sheet of paper. From an inner pocket, he produced a sheaf of photographs, laid them beside the prints, and carefully compared them. Finally he straightened up and looked at us, his face working.

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"Do you know what this does, gentlemen?" he asked, in a voice husky with emotion. "It strikes at the foundation of the whole system of finger-print identification! It renders forever uncertain a method we thought absolutely safe! It's the worst blow that has ever been struck at the police!"

"You mean the prints agree with the photographs?" asked Godfrey, going to his side.

"Absolutely!" said Sylvester, and mopped his face with a shaking hand.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE END OF THE CASE

To Sylvester, head of the Identification Bureau, it seemed that the world was tottering to its fall; but the rest of us, who had not really at the bottom of our hearts, perhaps, believed in the infallibility of the finger-print system, took it more calmly. And presently we went upstairs to take a look at the contents of Silva's secret cupboard. When he had first come to the house, Miss Vaughan explained, he had been given carte-blanche in this suite of rooms. He had them remodelled, installed the circular divan and crystal sphere, selected the hangings, and had at the same time, no doubt, caused the secret cupboard to be built.

Its contents were most interesting. There was a box of aerial bombs, which Godfrey turned over to Simmonds with the injunction to go and amuse himself. For Sylvester's contemplation and further confusion were the gloves with which Silva had managed his parlour mystification scheme, six pairs of them; and there was also the very simple apparatus with which the finger-print reproductions had been made—an apparatus, as Godfrey had suggested, similar in every way to that used for making rubber stamps. There, too, were the plates of zinc upon which the impressions of the prints had been etched with acid. And, finally, there were various odds and ends of a juggler's outfit, as well as various bottles of perfumes, essences, and liquids whose properties we could not guess.

Godfrey looked at the gloves carefully, as though in search of something, and at last selected one of them with a little exclamation of satisfaction.

"I thought so!" he said, and held it up. "Look at this glove, Sylvester. You see it has never been used—there is no ink on it. Do you know what it is? It's the print of Swain's left hand."

Sylvester took it and looked at it.

"It's a left hand all right," he said. "But what makes you think it is Swain's?"

“Because Silva expected to use both hands, till he learned that Swain had injured one of his. But for that, the blood needed to make the prints would have come from the victim, and Silva would have worn this glove, too; but Swain’s injury gave Silva a happy inspiration! Wonderful man!” he added, half to himself.

Goldberger and Simmonds went on into the inner room to arrange for the disposition of the body of Mahbub; but Godfrey and Miss Vaughan and I turned back together, for we did not wish to see the Thug. At her boudoir door Godfrey paused.

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"The case is clear," he said, "from first to last, provided you can supply us with a final detail, Miss Vaughan."

"What is that?" she asked.

"Did you write that note to Swain in your own room?"

"Yes."

"And will you show me the table at which you wrote it?"

"Certainly," and she opened the door. "Come in. I wrote it at that little desk by the window."

Godfrey walked to it, picked up a blotting-book which lay upon it, and turned over the leaves.

"Ah!" he said, after a moment. "I was sure of it. Here is the final link. Have you a small hand-mirror, Miss Vaughan?"

She brought one from her toilet-table and handed it to him in evident astonishment.

"What do you see in the mirror?" he asked, and held a page of the blotting-book at an angle in front of it.

Miss Vaughan uttered an exclamation of surprise, as she read the words reflected there:

MR. FREDERIC SWAIN,
1010 Fifth Avenue,
New York City.

If not at this address,
please try the Calumet Club.

"Tall oaks from little acorns grow," quoted Godfrey, tossing the book back upon the desk. "But for the fact that you blotted the envelope, Miss Vaughan, young Swain would never have been accused of murder."

"I do not understand," she murmured.

"Don't you see," he pointed out, "the one question which we have been unable to answer up to this moment has been this: how did Silva know you were going to meet Swain? He had to know it, and know it several hours before the meeting, in order to

have those finger-prints ready. I concluded, at last, that there *must* be a blotting-book—and there it is.”

Miss Vaughan stared at him.

“You seem to be a very wonderful man!” she said.

Godfrey laughed.

“It is my every-day business to reconstruct mysteries,” he said. “Shall I reconstruct this one?”

“Please do!” she begged, and motioned us to be seated.

Godfrey’s face was glowing with the sort of creative fire which, I imagine, illumines the poet’s brow at the moment of inspiration.

“Where did you first meet Silva?” he asked.

“In Paris.”

“What was he doing there?”

“He was practising mysticism. My father went to consult him; he was much impressed by him, and they became very intimate.”

“And Silva, of course, at once saw the possibilities of exploiting an immensely rich old man, whose mind was failing. So he comes here as his instructor in Orientalism; he does some very marvellous things; by continued hypnosis, he gets your father completely under his control. He secures a promise of this estate and a great endowment; he causes your father to make a will in which these bequests are specifically stated. Then he hesitates, for during his residence in this house, a new desire has been added to the

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old ones. It had not often been his fortune to be thrown in daily contact with an innocent and beautiful girl, and he ends by falling in love with you. He knows of your love for Swain. He has caused Swain to be forbidden the house; but he finds you still indifferent. At last, by means of his own entreaties and your father's, he secures your consent to become his disciple. He knows that, if once you consent to sit with him, he will, in the end, dominate your will, also.

"But you ask for three days' delay, and this he grants. During every moment of those three days, he will keep you under surveillance. Almost at once, he guesses at your plan, for you return to the house, you write a letter, and, the moment you leave your room, he enters it and sees the impression on the blotter. He follows you into the grounds, he sees you throw the letter over the wall, and suspects that you are calling Swain to your aid. More than that, Lester," he added, turning to me, "he saw you in the tree, and so kept up his midnight fire-works, on the off-chance that you might be watching!"

"Yes; that explains that, too," I agreed thoughtfully.

"When he realises that you are asking your lover's aid," Godfrey continued to Miss Vaughan, "a fiendish idea springs into his mind. If Swain answers the call, if he enters the grounds, he will separate him from you once for all by causing him to be found guilty of killing your father. He hastens back to the house, tears the leaf from the album of finger-prints and prepares the rubber gloves. That night, he follows you when you leave the house; he overhears your talk in the arbour; and he finds that there is another reason than that of jealousy why he must act at once. If your father is found to be insane, the will drawn up only three days before will be invalid. Silva will lose everything—not only you, but the fortune already within his grasp.

"He hurries to the house and tells your father of the rendezvous. Your father rushes out and brings you back, after a bitter quarrel with Swain, which Silva has, of course, foreseen. You come up to your room; your father flings himself into his chair again. It is Silva who has followed you—who has purposely made a noise in order that you might think it was Swain. And he carries in his hand the blood-soaked handkerchief which Swain dropped when he fled from the arbour.

"Up to this point," Godfrey went on, more slowly, "everything is clear—every detail fits every other detail perfectly. But, in the next step of the tragedy, one detail is uncertain—whose hand was it drew the cord around your father's throat? I am inclined to think it was Mahbub's. If Silva had done the deed, he would probably have chosen a method less Oriental; but Mahbub, even under hypnotic suggestion, would kill only in the way to which he was accustomed—with a noose. Pardon me," he added, quickly, as she

shrank into her chair, “I have forgotten how repellent this must be to you. I have spoken brutally.”

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"Please go on," she murmured. "It is right that I should hear it. I can bear it."

"There is not much more to tell," said Godfrey, gently. "Whoever it was that drew the cord, it was Silva who moistened the glove from the blood-soaked handkerchief, made the marks upon your father's robe, and then dropped the handkerchief beside his chair. Then he returned softly to his room, closed the door, put away the glove, cleansed his hands, made sure that Mahbub was in his closet, took his place upon the divan, and waited. I think we know the rest. And now, Lester," he added, turning to me, "we would better be getting to town. Remember, Swain is still in the Tombs."

"You are right," I said, and rose to take my leave, but Miss Vaughan, her eyes shining, stopped me with a hand upon the sleeve.

"I should like to go with you, Mr. Lester," she said. "May I?"

The colour deepened in her cheeks as she met my gaze, and I understood what was in her heart. So did Godfrey.

"I'll have my car around in ten minutes," he said, and hastened away.

"I have only to put on my hat," said Miss Vaughan; and I found her waiting for me in the library, when I entered it after arranging with Simmonds and Goldberger to appear with me in the Tombs court and join me in asking for Swain's release.

Godfrey's car came up the drive a moment later, and we were off.

The hour that followed was a silent one. Godfrey was soon sufficiently occupied in guiding the car through the tangle of traffic. Miss Vaughan leaned back in a corner of the tonneau lost in thought. It was just six days since I had seen her first; but those six days had left their mark upon her. Perhaps, in time, happiness would banish that shadow from her eyes, and that tremulousness from her lips. Every battle leaves its mark, even on the victor; and the battle she had fought had been a desperate one. But, as I looked at her, she seemed more complete, more desirable than she had ever been; I could only hope that Swain would measure up to her.

At last, we drew up before the grey stone building, whose barred windows and high wall marked the prison.

"Here we are," I said, and helped her to alight.

Godfrey greeted the door-keeper as an old friend, and, after a whispered word, we were allowed to pass. A guard showed us into a bare waiting-room, and Godfrey hastened away to explain our errand to the warden.



“Won’t you sit down?” I asked, but my companion shook her head, with a frightened little smile, and paced nervously up and down, her hands against her heart. How riotously it was beating I could guess—with what hope, what fear....

There was a quick step in the corridor, and she stood as if turned to stone.

Then the door was flung open, and, with radiant face, she walked straight into the outstretched arms of the man who stood there. I heard her muffled sob, as the arms closed about her and she hid her face against his shoulder; then a hand was laid upon my sleeve.

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"Come along, Lester," said Godfrey softly. "This case is ended!"

THE END