

CHAPTER 9

WITH the first coming of light, Eltham, Smith and I tested the electrical contrivances from every point. They were in perfect order. It became more and more incomprehensible how anyone could have entered and quitted Redmoat during the night. The barbed-wire fencing was intact, and bore no signs of having been tampered with.

Smith and I undertook an exhaustive examination of the shrubbery.

At the spot where we had found the dog, some five paces to the west of the copper beech, the grass and weeds were trampled and the surrounding laurels and rhododendrons bore evidence of a struggle, but no human footprint could be found.

"The ground is dry," said Smith. "We cannot expect much."

"In my opinion," I said, "someone tried to get at Caesar; his presence is dangerous. And in his rage he broke loose."

"I think so, too," agreed Smith. "But why did this person make for here? And how, having mastered the dog, get out of Redmoat? I am open to admit the possibility of someone's getting in during the day whilst the gates are open, and hiding until dusk. But how in the name of all that's wonderful does he GET OUT? He must possess the attributes of a bird."

I thought of Greba Eltham's statements, reminding my friend of her description of the thing which she had seen passing into this strangely haunted shrubbery.

"That line of speculation soon takes us out of our depth, Petrie," he said. "Let us stick to what we can understand, and that may help us to a clearer idea of what, at present, is incomprehensible. My view of the case to date stands thus:

(1) Eltham, having rashly decided to return to the interior of China, is warned by an official whose friendship he has won in some way to stay in England.

(2) I know this official for one of the Yellow group represented in England by Dr. Fu-Manchu.

(3) Several attempts, of which we know but little, to get at Eltham are frustrated, presumably by his curious `defenses.' An attempt in a train fails owing to Miss Eltham's distaste for refreshment-room coffee. An attempt here fails owing to her insomnia.

(4) During Eltham's absence from Redmoat certain preparations are made for his return. These lead to:

- (a) The death of Denby's collie;
- (b) The things heard and seen by Miss Eltham;
- (c) The things heard and seen by us all last night.

So that the clearing up of my fourth point--id est, the discovery of the nature of these preparations--becomes our immediate concern. The prime object of these preparations, Petrie, was to enable someone to gain access to Eltham's room. The other events are incidental. The dogs HAD to be got rid of, for instance; and there is no doubt that Miss Eltham's wakefulness saved her father a second time."

"But from what? For Heaven's sake, from what?"

Smith glanced about into the light-patched shadows.

"From a visit by someone--perhaps by Fu-Manchu himself," he said in a hushed voice. "The object of that visit I hope we may never learn; for that would mean that it had been achieved."

"Smith," I said, "I do not altogether understand you; but do you think he has some incredible creature hidden here somewhere? It would be like him."

"I begin to suspect the most formidable creature in the known world to be hidden here. I believe Fu-Manchu is somewhere inside Redmoat!"

Our conversation was interrupted at this point by Denby, who came to report that he had examined the moat, the roadside, and the bank of the stream, but found no footprints or clew of any kind.

"No one left the grounds of Redmoat last night, I think," he said. And his voice had awe in it.

That day dragged slowly on. A party of us scoured the neighborhood for traces of strangers, examining every foot of the Roman ruin hard by; but vainly.

"May not your presence here induce Fu-Manchu to abandon his plans?" I asked Smith.

"I think not," he replied. "You see, unless we can prevail upon him, Eltham sails in a fortnight. So the Doctor has no time to waste. Furthermore, I have an idea that his arrangements are of such a character that they **MUST** go forward. He might turn aside, of course, to assassinate me, if opportunity arose! But we know, from experience, that he permits nothing to interfere with his schemes."

There are few states, I suppose, which exact so severe a toll from one's nervous system as the **ANTICIPATION** of calamity.

All anticipation is keener, be it of joy or pain, than the reality whereof it is a mental forecast; but that inactive waiting at Redmoat, for the blow which we knew full well to be pending exceeded in its nerve taxation, anything, I hitherto had experienced.

I felt as one bound upon an Aztec altar, with the priest's obsidian knife raised above my breast!

Secret and malign forces throbbed about us; forces against which we had no armor. Dreadful as it was, I count it a mercy that the climax was reached so quickly. And it came suddenly enough; for there in that quiet Norfolk home we found ourselves at hand grips with one of the mysterious horrors which characterized the operations of Dr. Fu-Manchu. It was upon us before we realized it. There is no incidental music to the dramas of real life.

As we sat on the little terrace in the creeping twilight, I remember thinking how the peace of the scene gave the lie to my fears that we bordered upon tragic things. Then Caesar, who had been a docile patient all day, began howling again; and I saw Greba Eltham shudder.

I caught Smith's eye, and was about to propose our retirement indoors, when the party was broken up in more turbulent fashion. I suppose it was the presence of the girl which prompted Denby to the rash act, a desire personally to distinguish himself. But, as I recalled afterwards, his gaze had rarely left the shrubbery since dusk, save to seek her face, and now he leaped wildly to his feet, overturning his chair, and dashed across the grass to the trees.

"Did you see it?" he yelled. "Did you see it?"

He evidently carried a revolver. For from the edge of the shrubbery a shot sounded, and in the flash we saw Denby with the weapon raised.

"Greba, go in and fasten the windows," cried Eltham. "Mr. Smith, will you enter the bushes from the west. Dr. Petrie, east. Edwards, Edwards--" And he was off across the lawn with the nervous activity of a cat.

As I made off in an opposite direction I heard the gardener's voice from the lower gate, and I saw Eltham's plan. It was to surround the shrubbery.

Two more shots and two flashes from the dense heart of greenwood. Then a loud cry--I thought, from Denby--and a second, muffled one.

Following--silence, only broken by the howling of the mastiff.

I sprinted through the rose garden, leaped heedlessly over a bed of geranium and heliotrope, and plunged in among the bushes and under the elms. Away on the left I heard Edwards shouting, and Eltham's answering voice.

"Denby!" I cried, and yet louder: "Denby!"

But the silence fell again.

Dusk was upon Redmoat now, but from sitting in the twilight my eyes had grown accustomed to gloom, and I could see fairly well what lay before me. Not daring to think what might lurk above, below, around me, I pressed on into the midst of the thicket.

"Vernon!" came Eltham's voice from one side.

"Bear more to the right, Edwards," I heard Nayland Smith cry directly ahead of me.

With an eerie and indescribable sensation of impending disaster upon me, I thrust my way through to a gray patch which marked a break in the elmen roof. At the foot of the copper beech I almost fell over Eltham. Then Smith plunged into view. Lastly, Edwards the gardener rounded a big rhododendron and completed the party.

We stood quite still for a moment.

A faint breeze whispered through the beech leaves.

"Where is he?"

I cannot remember who put it into words; I was too dazed with amazement to notice. Then Eltham began shouting:

"Vernon! Vernon! VERNON!"

His voice pitched higher upon each repetition. There was something horrible about that vain calling, under the whispering beech, with shrubs banked about us cloaking God alone could know what.

From the back of the house came Caesar's faint reply.

"Quick! Lights!" rapped Smith. "Every lamp you have!"

Off we went, dodging laurels and privets, and poured out on to the lawn, a disordered company. Eltham's face was deathly pale, and his jaw set hard. He met my eye.

"God forgive me!" he said. "I could do murder to-night!"

He was a man composed of strange perplexities.

It seemed an age before the lights were found. But at last we returned to the bushes, really after a very brief delay; and ten minutes sufficed us to explore the entire shrubbery, for it was not extensive. We found his revolver, but there was no one there--nothing.

When we all stood again on the lawn, I thought that I had never seen Smith so haggard.

"What in Heaven's name can we do?" he muttered. "What does it mean?"

He expected no answer; for there was none to offer one.

"Search! Everywhere," said Eltham hoarsely.

He ran off into the rose garden, and began beating about among the flowers like a madman, muttering: "Vernon! Vernon!" For close upon an hour we all searched. We searched every square yard, I think, within the wire fencing, and found no trace. Miss Eltham slipped out in the confusion, and joined with the rest of us in that frantic hunt. Some of the servants assisted too.

It was a group terrified and awestricken which came together again on the terrace. One and then another would give up, until only Eltham and Smith were missing. Then they came back together from examining the steps to the lower gate.

Eltham dropped on to a rustic seat, and sank his head in his hands.

Nayland Smith paced up and down like a newly caged animal, snapping his teeth together and tugging at his ear.

Possessed by some sudden idea, or pressed to action by his tumultuous thoughts, he snatched up a lantern and strode silently off across the grass and to the shrubbery once more. I followed him. I think his idea was that he might surprise anyone who lurked there. He surprised himself, and all of us.

For right at the margin he tripped and fell flat. I ran to him.

He had fallen over the body of Denby, which lay there!

Denby had not been there a few moments before, and how he came to be there now we dared not conjecture. Mr. Eltham joined us, uttered one short, dry sob, and dropped upon his knees. Then we were carrying Denby back to the house, with the mastiff howling a *marche funebre*.

We laid him on the grass where it sloped down from the terrace. Nayland Smith's haggard face was terrible. But the stark horror of the thing inspired him to that, which conceived earlier, had saved Denby. Twisting suddenly to Eltham, he roared in a voice audible beyond the river:

"Heavens! we are fools! LOOSE THE DOG!"

"But the dog--" I began.

Smith clapped his hand over my mouth.

"I know he's crippled," he whispered. "But if anything human lurks there, the dog will lead us to it. If a MAN is there, he will fly! Why did we not think of it before. Fools, fools!" He raised his voice again. "Keep him on leash, Edwards. He will lead us."

The scheme succeeded.

Edwards barely had started on his errand when bells began ringing inside the house.

"Wait!" snapped Eltham, and rushed indoors.

A moment later he was out again, his eyes gleaming madly. "Above the moat," he panted. And we were off en masse round the edge of the trees.

It was dark above the moat; but not so dark as to prevent our seeing a narrow ladder of thin bamboo joints and silken cord hanging by two hooks from the top of the twelve-foot wire fence. There was no sound.

"He's out!" screamed Eltham. "Down the steps!"

We all ran our best and swiftest. But Eltham outran us. Like a fury he tore at bolts and bars, and like a fury sprang out into the road. Straight and white it showed to the acclivity by the Roman ruin. But no living thing moved upon it. The distant baying of the dog was borne to our ears.

"Curse it! he's crippled," hissed Smith. "Without him, as well pursue a shadow!"

A few hours later the shrubbery yielded up its secret, a simple one enough: A big cask sunk in a pit, with a laurel shrub cunningly affixed to its movable lid, which was further disguised with tufts of grass. A slender bamboo-jointed rod lay near the fence. It had a hook on the top, and was evidently used for attaching the ladder.

"It was the end of this ladder which Miss Eltham saw," said Smith, "as he trailed it behind him into the shrubbery when she interrupted him in her fathers room. He and whomever he had with him doubtless slipped in during the daytime--whilst Eltham was absent in London--bringing the prepared cask and all necessary implements with them. They concealed themselves somewhere--probably in the shrubbery-- and during the night made the cache. The excavated earth would be disposed of on the flower-beds; the dummy bush they probably had ready. You see, the problem of getting IN was never a big one. But owing to the `defenses' it was impossible (whilst Eltham was in residence at any rate) to get OUT after dark. For Fu-Manchu's purposes, then, a working-base INSIDE Redmoat was essential. His servant--for he needed assistance--must have been in hiding somewhere outside; Heaven knows where! During the day they could come or go by the gates, as we have already noted."

"You think it was the Doctor himself?"

"It seems possible. Whom else has eyes like the eyes Miss Eltham saw from the window last night?"

Then remains to tell the nature of the outrage whereby Fu-Manchu had planned to prevent Eltham's leaving England for China. This we learned from Denby. For Denby was not dead.

It was easy to divine that he had stumbled upon the fiendish visitor at the very entrance to his burrow; had been stunned (judging from the evidence, with a sand-bag), and dragged down into the cache--to which he must have lain in such dangerous proximity as to render detection of the dummy bush possible in removing him. The quickest expedient, then, had been to draw him beneath. When the search of the shrubbery was concluded, his body had been borne to the edge of the bushes and laid where we found it.

Why his life had been spared, I cannot conjecture, but provision had been made against his recovering consciousness and revealing the secret of the shrubbery. The ruse of releasing the mastiff alone had terminated the visit of the unbidden guest within Redmoat.

Denby made a very slow recovery; and, even when convalescent, consciously added not one fact to those we already had collated; his memory had completely deserted him!

This, in my opinion, as in those of the several specialists consulted, was due, not to the blow on the head, but to the presence, slightly below and to the right of the first cervical curve of the spine, of a minute puncture--undoubtedly caused by a hypodermic syringe. Then, unconsciously, poor Denby furnished the last link in the chain; for undoubtedly, by means of this operation, Fu-Manchu had designed to efface from Eltham's mind his plans of return to Ho-Nan.

The nature of the fluid which could produce such mental symptoms was a mystery--a mystery which defied Western science: one of the many strange secrets of Dr. Fu-Manchu.

CHAPTER 10

SINCE Nayland Smith's return from Burma I had rarely taken up a paper without coming upon evidences of that seething which had cast up Dr. Fu-Manchu. Whether, hitherto, such items had escaped my attention or had seemed to demand no particular notice, or whether they now became increasingly numerous, I was unable to determine.

One evening, some little time after our sojourn in Norfolk, in glancing through a number of papers which I had brought in with me, I chanced upon no fewer than four items of news bearing more or less directly upon the grim business which engaged my friend and I.

No white man, I honestly believe, appreciates the unemotional cruelty of the Chinese. Throughout the time that Dr. Fu-Manchu remained in England, the press preserved a uniform silence upon the subject of his existence. This was due to Nayland Smith. But, as a result, I feel assured that my account of the Chinaman's deeds will, in many quarters, meet with an incredulous reception.

I had been at work, earlier in the evening, upon the opening chapters of this chronicle, and I had realized how difficult it would be for my reader, amid secure and cozy surroundings, to credit any human being, with a callous villainy great enough to conceive and to put into execution such a death pest as that directed against Sir Crichton Davey.

One would expect God's worst man to shrink from employing-- against however vile an enemy--such an instrument as the Zayat Kiss. So thinking, my eye was caught by the following:-

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EXPRESS CORRESPONDENT NEW YORK.

"Secret service men of the United States Government are searching the South Sea Islands for a certain Hawaiian from the island of Maui, who, it is believed, has been selling poisonous scorpions to Chinese in Honolulu anxious to get rid of their children.

Infanticide, by scorpion and otherwise, among the Chinese, has increased so terribly that the authorities have started a searching inquiry, which has led to the hunt for the scorpion dealer of Maui.

Practically all the babies that die mysteriously are unwanted girls, and in nearly every case the parents promptly ascribe the death to the bite of a scorpion, and are ready to produce some more or less poisonous insect in support of the statement.

The authorities have no doubt that infanticide by scorpion bite is a growing practice, and orders have been given to hunt down the scorpion dealer at any cost."

Is it any matter for wonder that such a people had produced a Fu-Manchu? I pasted the cutting into a scrap-book, determined that, if I lived to publish my account of those days, I would quote it therein as casting a sidelight upon Chinese character.

A Reuter message to The Globe and a paragraph in The Star also furnished work for my scissors. Here were evidences of the deep-seated unrest, the secret turmoil, which manifested itself so far from its center as peaceful England in the person of the sinister Doctor.

HONG KONG, Friday.

"Li Hon Hung, the Chinaman who fired at the Governor yesterday, was charged before the magistrate with shooting at him with intent to kill, which is equivalent to attempted murder. The prisoner, who was not defended, pleaded guilty. The Assistant Crown Solicitor, who prosecuted, asked for a remand until Monday, which was granted.

Snapshots taken by the spectators of the outrage yesterday disclosed the presence of an accomplice, also armed with a revolver. It is reported that this man, who was arrested last night, was in possession of incriminating documentary evidence."

Later.

"Examination of the documents found on Li Hon Hung's accomplice has disclosed the fact that both men were well financed by the Canton Triad Society, the directors of which had enjoined the assassination of Sir F. M. or Mr. C. S., the Colonial Secretary. In a report prepared by the accomplice for dispatch to Canton, also found on his person, he expressed regret that the attempt had failed."--**Reuter.**

"It is officially reported in St. Petersburg that a force of Chinese soldiers and villagers surrounded the house of a Russian subject named Said Effendi, near Khotan, in Chinese Turkestan.

They fired at the house and set it in flames. There were in the house about 100 Russians, many of whom were killed.

The Russian Government has instructed its Minister at Peking to make the most vigorous representations on the subject."--**Reuter.**

Finally, in a Personal Column, I found the following:--

"HO-NAN. Have abandoned visit.--ELTHAM."

I had just pasted it into my book when Nayland Smith came in and threw himself into an arm-chair, facing me across the table. I showed him the cutting.

"I am glad, for Eltham's sake--and for the girl's," was his comment. "But it marks another victory for Fu-Manchu! Just Heaven! Why is retribution delayed!"

Smith's darkly tanned face had grown leaner than ever since he had begun his fight with the most uncanny opponent, I suppose, against whom a man ever had pitted himself. He stood up and began restlessly to pace the room, furiously stuffing tobacco into his briar.

"I have seen Sir Lionel Barton," he said abruptly; "and, to put the whole thing in a nutshell, he has laughed at me! During the months that I have been wondering where he had gone to he has been somewhere in Egypt. He certainly bears a charmed life, for on the evidence

of his letter to The Times he has seen things in Tibet which Fu-Manchu would have the West blind to; in fact, I think he has found a new keyhole to the gate of the Indian Empire!"

Long ago we had placed the name of Sir Lionel Barton upon the list of those whose lives stood between Fu-Manchu and the attainment of his end. Orientalist and explorer, the fearless traveler who first had penetrated to Lhasa, who thrice, as a pilgrim, had entered forbidden Mecca, he now had turned his attention again to Tibet--thereby signing his own death-warrant.

"That he has reached England alive is a hopeful sign?" I suggested.

Smith shook his head, and lighted the blackened briar.

"England at present is the web," he replied. "The spider will be waiting. Petrie, I sometimes despair. Sir Lionel is an impossible man to shepherd. You ought to see his house at Finchley. A low, squat place completely hemmed in by trees. Damp as a swamp; smells like a jungle. Everything topsy-turvy. He only arrived to-day, and he is working and eating (and sleeping I expect), in a study that looks like an earthquake at Sotheby's auction-rooms. The rest of the house is half a menagerie and half a circus. He has a Bedouin groom, a Chinese body-servant, and Heaven only knows what other strange people!"

"Chinese!"

"Yes, I saw him; a squinting Cantonese he calls Kwee. I don't like him. Also, there is a secretary known as Stozza, who has an unpleasant face. He is a fine linguist, I understand, and is engaged upon the Spanish notes for Barton's forthcoming book on the Mayapan temples. By the way, all Sir Lionel's baggage disappeared from the landing-stage-- including his Tibetan notes."

"Significant!"

"Of course. But he argues that he has crossed Tibet from the Kuen-Lun to the Himalayas without being assassinated, and therefore that it is unlikely he will meet with that fate in London. I left him dictating the book from memory, at the rate of about two hundred words a minute."

"He is wasting no time."

"Wasting time! In addition to the Yucatan book and the work on Tibet, he has to read a paper at the Institute next week about some tomb he has unearthed in Egypt. As I came away, a van drove up from the docks and a couple of fellows delivered a sarcophagus as big as a boat. It is unique, according to Sir Lionel, and will go to the British Museum after he has examined it. The man crams six months' work into six weeks; then he is off again."

"What do you propose to do?"

"What CAN I do? I know that Fu-Manchu will make an attempt upon him. I cannot doubt it. Ugh! that house gave me the shudders. No sunlight, I'll swear, Petrie, can ever penetrate to the rooms, and when I arrived this afternoon clouds of gnats floated like motes wherever a stray beam filtered through the trees of the avenue. There's a steamy smell about the place that is almost malarious, and the whole of the west front is covered with a sort of monkey-creeper, which he has imported at some time or other. It has a close, exotic perfume that is quite in the picture. I tell you, the place was made for murder."

"Have you taken any precautions?"

"I called at Scotland Yard and sent a man down to watch the house, but--"

He shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"What is Sir Lionel like?"

"A madman, Petrie. A tall, massive man, wearing a dirty dressing-gown of neutral color; a man with untidy gray hair and a bristling mustache, keen blue eyes, and a brown skin; who wears a short beard or rarely shaves--I don't know which. I left him striding about among the thousand and one curiosities of that incredible room, picking his way through his antique furniture, works of reference, manuscripts, mummies, spears, pottery and what not--sometimes kicking a book from his course, or stumbling over a stuffed crocodile or a Mexican mask--alternately dictating and conversing. Phew!"

For some time we were silent.

"Smith" I said, "we are making no headway in this business. With all the forces arrayed against him, Fu-Manchu still eludes us, still pursues his devilish, inscrutable way."

Nayland Smith nodded.

"And we don't know all," he said. "We mark such and such a man as one alive to the Yellow Peril, and we warn him--if we have time. Perhaps he escapes; perhaps he does not. But what do we know, Petrie, of those others who may die every week by his murderous agency? We cannot know EVERYONE who has read the riddle of China. I never see a report of someone found drowned, of an apparent suicide, of a sudden, though seemingly natural death, without wondering. I tell you, Fu-Manchu is omnipresent; his tentacles embrace everything. I said that Sir Lionel must bear a charmed life. The fact that WE are alive is a miracle."

He glanced at his watch.

"Nearly eleven," he said. "But sleep seems a waste of time-- apart from its dangers."

We heard a bell ring. A few moments later followed a knock at the room door.

"Come in!" I cried.

A girl entered with a telegram addressed to Smith. His jaw looked very square in the lamplight, and his eyes shone like steel as he took it from her and opened the envelope. He glanced at the form, stood up and passed it to me, reaching for his hat, which lay upon my writing-table.

"God help us, Petrie!" he said.

This was the message:

"Sir Lionel Barton murdered. Meet me at his house at once.--

WEYMOUTH, INSPECTOR."