

The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu

by
Sax Rohmer

First Published as
The Mystery of Dr. Fu Manchu
by London: Methuen in 1913.

Nostalgia League Edition 2002



<http://thenostalgialeague.com>

Chapter 1

"A Gentleman to see you, Doctor."

From across the common a clock sounded the half-hour.

"Ten-thirty!" I said. "A late visitor. Show him up, if you please."

I pushed my writing aside and tilted the lamp-shade, as footsteps sounded on the landing. The next moment I had jumped to my feet, for a tall, lean man, with his square-cut, clean-shaven face sun-baked to the hue of coffee, entered and extended both hands, with a cry:

"Good old Petrie! Didn't expect me, I'll swear!"

It was Nayland Smith--whom I had thought to be in Burma!

"Smith," I said, and gripped his hands hard, "this is a delightful surprise! Whatever--however--"

"Excuse me, Petrie!" he broke in. "Don't put it down to the sun!" And he put out the lamp, plunging the room into darkness.

I was too surprised to speak.

"No doubt you will think me mad," he continued, and, dimly, I could see him at the window, peering out into the road, "but before you are many hours older you will know that I have good reason to be cautious. Ah, nothing suspicious! Perhaps I am first this time." And, stepping back to the writing-table he relighted the lamp.

"Mysterious enough for you?" he laughed, and glanced at my unfinished MS. "A story, eh? From which I gather that the district is beastly healthy-- what, Petrie? Well, I can put some material in your way that, if sheer uncanny mystery is a marketable commodity, ought to make you independent of influenza and broken legs and shattered nerves and all the rest."

I surveyed him doubtfully, but there was nothing in his appearance to justify me in supposing him to suffer from delusions. His eyes were too bright, certainly, and a hardness now had crept over his face. I got out the whisky and siphon, saying:

"You have taken your leave early?"

"I am not on leave," he replied, and slowly filled his pipe. "I am on duty."

"On duty!" I exclaimed. "What, are you moved to London or something?"

"I have got a roving commission, Petrie, and it doesn't rest with me where I am to-day nor where I shall be to-morrow."

There was something ominous in the words, and, putting down my glass, its contents untasted, I faced round and looked him squarely in the eyes. "Out with it!" I said. "What is it all about?"

Smith suddenly stood up and stripped off his coat. Rolling back his left shirt-sleeve he revealed a wicked-looking wound in the fleshy part of the forearm. It was quite healed, but curiously striated for an inch or so around.

"Ever seen one like it?" he asked.

"Not exactly," I confessed. "It appears to have been deeply cauterized."

"Right! Very deeply!" he rapped. "A barb steeped in the venom of a hamadryad went in there!"

A shudder I could not repress ran coldly through me at mention of that most deadly of all the reptiles of the East.

"There's only one treatment," he continued, rolling his sleeve down again, "and that's with a sharp knife, a match, and a broken cartridge. I lay on my back, raving, for three days afterwards, in a forest that stank with malaria, but I should have been lying there now if I had hesitated. Here's the point. It was not an accident!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that it was a deliberate attempt on my life, and I am hard upon the tracks of the man who extracted that venom--patiently, drop by drop-- from the poison-glands of the snake, who prepared that arrow, and who caused it to be shot at me."

"What fiend is this?"

"A fiend who, unless my calculations are at fault is now in London, and who regularly wars with pleasant weapons of that kind. Petrie, I have traveled from Burma not in the interests of the British Government merely, but in the interests of the entire white race, and I honestly believe-- though I pray I may be wrong--that its survival depends largely upon the success of my mission."

To say that I was perplexed conveys no idea of the mental chaos created by these extraordinary statements, for into my humdrum suburban life Nayland Smith had brought fantasy of the wildest. I did not know what to think, what to believe.

"I am wasting precious time!" he rapped decisively, and, draining his glass, he stood up. "I came straight to you, because you are the only man I dare to trust. Except the big chief at headquarters, you are the only person in England, I hope, who knows that Nayland Smith has quitted Burma. I must have someone with me, Petrie, all the time--it's imperative! Can you put me up here, and spare a few days to the strangest business, I promise you, that ever was recorded in fact or fiction?"

I agreed readily enough, for, unfortunately, my professional duties were not onerous.

"Good man!" he cried, wringing my hand in his impetuous way. "We start now."

"What, to-night?"

"To-night! I had thought of turning in, I must admit. I have not dared to sleep for forty-eight hours, except in fifteen-minute stretches. But there is one move that must be made to-night and immediately. I must warn Sir Crichton Davey."

"Sir Crichton Davey--of the India--"

"Petrie, he is a doomed man! Unless he follows my instructions without question, without hesitation--before Heaven, nothing can save him! I do not know when the blow will fall, how it will fall, nor from whence, but I know that my first duty is to warn him. Let us walk down to the corner of the common and get a taxi."

How strangely does the adventurous intrude upon the humdrum; for, when it intrudes at all, more often than not its intrusion is sudden and unlooked for. To-day, we may seek for romance and fail to find it: unsought, it lies in wait for us at most prosaic corners of life's highway.

The drive that night, though it divided the drably commonplace from the wildly bizarre--though it was the bridge between the ordinary and the outre--has left no impression upon my mind. Into the heart of a weird mystery the cab bore me; and in reviewing my memories of those

days I wonder that the busy thoroughfares through which we passed did not display before my eyes signs and portents--warnings.

It was not so. I recall nothing of the route and little of import that passed between us (we both were strangely silent, I think) until we were come to our journey's end. Then:

"What's this?" muttered my friend hoarsely.

Constables were moving on a little crowd of curious idlers who pressed about the steps of Sir Crichton Davey's house and sought to peer in at the open door. Without waiting for the cab to draw up to the curb, Nayland Smith recklessly leaped out and I followed close at his heels.

"What has happened?" he demanded breathlessly of a constable.

The latter glanced at him doubtfully, but something in his voice and bearing commanded respect.

"Sir Crichton Davey has been killed, sir."

Smith lurched back as though he had received a physical blow, and clutched my shoulder convulsively. Beneath the heavy tan his face had blanched, and his eyes were set in a stare of horror.

"My God!" he whispered. "I am too late!"

With clenched fists he turned and, pressing through the group of loungers, bounded up the steps. In the hall a man who unmistakably was a Scotland Yard official stood talking to a footman. Other members of the household were moving about, more or less aimlessly, and the chilly hand of King Fear had touched one and all, for, as they came and went, they glanced ever over their shoulders, as if each shadow cloaked a menace, and listened, as it seemed, for some sound which they dreaded to hear. Smith strode up to the detective and showed him a card, upon glancing at which the Scotland Yard man said something in a low voice, and, nodding, touched his hat to Smith in a respectful manner.

A few brief questions and answers, and, in gloomy silence, we followed the detective up the heavily carpeted stair, along a corridor lined with pictures and busts, and into a large library. A group of people were in this room, and one, in whom I recognized Chalmers Cleeve, of Harley Street, was bending over a motionless form stretched upon a couch. Another door communicated with a small study, and through the opening I could see a man on all fours examining the carpet. The uncomfortable sense of hush, the group about the physician, the bizarre figure crawling, beetle-like, across the inner room, and the grim hub, around which all this ominous activity turned, made up a scene that etched itself indelibly on my mind.

As we entered Dr. Cleeve straightened himself, frowning thoughtfully.

"Frankly, I do not care to venture any opinion at present regarding the immediate cause of death," he said. "Sir Crichton was addicted to cocaine, but there are indications which are not in accordance with cocaine-poisoning. I fear that only a post-mortem can establish the facts--if," he added, "we ever arrive at them. A most mysterious case!"

Smith stepping forward and engaging the famous pathologist in conversation, I seized the opportunity to examine Sir Crichton's body.

The dead man was in evening dress, but wore an old smoking-jacket. He had been of spare but hardy build, with thin, aquiline features, which now were oddly puffy, as were his clenched hands. I pushed back his sleeve, and saw the marks of the hypodermic syringe upon his left arm. Quite mechanically I turned my attention to the right arm. It was unscarred, but on the back of the hand was a faint red mark, not unlike the imprint of painted lips. I examined it

closely, and even tried to rub it off, but it evidently was caused by some morbid process of local inflammation, if it were not a birthmark.

Turning to a pale young man whom I had understood to be Sir Crichton's private secretary, I drew his attention to this mark, and inquired if it were constitutional. "It is not, sir," answered Dr. Cleeve, overhearing my question. "I have already made that inquiry. Does it suggest anything to your mind? I must confess that it affords me no assistance."

"Nothing," I replied. "It is most curious."

"Excuse me, Mr. Burboyne," said Smith, now turning to the secretary, "but Inspector Weymouth will tell you that I act with authority. I understand that Sir Crichton was--seized with illness in his study?"

"Yes--at half-past ten. I was working here in the library, and he inside, as was our custom."

"The communicating door was kept closed?"

"Yes, always. It was open for a minute or less about ten-twenty-five, when a message came for Sir Crichton. I took it in to him, and he then seemed in his usual health."

"What was the message?"

"I could not say. It was brought by a district messenger, and he placed it beside him on the table. It is there now, no doubt."

"And at half-past ten?"

"Sir Crichton suddenly burst open the door and threw himself, with a scream, into the library. I ran to him but he waved me back. His eyes were glaring horribly. I had just reached his side when he fell, writhing, upon the floor. He seemed past speech, but as I raised him and laid him upon the couch, he gasped something that sounded like 'The red hand!' Before I could get to bell or telephone he was dead!"

Mr. Burboyne's voice shook as he spoke the words, and Smith seemed to find this evidence confusing.

"You do not think he referred to the mark on his own hand?"

"I think not. From the direction of his last glance, I feel sure he referred to something in the study."

"What did you do? Having summoned the servants, I ran into the study. But there was absolutely nothing unusual to be seen. The windows were closed and fastened. He worked with closed windows in the hottest weather. There is no other door, for the study occupies the end of a narrow wing, so that no one could possibly have gained access to it, whilst I was in the library, unseen by me. Had someone concealed himself in the study earlier in the evening--and I am convinced that it offers no hiding-place-- he could only have come out again by passing through here."

Nayland Smith tugged at the lobe of his left ear, as was his habit when meditating.

"You had been at work here in this way for some time?"

"Yes. Sir Crichton was preparing an important book."

"Had anything unusual occurred prior to this evening?"

"Yes," said Mr. Burboyne, with evident perplexity; "though I attached no importance to it at the time. Three nights ago Sir Crichton came out to me, and appeared very nervous; but at times his nerves-- you know? Well, on this occasion he asked me to search the study. He had an idea that something was concealed there."

"Some THING or someone?"

"`Something' was the word he used. I searched, but fruitlessly, and he seemed quite satisfied, and returned to his work."

"Thank you, Mr. Burboyne. My friend and I would like a few minutes' private investigation in the study."

CHAPTER 2

Sir Crichton Davey's study was a small one, and a glance sufficed to show that, as the secretary had said, it offered no hiding-place. It was heavily carpeted, and over-full of Burmese and Chinese ornaments and curios, and upon the mantelpiece stood several framed photographs which showed this to be the sanctum of a wealthy bachelor who was no misogynist. A map of the Indian Empire occupied the larger part of one wall. The grate was empty, for the weather was extremely warm, and a green-shaded lamp on the littered writing-table afforded the only light. The air was stale, for both windows were closed and fastened.

Smith immediately pounced upon a large, square envelope that lay beside the blotting-pad. Sir Crichton had not even troubled to open it, but my friend did so. It contained a blank sheet of paper!

"Smell!" he directed, handing the letter to me. I raised it to my nostrils. It was scented with some pungent perfume.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It is a rather rare essential oil," was the reply, "which I have met with before, though never in Europe. I begin to understand, Petrie."

He tilted the lamp-shade and made a close examination of the scraps of paper, matches, and other debris that lay in the grate and on the hearth. I took up a copper vase from the mantelpiece, and was examining it curiously, when he turned, a strange expression upon his face.

"Put that back, old man," he said quietly.

Much surprised, I did as he directed.

"Don't touch anything in the room. It may be dangerous."

Something in the tone of his voice chilled me, and I hastily replaced the vase, and stood by the door of the study, watching him search, methodically, every inch of the room-- behind the books, in all the ornaments, in table drawers, in cupboards, on shelves.

"That will do," he said at last. "There is nothing here and I have no time to search farther."

We returned to the library.

"Inspector Weymouth," said my friend, "I have a particular reason for asking that Sir Crichton's body be removed from this room at once and the library locked. Let no one be admitted on any pretense whatever until you hear from me." It spoke volumes for the mysterious credentials borne by my friend that the man from Scotland Yard accepted his orders without demur, and, after a brief chat with Mr. Burboyne, Smith passed briskly downstairs. In the hall a man who looked like a groom out of livery was waiting.

"Are you Wills?" asked Smith.

"Yes, sir."

"It was you who heard a cry of some kind at the rear of the house about the time of Sir Crichton's death?"

"Yes, sir. I was locking the garage door, and, happening to look up at the window of Sir Crichton's study, I saw him jump out of his chair. Where he used to sit at his writing, sir, you could see his shadow on the blind. Next minute I heard a call out in the lane."

"What kind of call?"

The man, whom the uncanny happening clearly had frightened, seemed puzzled for a suitable description.

"A sort of wail, sir," he said at last. "I never heard anything like it before, and don't want to again."

"Like this?" inquired Smith, and he uttered a low, wailing cry, impossible to describe. Wills perceptibly shuddered; and, indeed, it was an eerie sound.

"The same, sir, I think," he said, "but much louder."

"That will do," said Smith, and I thought I detected a note of triumph in his voice. "But stay! Take us through to the back of the house."

The man bowed and led the way, so that shortly we found ourselves in a small, paved courtyard. It was a perfect summer's night, and the deep blue vault above was jeweled with myriads of starry points. How impossible it seemed to reconcile that vast, eternal calm with the hideous passions and fiendish agencies which that night had loosed a soul upon the infinite.

"Up yonder are the study windows, sir. Over that wall on your left is the back lane from which the cry came, and beyond is Regent's Park."

"Are the study windows visible from there?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Who occupies the adjoining house?"

"Major-General Platt-Houston, sir; but the family is out of town."

"Those iron stairs are a means of communication between the domestic offices and the servants' quarters, I take it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then send someone to make my business known the Major-General's housekeeper; I want to examine those stairs."

Singular though my friend's proceedings appeared to me, I had ceased to wonder at anything. Since Nayland Smith's arrival at my rooms I seemed to have been moving through the fitful phases of a nightmare. My friend's account of how he came by the wound in his arm; the scene on our arrival at the house of Sir Crichton Davey; the secretary's story of the dying man's cry, "The red hand!"; the hidden perils of the study; the wail in the lane-- all were fitter incidents of delirium than of sane reality. So, when a white-faced butler made us known to a nervous old lady who proved to be the housekeeper of the next-door residence, I was not surprised at Smith's saying:

"Lounge up and down outside, Petrie. Everyone has cleared off now. It is getting late. Keep your eyes open and be on your guard. I thought I had the start, but he is here before me, and, what is worse, he probably knows by now that I am here, too."

With which he entered the house and left me out in the square, with leisure to think, to try to understand.

The crowd which usually haunts the scene of a sensational crime had been cleared away, and it had been circulated that Sir Crichton had died from natural causes. The intense heat having driven most of the residents out of town, practically I had the square to myself, and I gave myself up to a brief consideration of the mystery in which I so suddenly had found myself involved.

By what agency had Sir Crichton met his death? Did Nayland Smith know? I rather suspected that he did. What was the hidden significance of the perfumed envelope? Who was that mysterious personage whom Smith so evidently dreaded, who had attempted his life, who, presumably, had murdered Sir Crichton? Sir Crichton Davey, during the time that he had held office in India, and during his long term of service at home, had earned the good will of all, British and native alike. Who was his secret enemy?

Something touched me lightly on the shoulder.

I turned, with my heart fluttering like a child's. This night's work had imposed a severe strain even upon my callous nerves.

A girl wrapped in a hooded opera-cloak stood at my elbow, and, as she glanced up at me, I thought that I never had seen a face so seductively lovely nor of so unusual a type. With the skin of a perfect blonde, she had eyes and lashes as black as a Creole's, which, together with her full red lips, told me that this beautiful stranger, whose touch had so startled me, was not a child of our northern shores.

"Forgive me," she said, speaking with an odd, pretty accent, and laying a slim hand, with jeweled fingers, confidently upon my arm, "if I startled you. But--is it true that Sir Crichton Davey has been--murdered?"

I looked into her big, questioning eyes, a harsh suspicion laboring in my mind, but could read nothing in their mysterious depths--only I wondered anew at my questioner's beauty. The grotesque idea momentarily possessed me that, were the bloom of her red lips due to art and not to nature, their kiss would leave--though not indelibly--just such a mark as I had seen upon the dead man's hand. But I dismissed the fantastic notion as bred of the night's horrors, and worthy only of a mediaeval legend. No doubt she was some friend or acquaintance of Sir Crichton who lived close by.

"I cannot say that he has been murdered," I replied, acting upon the latter supposition, and seeking to tell her what she asked as gently as possible.

"But he is--Dead?"

I nodded.

She closed her eyes and uttered a low, moaning sound, swaying dizzily. Thinking she was about to swoon, I threw my arm round her shoulder to support her, but she smiled sadly, and pushed me gently away.

"I am quite well, thank you," she said.

"You are certain? Let me walk with you until you feel quite sure of yourself."

She shook her head, flashed a rapid glance at me with her beautiful eyes, and looked away in a sort of sorrowful embarrassment, for which I was entirely at a loss to account. Suddenly she resumed:

"I cannot let my name be mentioned in this dreadful matter, but--I think I have some information--for the police. Will you give this to--whomever you think proper?"

She handed me a sealed envelope, again met my eyes with one of her dazzling glances, and hurried away. She had gone no more than ten or twelve yards, and I still was standing bewildered, watching her graceful, retreating figure, when she turned abruptly and came back.

Without looking directly at me, but alternately glancing towards a distant corner of the square and towards the house of Major-General Platt-Houston, she made the following extraordinary request:

"If you would do me a very great service, for which I always would be grateful,"--she glanced at me with passionate intentness--"when you have given my message to the proper person, leave him and do not go near him any more to-night!"

Before I could find words to reply she gathered up her cloak and ran. Before I could determine whether or not to follow her (for her words had aroused anew all my worst suspicions) she had disappeared! I heard the whir of a restarted motor at no great distance, and, in the instant that Nayland Smith came running down the steps, I knew that I had nodded at my post.

"Smith!" I cried as he joined me, "tell me what we must do!" And rapidly I acquainted him with the incident.

My friend looked very grave; then a grim smile crept round his lips.

"She was a big card to play," he said; "but he did not know that I held one to beat it."

"What! You know this girl! Who is she?"

"She is one of the finest weapons in the enemy's armory, Petrie. But a woman is a two-edged sword, and treacherous. To our great good fortune, she has formed a sudden predilection, characteristically Oriental, for yourself. Oh, you may scoff, but it is evident. She was employed to get this letter placed in my hands. Give it to me."

I did so.

"She has succeeded. Smell."

He held the envelope under my nose, and, with a sudden sense of nausea, I recognized the strange perfume.

"You know what this presaged in Sir Crichton's case? Can you doubt any longer? She did not want you to share my fate, Petrie."

"Smith," I said unsteadily, "I have followed your lead blindly in this horrible business and have not pressed for an explanation, but I must insist before I go one step farther upon knowing what it all means."

"Just a few steps farther," he rejoined; "as far as a cab. We are hardly safe here. Oh, you need not fear shots or knives. The man whose servants are watching us now scorns to employ such clumsy, tell-tale weapons."

Only three cabs were on the rank, and, as we entered the first, something hissed past my ear. missed both Smith and me by a miracle, and, passing over the roof of the taxi, presumably fell in the enclosed garden occupying the center of the square.

"What was that?" I cried.

"Get in--quickly!" Smith rapped back. "It was attempt number one! More than that I cannot say. Don't let the man hear. He has noticed nothing. Pull up the window on your side, Petrie, and look out behind. Good! We've started."

The cab moved off with a metallic jerk, and I turned and looked back through the little window in the rear.

"Someone has got into another cab. It is following ours, I think."

Nayland Smith lay back and laughed unmirthfully.

"Petrie," he said, "if I escape alive from this business I shall know that I bear a charmed life."

I made no reply, as he pulled out the dilapidated pouch and filled his pipe.

"You have asked me to explain matters," he continued, "and I will do so to the best of my ability. You no doubt wonder why a servant of the British Government, lately stationed in

Burma, suddenly appears in London, in the character of a detective. I am here, Petrie--and I bear credentials from the very highest sources--because, quite by accident, I came upon a clew. Following it up, in the ordinary course of routine, I obtained evidence of the existence and malignant activity of a certain man. At the present stage of the case I should not be justified in terming him the emissary of an Eastern Power, but I may say that representations are shortly to be made to that Power's ambassador in London."

He paused and glanced back towards the pursuing cab.

"There is little to fear until we arrive home," he said calmly. "Afterwards there is much. To continue: This man, whether a fanatic or a duly appointed agent, is, unquestionably, the most malign and formidable personality existing in the known world today. He is a linguist who speaks with almost equal facility in any of the civilized languages, and in most of the barbaric. He is an adept in all the arts and sciences which a great university could teach him. He also is an adept in certain obscure arts and sciences which no university of to-day can teach. He has the brains of any three men of genius. Petrie, he is a mental giant."

"You amaze me!" I said.

"As to his mission among men. Why did M. Jules Furneaux fall dead in a Paris opera house? Because of heart failure? No! Because his last speech had shown that he held the key to the secret of Tongking. What became of the Grand Duke Stanislaus? Elopement? Suicide? Nothing of the kind. He alone was fully alive to Russia's growing peril. He alone knew the truth about Mongolia. Why was Sir Crichton Davey murdered? Because, had the work he was engaged upon ever seen the light it would have shown him to be the only living Englishman who understood the importance of the Tibetan frontiers. I say to you solemnly, Petrie, that these are but a few. Is there a man who would arouse the West to a sense of the awakening of the East, who would teach the deaf to hear, the blind to see, that the millions only await their leader? He will die. And this is only one phase of the devilish campaign. The others I can merely surmise."

"But, Smith, this is almost incredible! What perverted genius controls this awful secret movement?"

"Imagine a person, tall, lean and feline, high-shouldered, with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan, a close-shaven skull, and long, magnetic eyes of the true cat-green. Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources of science past and present, with all the resources, if you will, of a wealthy government-- which, however, already has denied all knowledge of his existence. Imagine that awful being, and you have a mental picture of Dr. Fu-Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate in one man."