

White Fred Merrick

The Cardinal Moth



Fred Fred

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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	12
CHAPTER IV	16
CHAPTER V	19
CHAPTER VI	26
CHAPTER VII	29
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	31

Fred M. White

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CHAPTER I

FLOWERS OF BLOOD

The purple darkness seemed to be filled with a nebulous suggestion of things beautiful; long trails and ropes of blossoms hung like stars reflected in a lake of blue. As the eye grew accustomed to the gloom these blooms seemed to expand and beautify. There was a great orange globe floating on a violet mist, a patch of pink swam against an opaque window-pane like a flight of butterflies. Outside the throaty roar of Piccadilly could be distinctly heard; inside was misty silence and the coaxed and pampered atmosphere of the Orient. Then a long, slim hand – a hand with jewels on it – was extended, and the whole vast dome was bathed in brilliant light.

For once the electric globes had lost their garish pertinacity. There were scores of lamps there, but every one of them was laced with dripping flowers and foliage till their softness was like that of a misty moon behind the tree-tops. And the blossoms hung everywhere – thousands upon thousands of them, red, blue, orange, creamy white, fantastic in shape and variegated in hue, with a diabolical suggestiveness about them that orchids alone possess. Up in the roof, out of a faint cloud of steam, other blossoms of purple and azure peeped.

Complimented upon the amazing beauty of his orchid-house, Sir Clement Frobisher cynically remarked that the folly had cost him from first to last over a hundred thousand pounds. He passed for a man with no single generous impulse or feeling of emotion; a love of flowers was the only weakness that Providence had vouchsafed to him, and he held it cheap at the money. You could rob Sir Clement Frobisher or cheat him or lie to him, and he would continue to ask you to dinner, if you were a sufficiently amusing or particularly rascally fellow, but if you casually picked one of his priceless *Cypripediums* – !

He sat there in his bath of brilliant blossoms, smoking a clay pipe and sipping some peculiarly thin and aggressive Rhine wine from a long, thin-stemmed Bohemian glass. He had a fancy for that atrocious grape juice and common ship's tobacco from a reeking clay. Otherwise he was immaculate, and his velvet dinner-jacket was probably the best-cut garment of its kind in London.

A small man, just over fifty, with a dome-like head absolutely devoid of hair, and shiny like a billiard-ball, a ridiculously small nose suggestive of the bill of a love-bird, a clean-shaven, humorous mouth with a certain hard cruelty about it, a figure slight, but enormously powerful. For the rest, Sir Clement was that rare bird amongst high-born species – a man, poor originally, who had become rich. He was popularly supposed to have been kicked out of the diplomatic service after a brilliant operation connected with certain Turkish Bonds. The scandal was an old one, and might have had no basis in fact, but the same *Times* that conveyed to an interested public the fact of Sir Clement Frobisher's retirement from the *corps diplomatique*, announced that the baronet in question had purchased the lease of 947, Piccadilly, for the sum of ninety-five thousand pounds. And for seven years Society refused to admit the existence of anybody called Sir Clement Frobisher.

But the man had his title, his family, and his million or so well invested. Also he had an amazing audacity, and a moral courage beyond belief. Also he married a lady whose social claims could not be contested. Clement Frobisher went back to the fold again at a great dinner given at Yorkshire House. There it was that Earl Beauregard, a one-time chief of Frobisher's, roundly declared that, take him all in all, Count Whyzed was the most finished and abandoned scoundrel in Europe. Did not Frobisher think so? To which Frobisher replied that he considered the decision to be a personal slight

to himself, who had worked so hard for that same distinction. Beauregard laughed, and the rest of the party followed suit, and Frobisher did much as he liked, ever after.

He was looking just a little bored now, and was debating whether he should go to bed, though it was not long after eleven o'clock, and that in the creamy month of the London season. Down below somewhere an electric bell was purring impatiently. The butler, an Armenian with a fez on his black, sleek head, looked in and inquired if Sir Clement would see anybody.

"If it's a typical acquaintance, certainly not, Hafid," Frobisher said, sleepily. "If it happens to be one of my picturesque rascals, send all the other servants to bed. But it's sure to be some commonplace, respectable caller."

Hafid bowed and withdrew. Down below the bell was purring again. A door opened somewhere, letting in the strident roar of the streets like a dirge, then the din shut down again as if a lid had been clapped on it. From the dim shadow of the hall a figure emerged bearing a long white paper cone, handled with the care and attention one would bestow on a sick child.

"Paul Lopez to see you," Hafid said.

"Lopez!" Frobisher cried. "See how my virtue is rewarded. It is the return for all the boredom I have endured lately. Respectability reeks in my nostrils. I have been longing for a scoundrel – not necessarily a star of the first magnitude, a rival to myself. Ho, ho, Lopez!"

The newcomer nodded and smiled. A small, dark man with restless eyes, and hands that were never still. There was something catlike, sinuous, about him, and in those restless eyes a look of profound, placid, monumental contempt for Frobisher.

"You did not expect to see me?" he said.

"No," Frobisher chuckled. "I began to fear that you had been hanged, friend Paul. Do you recollect the last time we were together? It was –"

The voice trailed off with a muttered suggestion of wickedness beyond words. Frobisher lay back in his chair with the tangled ropes of blossoms about his sleek head; a great purple orchid with a living orange eye broke from the cluster and hung as if listening. Lopez looked round the bewildering beauty of it all with an artistic respect for his surroundings.

"The devil has looked after his dear friend carefully," he said, with the same calm contempt. Frobisher indicated it all with a comprehensive hand. "Now you are jealous," he said. "Hafid, the other servants are gone to bed? Good! Then you may sit in the library till I require you. What have you got there, Paul?"

"I have a flower, an orchid. It is at your disposal, at a price."

"At a price, of course. What are you asking for it?"

Paul Lopez made no reply. He proceeded to remove the paper from the long cone, and disclosed a lank, withered-looking stem with faded buds apparently hanging thereto by attenuated threads. It might have been nothing better than a dead clematis thrown by a gardener on the dust-heap. The root, or what passed for it, was simply attached to a slap of virgin cork by a couple of rusty nails. Frobisher watched Lopez with half-closed eyes.

"Of course, I am going to be disappointed," he said. "How often have I gone hunting the eagle and found it to be a tit? The rare sensation of a new blossom has been denied me for years. Is it possible that my pets are going to have a new and lovely sister?"

He caressed the purple bloom over his head tenderly. Lopez drew from his pocket a great tangle of Manilla rope, yards of it, which he proceeded to loop along one side of the orchid-house. Upon this he twisted his faded stem, drawing it out until, with the dusty laterals, there were some forty feet of it.

"Where is your steam-pipe?" he asked.

Frobisher indicated the steam-cock languidly. Ever and again the nozzle worked automatically, half filling the orchid-house with the grateful steam which was as life to the gorgeous flowers. Lopez turned the cock full on; there was a hiss, a white cloud that fairly enveloped his recent work.

"Now you shall see what you shall see," he said in his calm, cool voice. "Oh, my friend, you will be with your arms about my neck presently!"

Already the masses of flowers were glistening with moisture. It filled up the strands of the loose Manilla rope, and drew it up tight as a fiddle-string. Through the dim cloud Frobisher could see the dry stalks literally bursting into life.

"Aaron's rod," murmured Frobisher. "Do you know that for Aaron's rod, properly verified, and in good working order, I would give quite a lot of money?"

"You would cut it up for firewood to possess what I shall show you presently," said Lopez. "See here."

He turned off the steam-cock and the thin, vapoury cloud rapidly dispelled. And then behold a miracle! The twisted, withered stalk was a shining, joyous green, from it burst a long glistening cluster of great white flowers, pink fringed, and with just a touch of the deep green sea in them. They ran along the stem like the foam on a summer beach. And from them, suspended on stems so slender as to be practically invisible to the eye, was a perfect fluttering cloud of smaller blossoms of the deepest cardinal red. Even in that still atmosphere they floated and trembled for all the world like a palpitating cloud of butterflies hovering over a cluster of lilies. Anything more chaste, more weird, and at the same time more bewilderingly beautiful, it would be impossible to imagine.

Frobisher jumped to his feet with a hoarse cry of delight. Little beads of perspiration stood on his sleek head. The man was quivering from head to foot with intense excitement. With hesitating forefinger he touched the taut Manilla rope and it hummed like a harp-string, each strand drawn rigid with the moisture. And all the moths there leapt with a new, hovering life.

"The Cardinal Moth," Frobisher said hoarsely. "Hafid, it is the Cardinal Moth!"

Hafid came, from the darkness of the study with a cry something like Frobisher's, but it was a cry of terror. His brown face had turned to a ghastly, decayed green, those lovely flowers might have been a nest of cobras from the terror of his eye.

"Chop it up, destroy it, burn it!" he yelled. "Put it in the fire and scatter the ashes to the four winds. Trample on it, master; crush the flower to pieces. He is mad, he has forgotten that dreadful night in Stamboul!"

"Would you mind taking that tankard of iced water and pouring it over Hafid's head?" said Frobisher. "You silly, superstitious fool! The Stamboul affair was a mere coincidence. And so there was another Cardinal Moth besides my unfortunate plant all the time! Oh, the beauty, the gem, the auk amongst orchids! Where, where did you get it from?"

"It came from quite a small collection near London."

"The greedy ruffian! Fancy the man having a Cardinal Moth and keeping it to himself like that! The one I lost was a mere weed compared to this. Name your price, Paul, and if it is too high, Hafid and I will murder you between us and swear that you were a burglar shot in self-defence."

Lopez laughed noiselessly – a strange, unpleasant laugh.

"You would do it without the slightest hesitation," he said. "But the orchid is quite safe with you, seeing that the owner is dead, and that his secret was all his own. And the price is a small one."

"Ah, you are modest, friend Paul! Name it."

"You are merely to tell a lie and to stick to it. I am in trouble, in danger. And I hold that hanging is the worst use you can put a man to. If anything happens, I came here last night at ten o'clock. I stayed till nearly midnight. Hafid must remember the circumstances also."

"Hafid," Frobisher said slowly, "will forget or remember anything that I ask him to."

Hafid nodded with his eyes still fixed in fascinated horror on the palpitating, quivering, crimson floating over its bed of snow. He heard and understood, but only by instinct.

"I was at home all the evening, and her ladyship is away," said Frobisher. "I was expecting a mere commonplace rascal – not an artist like yourself, Paul – and the others had gone to bed. And you were here for the time you said. Is not that so, Hafid?"

"Oh, by the soul of my father, yes!" Hafid said in a frozen voice. "Take it and burn it, and scatter it. What my lord says is the truth. Take it and burn it, and scatter it."

"He'll be all right in the morning," Frobisher said. "Lopez, take the big steps and festoon that lovely new daughter of mine across the roof. You can fasten it to those hooks. To-morrow I will have an extra steam valve for her ladyship. Let me see – if she gets her bath of steam every night regularly she will require no more. Aphrodite, beautiful, your bath shall be remembered."

He kissed his fingers gaily to the trembling flowers now hooked across the roof. Already the loose Manilla rope was drying and hanging in baggy folds that made a more artistic foil for the quivering red moths. It was only when the steaming process was going on that the thin, strong ropes drew it up humming and taut as harp-strings.

"Ah, that is like a new planet in a blue sky!" Frobisher cried. "Lopez, I am obliged to you. Come again when I am less excited and I will suitably reward you. To-night I am *tête montée*– I am not responsible for my actions. And the lie shall be told for you, a veritable *chef-d'oeuvre* amongst lies. Sit down, and the best shall not be good enough for you."

"I must go," Lopez said in the same even tones. "I have private business elsewhere. I drink nothing and I smoke nothing till business is finished. Good-night, prince of rascals, and fair dreams to you."

Lopez passed leisurely into the black throat of the library, Hafid following. Frobisher nodded and chuckled, not in the least displeased. He had not been so excited for years. The sight of those blossoms filled him with unspeakable pleasure. For their sakes he would have committed murder without the slightest hesitation. He had eyes for nothing else, ears deaf to everything. He heeded not the purr of the hall bell again, he was lost to his surroundings until Hafid shook him soundly.

"Count Lefroy to see you, and Mr. Manfred," he said. "I told them you were engaged, but they said that perhaps –"

Frobisher dropped into his chair with the air of a man satiated with a plethora of good things.

"Now what have I done to deserve all this beatitude!" he cried. "An unique find and a brother collector to triumph over, to watch, to prick with the needle of jealousy. But stop, I must worship alone to-night. Say that I shall particularly desire to see them at luncheon to-morrow."

CHAPTER II

ANGELA

Frobisher sat the following morning in the orchid-house chuckling to himself and waiting the advent of his two guests to luncheon. Heaven alone could follow the twists and turns of that cunning brain. Frobisher was working out one of his most brilliant schemes now. He took infinite pains to obtain by underground passages the things he might have obtained openly and easily. But there was the delight of puzzling other people.

He looked up presently, conscious of a presence beyond his own. In the dark Frobisher could always tell if anybody came into the room. He crooked his wicked head sideways with the air of a connoisseur, and in sooth there was good cause for his admiration. Here was something equal at least to his most beautiful and cherished orchids, a tall, graceful girl with shining brown hair, and eyes of the deepest, purest blue. Her complexion was like old ivory, and as pure, the nose a little short, perhaps, but the sweet mouth was full of strength and character.

"I came for the flowers that you promised me, Sir Clement," she said.

"Call me uncle and you shall have the conservatory," Frobisher grinned. "I am your uncle by marriage, you know, and your guardian by law. Angela, you are looking lovely. With the exception of a peasant woman I once met in Maremma, you are the most beautiful creature I ever saw."

Angela Lyne listened with absolute indifference. She was accustomed to be studied like this by Sir Clement Frobisher, whom she loathed and detested from the bottom of her heart. But Lady Frobisher was her aunt, and Frobisher her guardian for the next year, until she came of age, in fact.

"Give me the flowers," she said. "I am late as it is. I have sent my things on, for I shall dine with Lady Marchgrave after the concert, and come home alone. Hafid will let me in."

"Better take a latchkey," Frobisher suggested. "There! Let me pin them in for you. I'll show you an orchid when you have time to examine it that will move even you to admiration. But not now; she is too superb a creature for passing admiration. Now I think you will do."

There was no question of Frobisher's taste or his feeling for arranging flowers. The blossoms looked superb and yet so natural as they lay on Angela's breast – white orchids shot with sulphur. They were the theme of admiration an hour later at Lady Marchgrave's charity concert; they gleamed again on Angela's corsage as she sat in the Grosvenor Square drawing-room at dinner. Five-and-twenty people sat round the long table with its shaded lights and feathery flowers. There were distinguished guests present, for Lady Marchgrave was by way of being intellectual, but Angela had eyes for one man only. He had come a little late, and had slipped quietly into a chair at the bottom of the table – a tall man with a strong face, not exactly handsome, but full of power. The clean-shaven lips were very firm, but when the newcomer smiled his face looked singularly young and sweet. Angela's dinner partner followed her glance with his eyes.

"If it isn't that beast Denvers," he muttered. "I thought he had been murdered in the wilds of Armenia or some such desirable spot. You ought to be glad, Angela."

"I am glad, Mr. Arnott," Angela said coldly. "Permit me to remind you again that I particularly dislike being called by my Christian name; at least, at present."

The little man with the hooked nose and the shifting, moist eye, put down his champagne glass savagely. For some deep, mysterious reason, Sir Clement favoured George Arnott's designs upon Angela, and if nothing interfered he was pretty sure to get his own way in the end. At present Angela was coldly disdainful; she little dreamt of the power and cunning of the man she was thwarting. She turned her head away, absently waiting for Lady Marchgrave's signal. There was a flutter and rustle of silken and lace draperies presently, and the chatter of high-bred voices floating from the hall. A good many people had already assembled in the suite of rooms beyond, for Lady Marchgrave's receptions

were popular as well as fashionable. Angela wandered on until she came to the balcony overlooking the square. She leant over thoughtfully – her mind had gone back to such a night a year or so before.

"Mine is a crescent star to-night," a quiet voice behind her said. "I seemed to divine by instinct where you were. Angela, dear Angela, it is good to be with you again."

The girl's face flushed, her blue eyes were full of tenderness. Most people called her cold, but nobody could bring that accusation against her now. Her two hands went out to Harold Denvers, and he held them both. For a long while the brown eyes looked into the heavenly blue ones.

"Still the same?" Denvers asked. "Nobody has taken what should be my place, Angela?"

"Nobody has taken it, and nobody is ever likely to," Angela smiled. "There is supposed to be nothing between us; you refused to bind me, and you did not write or give me your address, but my heart is yours and you know it. And if you changed I should never believe in anything again."

"If I should change! Dear heart, is it likely? If you only knew what I felt when I caught sight of you to-night. My queen, my beautiful, white queen! If I could only claim you before all the world!"

Angela bent her head back behind the screen of a fluttering, silken curtain and kissed the speaker. He held her in his arms just for one blissful moment.

"It seems just the same," he said, "as if the clock had been put back a year, to that night when Sir Clement found us out. The son of the man whom he had ruined and his rich and lovely ward! There was a dramatic scene for you! But he only grinned in that diabolical way of his, and shortly after that mission to Armenia was offered to me. I never guessed then who procured it for me, but I know now as well as I know that Sir Clement never intended me to come back."

"Harold! Do you really mean to say that – that –"

"You hesitate, of course. It is not a pretty thing to say. Life is cheap out there, and if I was killed, what matter? Let us talk of other and more pleasant things."

"Of your travels and adventures, for instance. Did you find any wonderful flowers, like you did, for instance, in Borneo, Harold? Where did you get that lovely orchid from?"

A single blossom flamed on the silk lapel of Denvers' coat – a whitish bloom with a cloud of little flowers hovering over it like moths. It was the Cardinal Moth again.

"Unique, is it not?" Harold said. "Thereby hangs a strange, romantic tale which would take too long to tell at present. What would Sir Clement give for it?"

"Let me have it before I go," asked Angela, eagerly. "I should like to show it to Sir Clement. He has some wonderful flower that he wants me to see, but I feel pretty sure that he has nothing like that. I shall decline to say where I got the bloom from."

Denvers removed the exquisite bloom with its nodding scarlet moths and dexterously attached it to Angela's own orchids. The thing might have been growing there.

"It seems strange to see that bloom on your innocent breast," Harold said. "It makes me feel quite creepy when I look at it. If you only knew the sin and misery and shame and crime that surrounds the Cardinal Moth you would hesitate to wear it."

Angela smiled; she did not possess the imaginative vein.

"You shall tell me that another time," she said. "Meanwhile you seem to have dropped from the clouds... Are your plans more promising for the future?"

"A little nebulous for the present," Denvers admitted, "though the next expedition, which is not connected with Sir Clement Frobisher, promises well for the future. There is a lot to be done, however, and I am likely to be in London for the next three weeks or so. And you?"

"We are here for the season, of course. My aunt is staying at Chaffers Court till Friday, hence the fact that I am here alone. If you are very good you shall take me as far as Piccadilly in a taxi. I must see a good deal of you, Hal, for I have been very lonely."

There was a pathetic little droop in Angela's voice. Harold drew her a little closer.

"I wish I could take you out of it, darling," he said. "For your sake, we must try and make the next venture a success. If we can only start the company fairly, I shall be able to reckon on a thousand a year. Do you think you could manage on that, Angela?"

"Yes, or on a great deal less," Angela smiled. "I could be happy with you anywhere. And you must not forget that I shall have a large fortune of my own some day."

Other people were drifting towards the cool air of the balcony now, George Arnott amongst the number. It was getting late, and Angela was tired. She whispered Harold to procure her a cab, and that she would say good-night to Lady Marchgrave and join him presently. The cab came, and so did the lights of Piccadilly all too soon. Denvers lingered on the steps just for a moment. He was going down to a big country house on Saturday for the week-end. Would Angela come if he could procure her an invitation? Angela's eyes replied for her. She was in the house at length by the aid of her latchkey. The dining-room door opened for a moment; there was a rattle of conversation and the smell of Egyptian cigarettes. Evidently Sir Clement was giving one of his famous impromptu dinner-parties. Angela took the spray of orchids from her breast and passed hurriedly in the direction of the orchid-house. The bloom would keep best there, she thought.

As she passed along the corridor the figure of a man preceded her. The stranger crept along, looking furtively to the right and the left. From his every gesture he was doing wrong here. Then he darted for the orchid-house and Angela followed directly she had recovered herself. She would corner the man in the conservatory and demand his business. In the conservatory Angela looked about her. The man had vanished.

He had utterly gone – he was nowhere to be seen. Angela rubbed her eyes in amazement. There was no other way out of the conservatory. She stood therewith the Cardinal Moth in her hand, aware now that she was looking into the scared face of Hafid.

"Take it and burn it, and destroy it," he said in a dazed kind of way. "Take it and burn it at once. Dear lady, will you go to bed? Take it and burn it – my head is all hot and confused. Dear lady, do not stay here, the place is accursed. By the Prophet, I wish I had never been born."

CHAPTER III

CROSSED SWORDS

Hafid came into the library and pulled to the big bronze gates of the orchid-house like the portals of a floral paradise. There were flowers here: stephanotis climbing round the carved mantel, ropes of orchids dangling from the electroliers, in one corner a mass of maiden-hair fern draped the wall. Even the pictures in their Florentine frames were roped with blossoms.

Frobisher glanced beyond the carved and twisted gates with a peculiar smile after Angela had departed. His luncheon guests were late. He looked more like a mischievous bird than usual. There was an air of pleased anticipation about him as of a man who is going to witness a brilliant comedy.

There came to him a tall man with a heavy moustache and an unmistakable military swagger. If Frobisher resembled a parrot, Lefroy was most unmistakably a hawk. He passed in society generally as a cavalry officer high in favour of his Majesty the Shan of Ganistan; more than one brilliant expedition against the hill-tribes had been led by him. But some of the hill-men could have told another tale.

"Well, Lefroy," Frobisher exclaimed, genially. "This is a pleasure, a greater pleasure than you are aware of. Mr. Manfred, take a seat."

Lefroy's secretary bowed and sank into a deep chair. His face was absolutely devoid of emotion, a blank wall of whiteness with two eyes as expressionless as shuttered windows. Most people were disposed to regard Manfred as an absolute fool. The hill-men at the back of Ganistan muttered in their beards that he was, if possible, worse than his master.

Lefroy reached for a cigar, lighted it, and looked around him. The white-faced Manfred seemed to have lapsed into a kind of waking sleep. A more utter indifference to his surroundings it would be hard to imagine. Yet he was a kind of intellectual camera. He had never been in Frobisher's library before. But a year hence he could have entered it in the dark and found his way to any part of the room with absolute certainty.

"I came to see you over that central Koordstan Railway business," Lefroy said.

"Precisely," Frobisher smiled. "I might have guessed it. As an Englishman – though you have so picturesque a name – you are anxious that England should receive the concessions. In fact, you have already promised it to our Government."

Lefroy made a motion as who should move a piece on a chess-board.

"That is one to you," he said. "Yes, you are quite right. Whereas you?"

"Whereas I am interested on behalf of the Russian Government. I tried our people here two years ago, but they refused to have anything to do with me."

"Refused to trust you, in point of fact."

Frobisher laughed noiselessly. The wrinkled cunning of his face and the noble expanse of his forehead looked strange together.

"Quite right," he said. "They refused to trust me. Any man who knows my record would be a fool to do so. But in that instance I was perfectly loyal, because it was my interest to be so. Still I bowed with chastened resignation and – immediately offered my services to Russia. Then you slipped in and spoilt my little game."

"There is half a million hanging to the thing, my dear fellow."

"Well, well! But you have not won yet. You can do nothing till you have won the Shan of Koordstan to your side. Whichever way he throws his influence the concession goes. And He of Koordstan and myself are very friendly. He dines here to-night."

Lefroy started slightly. He glanced at Frobisher keenly under his shaggy brows. The latter lay back smoking his filthy clay with dreamy ecstasy.

"Yes," he went on, "He dines here to-night to see my orchids. My dear fellow, if you and Manfred will join us, I shall be delighted."

Lefroy muttered something that sounded like acceptance. Manfred came out of his waking dream, nodded, and slipped back into conscious unconsciousness again.

"That picturesque and slightly drunken young rascal has a passion for orchids," said Frobisher. "It is the one redeeming point in his character. But you know that, of course. You haven't forgotten the great coup so nearly made with the Cardinal Moth."

"The plant that was burnt at Ochiri," Lefroy said uneasily.

"The same. What a wax the old man was in, to be sure! Ah, my dear Lefroy, we shall never, never see a Cardinal Moth again!"

"If I could," Lefroy said hoarsely. "Your chances with the Shan of Koordstan wouldn't be worth a rap. With that orchid I could buy the man body and soul. And the plant that was stolen from us at Turin is dead long ago. It must be, such a find as that couldn't possibly have been kept quiet."

"I'll bet you a thousand pounds that orchid is alive," Frobisher said dryly.

Lefroy sat up straight as a ramrod. The waxed ends of his big moustache quivered. He turned to Manfred, anxiety, anger, passion, blazing like a brief torch in his eyes. Manfred seemed to divine rather than know that he was under that black battery, and shook his head.

"I fail to see the point of the joke," Lefroy said.

Frobisher signed to Hafid to throw back the gates. Lefroy was on his feet by this time. He breathed like one who has run fast and far. Manfred followed him with the air of a man who is utterly without hope or expectation.

"There!" Frobisher cried with a flourish of his hand. "What is that you see beyond the third tier of ropes? Ah, my beauty, here comes another lover for you!"

Lefroy's black eyes were turned up towards the high dome of the orchid-house. Other tangled ropes and loops of blossoms met his gaze and held it as he glanced in the direction indicated by Frobisher. And there, high up above them all he could see the long, foamy, pink mass of blooms with the red moths dancing and hovering about them like things of life.

"The Cardinal Moth," he screamed. "Manfred, Manfred, curse you!"

He wheeled suddenly round in a whirl of delirious passion, and struck Manfred a violent blow in the mouth. The secretary staggered back, a thin stream of blood spurted from his split lip. But he said nothing, manifested no feeling or emotion of any kind. With a handkerchief he staunched the flow with the automatic action of a marionette.

"The Cardinal Moth," Frobisher said as genially as if nothing had happened. "The gem has but recently come into my possession. It will be a pleasant surprise for our friend the Shan to-night."

Just for an instant it looked as if Lefroy were about to transfer his spleen from Manfred to his host. But Frobisher had been told enough already. The cowardly blow said as plainly as words could speak that Frobisher had obtained the very treasure that Lefroy was after. He imagined that his secretary had played him false. And, moreover, he knew that Frobisher knew this.

"You've got it," he said. He seemed to have a difficulty in swallowing something. "But you could not bring yourself to part with it. You couldn't do it."

"My good Lefroy, every man has his price, even you and I. My beloved Moth may not be a very good trap, but I shall find it a wonderfully efficient bait."

"I dare say," Lefroy returned moodily. "Can I examine the flower closer?"

"Certainly. Hafid, bring the extending steps this way. Be careful of those ropes and tangles. An active man like you could climb up the stays and bracket to the roof."

Lefroy was a long time examining the flower. He was torn by envy and admiration. When he came down again his face was pale and his hands trembled.

"The real thing," he said, "the real, palpitating, beautiful thing. But there is blood upon it."

"Born in blood and watered with the stream of life. No, I am not going to tell you where I got it from. And now, my dear Lefroy, what will you take for your Koordstan concessions?"

Lefroy said nothing, but there was a gleam in his downcast eyes. Then presently he broke into a laugh that jarred on the decorous silence of the place.

"The game is yours," he said. "White to play and mate in three moves. Still there may be a way out. And, on the other hand, you must be very sure of your game to show me that. Lord, I'd give twopence to have you alone in a dark corner!"

He rose abruptly, turned on his heel, and made for the door, followed by the white automaton with the bleeding lip. He could hear Frobisher's diabolical chuckle as the big bronze gates closed behind him. It was perhaps the most silent meal ever partaken of at Frobisher's. He was glad at length to see the last of his luncheon guests.

Once in the streets Lefroy's manner changed. He looked uneasy and downcast.

"I'm sorry I hit you, Manfred," he said. "But when I caught sight of that infernal plant I felt sure that you had sold me. But even you couldn't have carried the thing off quite so coolly as that. And yet – and yet there can't be two Cardinal Moths in existence."

"There are not," Manfred said impatiently. "That is the same one I hoped to have had in my possession to-night. Didn't Frobisher say it had recently fallen into his hands?"

"I recollect that now. Manfred, I'm done. And yet I regarded it as a certainty."

"You were a great fool to strike me just now," said Manfred, thoughtfully, and without resentment. "Why? Because the blow told Frobisher that he had gained possession of the very thing you were after. It was as good as telling him that you thought I had betrayed you. To-night when the Shan dines –"

Lefroy grasped Manfred's arm with crushing force.

"He isn't going to dine with Frobisher to-night," he whispered. "We shall dine there, but his Majesty will be unfortunately detained owing to sudden indisposition. In other words, he will be too drunk to leave his hotel. Let's go into your lodgings and have a brandy and soda. I've got a plan ready. There is just a chance yet that I may succeed."

Manfred let himself into a house just off Brook Street. In a modest room upstairs, a box of cigars, some spirits, together with a silver jug of water, and a box of sparklets were put out. On the round table lay an early edition of an evening paper that Manfred opened somewhat eagerly for him. He glanced over a late advertisement in the personal column and shook his head.

"It is as I thought," he said. "See here. 'The butterflies have gone away and cannot be found. My poor friend has broken his neck and I have gone on a journey' – That is addressed to me, Lefroy. It is a message from my man that somebody has stolen the Cardinal Moth, and that my man's confederate has met with a fatal accident. Also it seems likely that there will be a fuss over the business, so that my correspondent has gone somewhere out of the way. We will look for some account of the tragedy presently; it is sure to be in this paper. Now tell me what you propose to do."

Lefroy poured a brandy and soda down his throat without a single movement of his larynx.

"I'm in a devil of a mess," he said frankly. "I made certain of getting the Cardinal Moth."

"So did I. But that is a detail. Go on."

"I wanted money badly. The concession seemed to be as good as mine. With the Moth as a bribe for the Shan it would have been all Lombard Street to a green gooseberry. So I lodged the charter with a notorious money-lending Jew in Fenchurch Street, and got twenty thousand pounds on account."

"My dear Lefroy, you hadn't got the concession to lodge!"

"No, but I had the man's letters, and I had the draft contract. So I forged the Charter, hoping to exchange it for a more broad and liberal one later on, and there you are!"

"And where will you be if you stay in the country forty-eight hours longer?"

"I understand," Lefroy said grimly. "But there is a chance yet. The Shan does not go to Frobisher's dinner this evening and we do. You are suddenly indisposed and sit out. At a given signal I make a diversion. Then you hurry into that orchid-house and steal the flower."

"The thing is absolutely impossible, my dear fellow!"

"Not at all. There is a much smaller Moth growing side by side with the larger one. I found that out to-night. You have only to snap off a small piece of cork and unwind the stems. Then you hurry off to my place with it and put it amongst my orchids. The old man does not expect anything beyond a small plant; those we had before were babies compared to the one yonder. Then we get the Shan round the next day and give him the vegetable. I shall have the concession ready. And it's any money Frobisher never knows how he has been done."

"I'll make the attempt if you like," Manfred said without emotion. "We can discuss the details in the morning. And now let me see what happened to my man. There is sure to be an account in this paper."

Manfred came upon it at length:

"Mysterious Occurrence in Streatham.

"Yesterday evening Thomas Silverthorne, caretaker at Lennox Nursery, Streatham, was aroused by hearing a noise in the greenhouse attached to the house. Silverthorne had not gone to bed; indeed, only a few hours before his employer had died, leaving him alone in the house. On entering the greenhouse the caretaker discovered the body of a man lying on the floor quite dead. Silverthorne thinks that it was the dull thud of the body that aroused him. Some plants in the roof had been pulled down – rare orchids, according to Silverthorne, who, however, is no gardener – but there was no means to show how the unfortunate man got there, as there is no exit from the greenhouse to the garden. The man was quite dead, and subsequent medical examination showed that he had been strangled by a coarse cloth twisted tightly round his throat; indeed, the marks on the hempen-cloth were plainly to be seen. An inquest will be held to-morrow."

"Well, what do you think of it?" Lefroy asked.

Manfred pitched the paper aside in a sudden flame of unreasoning passion.

"Accursed thing!" he cried. "It is the curse that follows the pursuit of the Cardinal Moth. It is ever the same, always blood, blood. If I had my way – "

"Drop it," Lefroy said sternly. "Remember what you have got to do."

Manfred grew suddenly hard and wooden again.

"I have passed my word," he said. "And it shall be done, though I would rather burn my hand off first."

CHAPTER IV

A DUSKY POTENTATE

A very late breakfast, past two o'clock, in fact, was laid out in one of the private sitting-rooms of Gardner's hotel that self-same afternoon. Gardner's only catered for foreign princes and ambassadors and people of that kind, the place was filled with a decorous silence, the servants in their quiet liveries gave a suggestion of a funeral of some distinguished personage, and that the body had not long left the premises. But despite the fact, some queer people patronised Gardner's from time to time, and His Highness the Shan of Koordstan was not the least brilliant in that line.

It was nearer three when he pushed his plate away and signified to the servant that he had finished his breakfast. A morsel of toast and caviare assisted by a glass of brandy and soda-water is not a meal suggestive of abstemious habits, and, indeed, the Shan of Koordstan by no means erred in that direction.

He looked older than his years, and had it not been for his dusky complexion and yellow eyes, might have passed for a European of swarthy type. His features were quite regular and fairly handsome; he was dressed in the most correct Bond Street fashion, the cigarette he held between his shaky fingers might have come from any first-class club.

"I've got a devil of a head," he said, as the servant softly crept away with the tray. "I shall have to drop that old Cambridge set. I can't stand their ways. If anybody comes I am out, at least out to everybody besides Mr. Harold Denvers; you understand."

The servant bowed and retired. He came back presently with a card on a salver, and he of Koordstan gave a careless nod of assent. The next moment Harold Denvers came into the room. He sniffed at the mingled odour of brandy and cigarette smoke, and smiled. Koordstan was watching him with those eyes that never rested. Their side gleam and the hard set of the grinning mouth showed that a tiger was concealed there under a thin veneer of Western civilisation.

"You've got back again, Denvers," he said. "Pon my word, you're devilish lucky. They had quite meant to put you out of the way this time."

"Your Highness is alluding to Sir Clement Frobisher, of course," Harold said.

Koordstan crossed over to an alcove and pushed the curtain back. Beyond was a small conservatory filled with choice orchids. They were a passion with him as with Frobisher. One of his chief reasons for coming to Gardner's was because it was possible to fill the small conservatory with a selection of his favourites. The atmosphere was damp and oppressive, but the Shan seemed to revel in it.

"That's about the size of it," he said. "Frobisher found out that you were *épris* of his lovely ward, and he had other views for her. The young lady has a will of her own, I understand."

"If you could see your way," Harold murmured, "to leave Miss Lyne out of the discussion –"

"My dear chap, I have not the slightest intention of erring against good taste. I like you, and out of all the men I come in contact with, you are the only honest man of the lot. Now I have stated why you were to be got out of the way I can proceed. Can't you see that there is somebody else who is your mortal enemy besides Frobisher?"

"I cannot call any one particularly to mind at present."

"Oh, you are blind!" Koordstan cried. "What about George Arnott? Now I know that, like a great many people, you regard Arnott as a fool. He has the laugh of a jackass, with the silly face of a cow. But behind the mooncalf countenance of his and that watery eye is a fine brain, and no heart or conscience. He and Frobisher are hand in glove together: they have some fine scheme afloat. And the price of Arnott's alliance is the hand of a certain lady, who shall be nameless."

"Do you mean that Arnott, when I went out to Armenia, actually –"

"Actually! Yes, that is the word. I shall be able to prove it when the time comes. And now you have come about those concessions that I was to consider with a view – "

"Begging your pardon – the concessions which your Highness has promised to my company."

"Drop that polite rot, old chap," Koordstan said, with engaging frankness. "You speak like that, but you regard me as a sorry ass who is building his own grave with empty brandy bottles. *Entre nous*, I did promise you those concessions, but you can't have them."

Harold knew his man too well to rage and storm or show his anger. He had counted on this matter. He had seen his way through dangers and perils of the fertile valleys of Koordstan and a fortune and perhaps fame behind. The hard grin on the face of the Shan relaxed a little.

"I'll tell you how it is," he said. "You know a lot about my people and what a superstitious gang they are. And you have heard the history of the Blue Stone of Ghan. As a matter of fact it's a precious big ruby, and is a talisman that every Shan of Koordstan is never supposed to be without. Now if I sold that stone or gave it away, what would happen to me when I got home?"

"They would tear you to pieces and burn your body afterwards."

"Precisely. Now that is a pretty way to treat a gentleman who merely has the misfortune to be hard up. And I have been most infernally hard up lately, owing to my unlucky speculations and those tribe troubles. Can't get in the taxes, you know. So the long and short of it is, that I pledged the Blue Stone."

Harold started. The statement did not convey much to the Western ears generally, but Denvers realised the true state of the case. The Shan was not a popular monarch; he was too European and absentee for that, and if the fact came out the priests would ruin him.

"That was a most reckless thing to do," Harold said.

"It was acting the goat, wasn't it?" Koordstan said carelessly, as he pared his long nails. "There was a new orchid or something that I had to buy. Sooner or later I shall recover the Blue Stone. But unfortunately for you, Lefroy and his set are after those concessions, and in some way Lefroy has discovered that the precious old jewel is no longer in my possession."

"So that is the way in which he is putting the pressure on you?"

"That's it," the Shan said with a dangerous gleam in his eyes. "Mind you, he is too good a diplomat to say out and out that he has made that important discovery. The Blue Stone is engraved on one side, and that side is used as a seal for sealing important state documents. Lefroy is desolate, but his people will do nothing until they get from me a wax impression of the seal; he told me that here. And he smiled. It was very near to the last time he smiled at anybody. If we had not been in London!"

Koordstan checked himself and paced up and down the small conservatory as like a caged tiger as a human being could be.

"Your answer to that was easy," Harold said. "You might have declined on the grounds that it would have been too easy to forge a die from that waxen impression."

"Good Lord, and I never thought of it!" Koordstan cried. "By Jove, that opens up a fine field for me! But it will take time. In the meantime a smiling face and a few of those previous subterfuges that men for want of a better name call diplomacy. You shall have your concessions yet."

Harold muttered something that might have been thanks, but he had his doubts. The Shan was favourably disposed towards him, but he would not have trusted the latter a yard so far as money was concerned. But there was another and better card yet to play.

"I have not forgotten your promise," he said. "When I showed you the Cardinal Moth."

"Afterwards subsequently destroyed. Ah, that we shall never see again. If you could give me that, you could make any terms with me. By heaven, I would have all Koordstan back at my feet if I could show them the 'Moth'! Denvers, you don't mean to say that you have come here with the information – "

He paused as if breath had suddenly failed him. The yellow face was quite ashy.

"Indeed I have," Harold said quietly. "That was one of the reasons why I came home. I got scent of the thing on the far side of the Ural mountains. My adventures would fill a big book. But I came home with the 'Moth' packed up in a quarter-pound tin of navy cut tobacco."

"You have kept this entirely to yourself?" the Shan asked hoarsely.

"Well, rather. I meant to have brought you a bloom as a guarantee of good faith. The plant is at present hidden away in the obscure conservatory at a nursery in the suburbs. If you would like – "

Harold paused as a soft-footed servant came in with a card on a tray. The Shan glanced at it and grinned.

"Tell him to come again in half an hour," he said. "Denvers, you had better depart by the Green Street door; it's Lefroy, and it would be as well for him not to know that you had been here. Go on."

"If you would like to see the 'Moth' I can make arrangements for you to do so. Only not one word of this to anybody. We can steal away down to Streatham and – "

Koordstan bounced to his feet, anger and disappointment lived on his face.

"Streatham, did you say!" he cried. "There seems to be witchery about the business. Don't tell me that you left the plant in care of a man called – "

The Shan grabbed for an early edition of an evening paper which fluttered in his hand like a leaf in a breeze. He found what he wanted presently and began to read half aloud.

"Yesterday evening Thomas Silverthorne, caretaker at the Lennox Nursery, Streatham – Look here, Denver, read it for yourself. At the Lennox nursery a man was found dead, murdered by having a rope placed round his neck, and held there till he was strangled. Silverthorne says there was a rare orchid or two in the house, and that one of them had been pulled down and probably stolen. Now if you tell me that your 'Moth' was placed there, I shall want to murder you."

Harold rose, his face was disturbed and uneasy.

"It is as you imagine," he said. "I did place the 'Moth' there the night before last. And I would have taken my oath that nobody knew that the plant was in England, I'll go to Streatham at once; I'll get to the bottom of this strange mystery."

"Count Lefroy is sorry," murmured the soft-footed servant, as he looked in, "but he hopes your Highness will see him now as he can wait no longer."

CHAPTER V

AN INTERRUPTED FEAST

To Frobisher's *pêtit dîner* the same evening of that eventful day ostensibly to meet the Shan of Koordstan, Lefroy came large and flamboyant, with a vivid riband across his dazzling expanse of shirt and a jewelled collar under his tie. There was an extra gloss on his black moustache, his swagger was a little more pronounced than usual. He looked like what he was – a strong man weighed down by not too many scruples.

There were less than a dozen men altogether, a couple of well-known members of the Travellers', a popular K.C., and a keen, hatchet-faced judge with a quiet manner and a marvellous faculty for telling dialect stories. The inevitable politician and fashionable doctor completed the party. As Lefroy and his secretary entered the drawing-room most of the men were admiring a portfolio of Morland's drawings that Frobisher had picked up lately.

Hafid stepped noiselessly across the floor with a telegram on a salver. Frobisher read it without the slightest sign of annoyance.

"The Shan is not coming," he said. "Koordstan is indisposed."

"So I gathered when I called professionally this afternoon," Dr. Brownsmith said dryly.

"Champagne," Frobisher laughed whole-heartedly. "All right, Sir James. I won't question you too far. So white is not going to mate in three moves this evening, Lefroy?"

Lefroy shrugged his shoulders carelessly. The Shan of Koordstan was safe for the present. He had seen to that. Manfred had dropped quietly into a chair with just the suggestion of pain on his face. A smooth-voiced butler announced that dinner was served.

"Where does Frobisher get his servants from, Jessop?" Sir James Brownsmith asked the judge, as the two strolled across the hall together. "Now there's a model of a butler for you. His voice has a flavour of old, nutty sherry about it. By Jove, what are those flowers?"

There were flowers everywhere, mostly arranged by Frobisher himself. In the centre was a rough handful of green twigs bound together with a silver cord, and the whole surmounted by a coil of the pinky-white orchid with its fringe of trembling red moths.

"Orchids," said the politician. "Something fresh, Frobisher? What do you call it?"

"The specimen is not named at present," Lefroy said meaningly.

Frobisher glanced at the speaker and smiled.

"Lefroy is quite right," he said. "The specimen lacks a name. It came in the first place from Koordstan, and there were three spines of the original plant. It is a freak, there never was anything like it before, and there will probably never be one like it again. That self-same orchid was very near to being the price of a kingdom once upon a time."

"Only it is unfortunately impossible to tell the story," Lefroy remarked.

Once again Frobisher glanced at the speaker and smiled. Most of the guests by this time were busy over their soup. They were not the class of men to waste valuable sentiment over flowers. It was only Frobisher who glanced from time to time lovingly at the Cardinal Moth. Manfred seemed to avoid it altogether. He sat at the table eating nothing and obviously out of sorts with his food.

"I've a bilious headache, Sir Clement," he explained. "The mere sight of food and smell of cooking makes me sick to the soul. Would you mind if I sat in the drawing-room in the dark for a little time? I am confident that the attack will pass off presently."

"Anything you please, my dear fellow," Frobisher cried hospitably. "A strong cup of tea! A glass of champagne and a dry biscuit? No? If you ring the bell Hafid will attend to you."

Hafid salaamed as he dexterously caught a meaning glance from Frobisher. Lefroy brutally proclaimed aloud that a good dinner was utterly wasted upon Manfred. Brownsmith with his mouth

full of aspic was understood to say something anent the virtues of bromide. So the dinner proceeded with pink lakes of light on the table, the flowers and the cut glass and quaint silver. And there were blossoms, blossoms everywhere, thousands of them. Frobisher might have been a great scoundrel – that he was a man of exquisite taste was beyond question. The elaborate dinner dragged smoothly along, two hours passed, a silver chime proclaimed eleven o'clock.

The cloth was drawn at length, as the host's whim was, the decanters and glittering glass stood on a brown glistening lake of polished oak, with here and there a dash of fruit to give a more vivid touch of colour. Hafid handed round a silver cigarette-box, a cedar cigar cabinet on wheels was pushed along the table. Over the shaded electric lights a blue wrack of smoke hung. The silver chime struck twelve.

"Hafid; you have made Mr. Manfred comfortable?" Frobisher asked.

Hafid replied that he had done all that a man could do. Mr. Manfred was reclining in the dark near an open window. All the other servants but himself had retired. The butler had seen that everything necessary was laid out in the smoking-room.

"Always send the servants to bed as soon as possible," Frobisher explained. "What with the spread of modern journalism, I find it necessary. You never know nowadays how far one's butler is interested in the same stock that you are deeply dipped in. And a long-eared footman has changed the course of diplomacy before now."

"If everybody pursued the same policy, George," Baron Jessop murmured, "I and my learned friends of the Bench would have more or less of a sinecure."

"And Lord Saltaur, yonder would not have lost a beautiful wife," Lefroy said loudly.

A sudden hush seemed to smite the table. Lord Saltaur whitened to his lips under his tan; his long, lean hands gripped the edge of the table passionately. His own domestic scandal had been so new, so painful, that the whole party stood aghast at the brutality of the insult.

"Frobisher," Saltaur said, hoarsely. "It is not pleasant to be insulted by a blackguard –"

"What was that word?" Lefroy asked quite sweetly. "My hearing may be a trifle deficient, but I fancied his lordship said something about a blackguard."

Frobisher interfered as in duty bound. As a matter of fact he was enjoying the situation. Lefroy had drunk deeply, but then he had seen Lefroy's amazing prowess in that direction too many times for any fears as to his ultimate equilibrium. No, Lefroy was playing some deep game. As yet only the first card had been laid upon the table.

"I think that the apology lies with you, Count," Frobisher said tentatively.

"A mere jest," Lefroy said, airily. "*A jeu d'esprit*. Lord Saltaur's wife."

"You hound!" Saltaur cried passionately. "Whatever I have been, you might leave the name of a pure woman out of your filthy conversation. If you don't apologise at once, I'll thrust your words down your throat for you."

A contemptuous reply came from Lefroy. There was a flash of crystal and a glass shattered on the Count's dark face, leaving a star-shaped wound on his cheek. A moment later and he and Saltaur were struggling together like wild animals. Frobisher had so far forgotten himself as to lean back in his chair as if this were a mere exhibition got up for his entertainment.

"Is this part of the evening's amusement, Sir Clement?" the judge asked coldly.

Frobisher realised his responsibilities with a sigh for his interrupted pleasure. His civilisation was the thinnest possible veneer, a shoddy thing like Tottenham Court Road furniture.

"Come, you chaps must drop it," he cried. "I can't have you fighting over my Smyrna carpet. Saltaur, you shall have your apology. Lefroy, do you hear me?"

Strong arms interfered, and the two men were dragged apart. Lefroy's teeth glistened in a ghastly grin; there was a speck of blood on his white shirt front. Saltaur's laboured breathing could be heard all over the room.

"I take you all to witness that it was no seeking of mine," he cried. "I was foully insulted. In a few days all the world will know that I have been made the victim of a discharged servant's perjury. Frobisher, I am still waiting for my apology."

Lefroy paused and passed his handkerchief across his face. He seemed to have wiped the leering expression from it. He looked a perfect picture of puzzled bewilderment.

"What have I done?" he asked. "What on earth have I said?"

"Beautiful," Frobisher murmured. "Artistic to a fault. What is he driving at?"

Baron Jessop explained clearly and judiciously. He was glad to have an opportunity of doing so. Viewing the thing dispassionately, he was bound to say that Count Lefroy had been guilty of a grave breach of good taste. But he was quite sure that under the circumstances —

"On my honour, I haven't the slightest recollection of it," Lefroy cried. "If there is one lady of my acquaintance I honour and respect it is Lady — the charming woman whom Lord Saltaur calls his wife. A sudden fit of mental aberration, my lord. An old wound in the head followed by a spell in the sunshine. This is the third time the thing has happened. The last time in Serbia nearly cost me my life. My dear Saltaur, I am sorry from the bottom of my heart."

"Funniest case I ever heard of," the puzzled Saltaur murmured. "All the same, I'm deuced sorry I threw that wine glass at you."

"Oh, so you chucked a wine glass at me! Laid my cheek open, too. Well, I should have done exactly the same thing under the same circumstances. From this night I touch nothing stronger than claret. If I'd stuck to that, this wouldn't have happened."

The good-humoured Saltaur muttered something in reply, the threads of the dropped conversation were taken up again. Hafid, who had watched the sudden quarrel with Oriental indifference, had gone off to the conservatory for hot water to bathe Lefroy's damaged face. There was just a lull for a moment in the conversation, a sudden silence, and then the smash of a crystal vessel on a tiled floor and a strangled cry of terror from Hafid. He came headlong into the room, his eyes starting, his whole frame quivering with an ungovernable terror.

"Mr. Manfred," he yelled. "Lying on the floor in the conservatory, dead. Take it and burn it, and destroy it. Take it and burn it, and destroy it. Take it —"

Frobisher pounced upon the wailing speaker and clutched him by the throat. As the first hoarse words came from Hafid the rest of the party had rushed headlong into the orchid-house. Frobisher shook his servant like a reed is shaken by a storm.

"Silence, you fool!" he whispered. "You didn't kill the man, and I didn't kill the man. If he is dead he has not been murdered. And it is no fault of yours."

"Allah knows better," Hafid muttered, sulkily. "You didn't kill him, and I didn't kill him, but he is dead, and Allah will punish the guilty. Take it and burn it, and —"

"Idiot! Son of a pig, be silent. And mind, you are to know nothing. You went to get the hot water from the orchid-house and saw Mr. Manfred lying there. As soon as you did so you rushed in to tell us. Now come along."

The limp body of Manfred had been partly raised, and his head rested on Sir James Brownsmith's knee. The others stood waiting for the verdict.

"The fellow is dead," the great doctor said. "Murdered, I should say, undoubtedly. He has been strangled by a coarse cloth twisted about his throat — precisely the same way as that poor fellow was murdered at Streatham the night before last."

A solemn silence fell upon the group. Hafid stood behind, his lips moving in silent speech:

"Take it and burn it, and destroy it. Take it and burn it, and destroy it, for there is blood upon it now and ever."

The drama was none the less moving because of its decorous silence. The great surgeon knelt on the white marble floor of the orchid-house with Manfred's head on his knee. Though Sir James Brownsmith's hand was quite steady, his face was white as his own hair, or the face of the dead

man staring dumbly up to the tangle of ropes and blossoms overhead. There the Cardinal Moth was dancing and quivering as if exulting over the crime. A long trail of it had broken away, and one tiny cloud of blossom danced near the surgeon's ear, as if trying to tell him the tragedy and its story.

"A ghastly business," the judge murmured. "How did the murderer get in here?"

"How did he get out?" Frobisher suggested. "There is no exit from here at all. All the servants have been in bed long ago, and the front door is generally secured, at least the latch is always down."

"But what brought poor Manfred in here?" Saltaur asked. "I understood from Hafid that he was lying down in the drawing-room. Oh, Hafid! Wake up, man!"

"Take it and burn it, and destroy it," Hafid said mechanically.

Frobisher shook him savagely, shook the dreamy horror off him like a garment. He was sorry, he said, but he could tell the excellent company nothing. A quarter of an hour before and Mr. Manfred had appeared to be asleep on the drawing-room sofa. Hafid had asked him if he needed anything, and he had made no reply.

"Very strange," Sir James murmured, still diagnosing the cruel stranded pattern about the dead man's throat. "Perhaps Count Lefroy – where is the Count?"

"He went back into the dining-room," said Saltaur.

Frobisher brought his teeth together with a click. For the moment he had quite forgotten Count Lefroy. He passed from the library and into the dining-room. Lefroy stood by the great shining table close against the fluttering pyramid of red moths, a thin-bladed knife in his hands.

"And what might you be doing?" Frobisher asked softly.

Lefroy smiled somewhat bitterly. He was perfectly self-possessed with the grip of the man who knows how to hold himself in hand. And he smiled none the less easily because there was murder raging in his heart.

"I am cutting my nails," he said.

"Oh, I'll cut your claws for you!" Frobisher said. "Don't do that, what will your manicure artist say? And a social superiority (feminine) tells me that you have the finest hand of any man in London. You are unhinged, my dear Count. This little affair – "

"This cold-blooded murder you mean. Oh, you scoundrel!"

Lefroy had dropped the mask for a moment. There was contempt, loathing, horror in the last few words. Frobisher, counting the nodding swarm of crimson moths, merely smiled.

"Twenty-seven, thirty-one, thirty-nine," he said. "You haven't stolen any of my flowers yet. Not a bad idea of yours to purloin a cluster, and send it to our tin Solomon yonder, as an earnest of good intentions later on. And why do you call me scoundrel?"

"You are the most infernal villain that ever breathed."

"Well, perhaps I am. It is very good of you to admit my superior claims, dear Lefroy. But I am getting old, and you may live to take my place some day. Why – "

"Why did you kill Manfred?"

"My dear fellow, I didn't kill Manfred. You think he has been murdered in the ordinary sense of the word. Manfred has not been murdered, and nobody will ever be hanged for the crime. That you may take my word for. It is the vengeance of the Crimson Moth, death by visitation of God; call it what you will. And it might have been yourself."

Frobisher's whole manner had changed, his eyes were gleaming evilly as he hissed the last words warningly in Lefroy's ear. The latter changed colour slightly.

"I don't understand what you mean," he stammered.

"And yet you are not usually slow at understanding. I repeat that it might have been yourself. If you had attempted the raid of the Cardinal Moth, instead of Manfred, you would have been lying at the present moment with your head on Brownsmith's knees, and the mark of the beast about your throat."

"And if I tell those fellows yonder what you say?"

"You are at liberty to say anything you please. But you are not going to say anything, my dear Lefroy; you are too fine a player for that. You are going to wait patiently for your next innings. Come back to the others. And perhaps I had better lock this door."

Lefroy, like a wise man, accepted the inevitable. But the rest of the party were no longer in the orchid-house. They had carried the dead man to the back dining-room, where they had laid him out on a couch. Frobisher rang up the nearest police-station on the telephone with the request that an inspector should be sent for at once.

"By gad, this is a dreadful thing, don't you know!" Saltaur said with a shudder. "Fancy that poor fellow being murdered whilst we were wrangling in the dining-room. I suppose there is no doubt that it is murder, doctor?"

"Not the shadow of a doubt about it," Sir James replied. "Poor Manfred must have been admiring the flowers when the assassin stepped behind him and threw that coarse cloth over his head. A knee could be inserted on his spine, and the head forced backwards. The cloth must have been twisted with tremendous force. It is quite a novel kind of murder for England."

"Oh, then you have heard of something of the same kind before?" Frobisher asked.

"In India, frequently. I had a chance to examine more than one victim of Thuggee, yonder. You remember what a scourge Thugism used to be in India some years ago. A Thug killed Manfred, I have not the slightest doubt about it."

"But there are no Thugs in England," the judge protested.

"My dear fellow, I have had an unfortunate demonstration to the contrary. And this crime is not necessarily the work of a native. Thuggee is not dead in India yet, and some white scoundrel might have learnt the trick. Your own servant, Hafid –"

"A robust bluebottle would make a formidable antagonist for Hafid," Frobisher interrupted. "Hafid, somebody is ringing the bell. If it's a policeman, ask him in."

Inspector Townsend came in, small, quiet, soft of manner, and undoubtedly dressed in Bond Street. He listened gravely to all that Frobisher and Brownsmith had to say, and then he asked permission to view the body, and subsequently examine the premises.

A close search of the house only served to deepen the mystery. All the servants slept on the top floor, and that part of the house was bolted off every night after the domestic staff had retired. This was a whim of Sir Clement's, a whim likely to increase his unpopularity in case of fire, but at present that was a secondary consideration. There was no exit from the orchid-house, no windows had been left open, and despite the fact that there were guests in the house, the front-door latch had been dropped quite early in the evening. A rigid cross-examination of Hafid led to no satisfactory result. The man was almost congealed with terror and shock, but it was quite obvious that he knew nothing whatever about the mystery.

"There will be an inquest to-morrow at twelve, Sir Clement," Townsend said. "It will probably be a mere formal affair at which you gentlemen will be present. Good night, sirs."

"We had better follow the inspector's example," Lefroy cried. "Good night, Frobisher."

"My dear fellow, I wish you a cordial adieu," Frobisher cried. "And I can only regret that our pleasant evening has had so tragic a termination. Townsend, you have locked up the back dining-room and taken the key? Good! I want no extra responsibility."

The big hall-door closed behind the last of them. Frobisher took Hafid firmly by the collar and led him into the orchid-house.

"Now, you rascal," he asked, "what on earth do you mean by it?"

"Take it and destroy it, and burn it," Hafid wailed, with a wriggling of his body. He seemed to be trying to shake off something loathsome. "Oh, master, what is to become of us?"

"You grovelling, superstitious fool," Frobisher said lightly. "Nothing will become of us. Nobody knows anything, nobody will ever know anything as long as you remain silent. We haven't murdered anybody!"

"Allah looking down from Paradise knows better than that, master!"

"Well, he is not likely to be called in as a witness," Frobisher muttered grimly. "I tell you nothing has happened that the law can take the least cognisance of. Mind you, I didn't know that things would go quite so far. When I rang up the curtain it was comedy I looked for, not tragedy. Take the key and go into the dining-room. Remove those orchids and burn them, taking care that you destroy thirty-nine of the red flowers. Then you can go to bed."

Hafid recoiled with unutterable loathing on his face.

"I couldn't do it," he whispered. "I couldn't touch one of those accursed blossoms. Beat me, torture me, turn me into the street to starve, but don't ask me to do that, master. I dare not."

He cowered abjectly at Frobisher's feet. With good-humoured contempt the latter kicked him aside. "Go to bed," he said. "You are a greater coward than even I imagined. Put the lights out, and I'll go to bed also."

The lights were carefully put out, except in the smoking-room, where Frobisher sat pondering over the strange events of the evening. He was not in the least put out or alarmed or distressed; on the contrary, he looked like a man who had been considerably pleased with an interesting entertainment. For Manfred he felt neither sorrow nor sympathy.

He did not look fearfully round the room as if half expecting to see the shadow of Manfred's assassin creeping upon him. But he smiled in his own peculiar fashion as the door opened and a white-robed figure came in. It was Angela with her fine hair about her shoulders and a look of horror in her eyes.

"So you've found out all about it," Sir Clement said. "I'm sorry, because it will spoil your rest. How did you come to make the discovery?"

"I had just come in," Angela explained. "I let myself in with my latchkey. I did not come near you because I could hear that you were entertaining company, so I went straight to bed. Then I heard Hafid's cry, and I came to the head of the stairs where I could hear everything."

"You mean to say that you stood there and listened?"

"I couldn't help it. So far as I could judge there was an assassin in the house. Just for the moment I was far too frightened to move. That raving madman might have come for me next."

"Well, you can make your mind quite easy on that score. As you know, the whole house has been most thoroughly searched from top to bottom, and there is nobody here but the servants and ourselves now. If I were you I should keep out of it. Go to bed."

Sir Clement barked out the last few words, but Angela did not move.

"There will be an inquest, of course?" she asked.

"Oh, Lord, yes! The papers will reek of it, and half the reporters in London will look upon the place as a kind of public-house for the next week. Take my advice and keep out of it. You know nothing and you want to continue to know nothing, so to speak."

"But I am afraid that I know a great deal," Angela said slowly. "When I came in I was going into the conservatory to place a flower that I had given me to-night. It is a flower that I am likely to be interested in another time. And there I saw a strange man walking swiftly the same way. From his air and manner he was obviously doing wrong. My idea was to follow and stop him. And when I reached the conservatory, to my intense surprise, he was nowhere to be seen."

Frobisher bent down to fill his pipe. There was an evil, diabolical grin, so malignant, and yet so gleeful, as to render the face almost inhuman.

"It may be of importance later on," he said. "Meanwhile, I should keep the information to myself. Now go to bed and lock your door. I'm going to finish my pipe in my dressing-room."

Frobisher snapped out the lights, leaving the house in darkness. For once in her life Angela did lock her door. She could not sleep; she had no desire for bed and yet her eyes were heavy and tired. She pulled up the blind and opened the window; out beyond, the garden was flooded with moonlight. As Angela stood there she seemed to see a figure creeping from one bush to another.

"It is my fancy," she told herself. "I could imagine anything to-night. And yet I could have been certain that I saw the figure of a man."

Angela paused; it was no fancy. A man crept over the grass and looked up at the window as if he were doing something strictly on the lines of conventionality. To her amazement Angela saw that the intruder was in evening dress, and that it was Harold Denvers.

"Harold," she whispered. "Whatever are you doing there?"

"I came on the chance," was the reply. "I have heard strange things to-night, and there is something that I must know at once. I was going to try and rouse you with some pebbles. Dare you go down to the garden-room window and let me in? Darling, it is a matter of life or death, or I would not ask."

Angela slipped down the stairs noiselessly, and opened the window.

CHAPTER VI

A BIT OF THE ROPE

Sir James Brownsmith thought that on the whole he would walk home from Piccadilly to Harley Street. The chauffeur touched his hat, and the car moved on. The eminent surgeon had ample food for reflection; it seemed to him that he was on the verge of a great discovery. Somebody accosted him two or three times before he came back to earth again.

"That you, Townsend?" he asked, abruptly. "You want to speak to me? Certainly. Only as I am rather tired to-night if you will cut it as short as possible, I shall be glad."

"I am afraid I can't, Sir James," Inspector Townsend replied. "Indeed I was going to suggest that I walked as far as your house and had a chat over matters."

Sir James shrugged his shoulders, and Harley Street was reached almost in silence. In the small consulting-room the surgeon switched on a brilliant light and handed over cigars and whisky and soda.

"Now go on," he said. "It's all about to-night's business, I suppose?"

"Precisely, sir. You've helped us a good many times with your wonderful scientific knowledge, and I dare say you will again. This Piccadilly mystery is a queer business altogether. Do you feel quite sure that the poor fellow was really murdered, after all?"

Brownsmith looked fixedly at the speaker. He had considerable respect for Townsend, whose intellect was decidedly above the usual Scotland Yard level. Townsend was a man of imagination and a master of theory. He went beyond motive and a cast of a footmark – he was no rule-of-thumb workman.

"On the face of it I should say there can be no possible doubt," said Sir James.

"Murdered by strangulation, sir? The same as that man at Streatham. As you have made a careful examination of both bodies you ought to know?"

"Is there any form of murder unknown to me, Townsend?" Sir James asked. "Is there any trick of the assassin's trade that I have not mastered?"

"Oh, I admit your special knowledge, sir! But it's a trick of mine to be always planning new crimes. I could give you three ways of committing murder that are absolutely original. And I've got a theory about this business that I don't care to disclose yet. Still, we can discuss the matter up to a certain point. Both those men were destroyed – or lost their lives – in the same way."

"Both strangled, in fact. It's the Indian Thug dodge. But you know all about that, Townsend?"

"We'll admit for the moment that both victims have been destroyed by Thuggee. But isn't it rather strange that both bodies were found in close juxtaposition to valuable orchids? We know, of course, that Sir Clement's orchids are almost priceless. The Streatham witness, Silverthorne, says that a very rare orchid was recently placed in the Lennox conservatory. Now, isn't it fair to argue that both murdered men lost their lives in pursuit of those orchids?"

Sir James nodded thoughtfully. He had forgotten the Cardinal Moth for the moment.

"I see you have pushed your investigations a long way in this direction," he said. "This being so, have you ascertained for a fact that the Lennox nursery really contained nothing out of the common in the way of Orchidaceæ? You know what I mean."

"Quite so, sir. That I have not been able to ascertain because the proprietor of the Lennox nursery has no special knowledge of his trade. His great line is cheap ferns for the London market. But he says a gentleman whom he could easily recognise left him an orchid to look after – a poor dried-up stick it seemed to be – with instructions to keep it in a house not too warm, where it might remain at a small rent till wanted."

"Oh, indeed! You are interesting me, Townsend. Pray go on."

"Well, Sir James, I wanted to see the flowers after the murder, not that I expected it to lead to anything at that time. Seeing what has happened this evening, it becomes more interesting. Would you believe it, sir, that the flower in question was gone?"

"You mean that it had been stolen? Really, Townsend, we seem to be on the track of something important."

"Yes, Sir James, the flower had gone. Now, what I want to know is this – has Sir Clement Frobisher added anything special to his collection lately?"

Sir James shot an admiring glance at his questioner. Seeing that he was working almost entirely in the dark, Townsend had developed his theory with amazing cleverness.

"It's a treat to work with you," the great surgeon said. "As a matter of fact, Sir Clement had got hold of something that struck me as absolutely unique. It's a flower called the Cardinal Moth. A flower on a flower, so to speak; a large cluster of whitey-pink blossoms with little red blooms hovering over like a cloud of scarlet moths. Sir Clement is very pleased about it."

"From what you say I gather that he has not had it long, sir?"

"Oh, I should say quite recently! But you are not going to tell me that you suspect Frobisher?"

"At present, I don't suspect anybody, though Sir Clement is an unmitigated rascal who would not stop at any crime to serve his own ends. I don't go so far as to say that he had a hand in the business, but I do say that he could tell us exactly how the tragedy took place."

Sir James shot an admiring glance in the direction of the speaker. Frobisher's elfish interest in the crime, and his amazing *sang-froid* under the circumstances, had struck the surgeon unpleasantly. Townsend looked reflectively into the mahogany depths of his whisky and soda.

"It's one thing to know that, and quite another to make a man like Sir Clement speak," he said. "I am more or less with you, sir, over the Thuggee business, but was the crime committed with a rope? I shall not be surprised to find that it was done with a bramble, something like honeysuckle or the like. But at the same time as you seemed so certain about the rope, why –"

Townsend waved his hand significantly. Sir James rose and unlocked a safe from which he produced an envelope with some fibrous brown strands in it. These he placed under a powerful microscope.

"Now, these I took from the throat of the poor fellow who was killed at Streatham," he explained. "I was rather bored by the case when you called me in first, and even up to the time I gave my evidence at the inquest. After the inquest was over I examined the body over again, and I confess that my interest increased as I proceeded. After what you have just told me I am completely fascinated. I made a most careful examination of the dead man's neck once, and had discovered that he had died of strangulation, and bit by bit I collected these. They are fibres of the rope with which the crime was done."

Townsend nodded so far as Sir James had proved his case.

"Have you done as much with the poor fellow at Sir Clement's residence?" he asked.

"No, but I shall do so in the morning. This is a curious sort of stuff, Townsend, and certainly not made in England. It is not rope or cord in our commercial sense of the word, but a strong Manilla twist of native fibre. Thus we are going to introduce a foreign element into the solution."

Townsend smiled as he produced a little packet from his pocket and laid it on the table.

"You are building up my theory for me, wonderfully, sir," he said. "I also have something of the same sort here, only I have more than you seem to have collected. Here is the same sort of fibre from Mr. Manfred's collar-stud, so that he must have been strangled over his collar, which means a powerful pressure. I didn't think it possible for human hands to put a pressure like that, but there it is."

"My word, we've got a powerful assassin to look for!" Sir James exclaimed. "Like you, I should not have deemed it possible. Did you find all that on Manfred's collar-stud?"

"Not all of it, sir. The collar-stud was bent up as if it had been a bit of tinfoil. But I found the bulk of this under the dead man's finger-nails. They are long nails, and doubtless in the agony of

strangulation they clutched frantically at the cord. I am quite sure that you will find this fibre to be identical with that which you took from the neck of the Streatham victim."

"And this caretaker you speak of. Is he a respectable man? Silverthorne you said his name was, I fancy."

"That's the man, sir. He has been in his present employ for one-and-twenty years, a hard-working, saving man, with a big family. Oh, I should take his word for most things that he told me!"

Sir James revolved the problem slowly in his mind, as he inhaled his cigarette smoke. If the Lennox nursery had been deliberately made the centre of a puzzling murder mystery, it was quite sure that neither the nursery proprietor nor his man knew anything whatever about it. And yet it had been necessary, for some reason, that a glass-house should play an important part, for both murders had taken place under glass, and both suggested that the orchid was at the bottom of it. Again, Townsend was not the kind of man to make reckless statements, and when he boldly averred that Sir Clement Frobisher could tell all about it if he liked, he had assuredly some very strong evidence to go upon. A great deal depended upon the analysis of the red, liquid stain on the fibre taken by Townsend from the body of Manfred.

"If these little bits of stuff could speak what tales they could tell," Sir James said, as he carefully locked up both packets of fibre. I'll get up an hour earlier in the morning and have a dig at these, Townsend. And meanwhile as my days are busy ones, and it's past one o'clock, I shall have to get you to finish your drink and give me your room instead of your company.

Townsend took the hint and his hat and retired. But though Sir James had expressed his intention of retiring almost immediately, he stretched out his hand for another cigarette and lighted it thoughtfully. Was it possible, he wondered, if Sir Clement Frobisher really could solve the mystery? And had he anything to do with it? Not directly, Sir James felt sure; Frobisher was not that kind of man. He was much more likely to get the thing done for him. He was secretive, too, over the Cardinal Moth; he had behaved so queerly over that business of Count Lefroy and his insult of Frobisher's guest. Brownsmith pitched his cigarette into the grate, and switched off the electric light impatiently.

"Why should I worry my head about it?" he muttered. "I'll go to bed."

CHAPTER VII

A GRIP OF STEEL

Sir Clement had not gone to bed yet. He sat over a final pipe in his dressing-room, the fumes of the acrid tobacco lingered everywhere. The owner of the house leant back, his eyes half closed, and the smile on his face suggestive of one who is recalling some exquisite comedy. A shocking tragedy had been enacted almost under his very eyes, and yet from Frobisher's attitude the thing had pleased him, he was not in the least disturbed.

He began to kick off his clothing slowly, the filthy clay pipe between his lips. He touched a bell, and Hafid slid into the room. There was terror in his eyes enough and to spare. He might have been a detected murderer in the presence of his accuser. He trembled, his lips were twitching piteously, there was something about him of the rabbit trying to escape.

"Well, mooncalf," Frobisher said with bitter raillery. "Well, my paralytic pearl of idiots. Why do you stand there as if somebody was tickling your midriff with a bowie knife?"

"Take it and burn it, and destroy it," Hafid muttered. The man was silly with terror. "Take it and burn it, and destroy it."

"Oh, Lord, was there ever such a fool since the world began?" Frobisher cried. "If you make that remark again I'll jamb your head against the wall till your teeth chatter."

"Take it and burn it, and destroy it," Hafid went on mechanically. "Master, I can't help it. My tongue does not seem able to say anything else. Let me go, send me away. I'm not longer to be trusted. I shall run wild into the night with my story."

"Yes, and I shall run wild with my story in the day-time, and where will you be then, my blusterer? What's the matter with the man? Has anybody been murdered?"

"No," Hafid said slowly, as if the words were being dragged out of him. "At least, the law could not say so. No, master, nobody has been murdered."

"Then what are you making all this silly fuss about? Nobody has been murdered but an inquisitive thief who has accidentally met with his death. Other inquisitive thieves are likely to meet with the same fate. Past master amongst congenial idiots, go to bed."

Frobisher shouted the command backed up by a sounding smack on the side of Hafid's head. He went off without sense or feeling; indeed, he was hardly conscious of the blow. Frobisher sat there smiling, sucking at the marrow of his pipe, and slowly preparing for bed. His alertness and attention never relaxed a moment, his quick ears lost nothing.

"Who's moving in the house?" he muttered. "I heard a door open softly. When people want to get about a house at dead of night it is a mistake to move softly. The action is suspicious, whereas if the thing were openly done, one doesn't trouble."

Frobisher snapped out the lights and stood in the doorway, rigid to attention. Presently the darkness seemed to rustle and breathe, there was a faint suggestion of air in motion, and then silence again. Frobisher grinned to himself as he slipped back into his room.

"Angela," he said softly; "I could detect that faint fragrance of her anywhere. Now what's she creeping about the house at this time for? If she isn't back again in a quarter of an hour I shall proceed to investigate. My cold and haughty Angela on assignation bent! Oh, oh!"

Angela slipped silently down the broad stairway, utterly unconscious of the fact that she had been discovered. She was usually self-contained enough, but her heart was beating a little faster than usual. In some vague way she could not disassociate this visit of Harold's from the tragedy of the earlier evening. And to a certain extent Harold was compromising her, a thing he would have hesitated to do unless the need had been very pressing. By instinct Angela found her way to the garden-room window, the well-oiled catch came back with a click, and Harold was in the room. They wanted no

light, the moon was more than sufficient. Harold's face was pale and distressed in the softened rays of light.

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