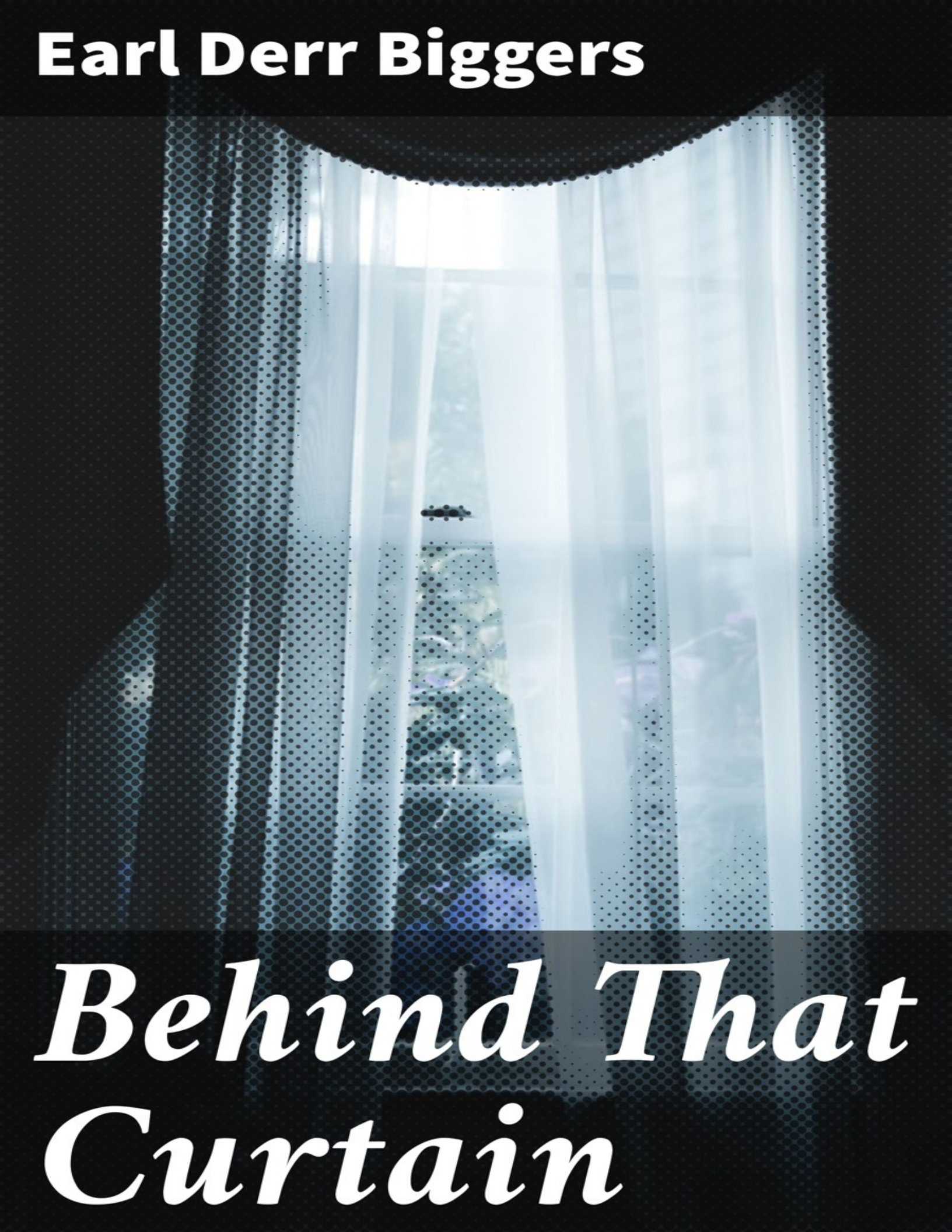
Earl Derr Biggers



Behind That Curtain

Earl Derr Biggers

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CHAPTER I

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THE MAN FROM SCOTLAND YARD

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Bill Rankin sat motionless before his typewriter, grimly seeking a lead for the interview he was about to write. A black shadow shot past his elbow and materialized with a soft thud on his desk. Bill's heart leaped into his throat and choked him.

But it was only Egbert, the office cat. Pretty lonesome round here, seemed to be Egbert's idea. How about a bit of play? Rankin glared at the cat with deep disgust. Absurd to be so upset by a mere Egbert, but when one has been talking with a great man for over an hour and the subject of the talk has been murder, one is apt to be a trifle jumpy.

He reached out and pushed Egbert to the floor. "Go away," he said. "What do you mean, scaring me out of a year's growth? Can't you see I'm busy?"

His dignity offended, Egbert stalked off through the desert of typewriter tables and empty chairs. Bill Rankin watched him disappear at last through the door leading into the hallway. The hour was five thirty; the street ten stories below was filled with home-going throngs, but up here in the city room of the *Globe* a momentary quiet reigned. Alone of all the green-shaded lamps in the room, the one above Rankin's typewriter was alight, shedding a ghastly radiance on the blank sheet of paper in his machine. Even the copy desk was deserted. In his cubby-hole at the rear sat the

Globe's city editor, the only other human thing in sight. And he was not, if you believed the young men who worked for him, so very human at that.

Bill Rankin turned back to his interview. For a brief moment he sat wrapped in thought; then his long, capable fingers sought the keys. He wrote:

> "The flights of genius and miracles of science which solve most of the crimes in detective stories have no real part in detective work. This is the verdict of Sir Frederic Bruce, former head of the Criminal Investigation Department at Scotland Yard.
>
> "Sir Frederic, who is stopping over for two weeks in San Francisco during the course of a trip around the world, is qualified to give an expert opinion. For nearly seventeen years he acted as Deputy-Commissioner at the head of the most famous detective organization in existence, and though he has now retired, his interest in crime detection is as keen as ever. Sir Frederic is a big man, with a kindly twinkle in his gray eyes, but occasionally those eyes have a steely look that made this reporter nervous. If we had killed the old Earl of Featherstonehaugh on his rare Persian rug, we would not care to have Sir Frederic on our trail. For the great detective is that type of Scotchman who is a stranger to defeat. He would never abandon the scent.
>
> "'I read a great deal of detective fiction,' Sir Frederic said. 'It amuses me, but there is usually nothing for a detective to learn from it. Except for the finger-print system and work in the chemical

> laboratory on stains, scientific research has furnished little assistance to crime detection. Murder mysteries and other difficult criminal cases are solved by intelligence, hard work and luck, with little help from the delicate scientific devices so dear to the authors of——'"

Suddenly Bill Rankin stopped writing and sat erect in his uncomfortable chair. There was a familiar ring to the ideas he was setting down on paper; he had heard them before, and recently. Opinions identical with these, expressed not in the polished English of Sir Frederic, but in a quite different idiom——Ah yes. He smiled, recalling that pudgy little man he had interviewed three days ago in the lobby of the Stewart Hotel.

The reporter rose from his chair and, lighting a cigarette, began to pace the floor. He spoke aloud: "Of course—and I never thought of it. A corking feature story staring me right in the face, and I was blind—blind. I must be losing my grip." He looked anxiously at the clock, tossed aside his cigarette and resumed his chair. Completing the sentence which he had interrupted midway, he continued:

> "Sir Frederic was asked what he considered the greatest piece of detective work within his knowledge.
>
> "'I can not answer that because of the important part played by chance,' he replied. 'As I have just said, most criminal cases are solved by varying proportions of hard work, intelligence and luck, and I

am sorry I must add that of these three, luck is the greatest by far.

"'Hard, methodical work, however, has brought results in many instances. For example, it unraveled the famous Crippen mystery. The first intimation we had of something wrong in that case came when we heard that the woman treasurer of a music-hall——'"

Bill Rankin wrote on, with lightning speed now, for he was eager to finish. The thing he was doing had suddenly become a minor matter. A far better story was running through his head. His fingers flew over the keys; when he paused, at rare intervals, it was to turn an inquiring gaze on the clock.

He ripped the final sheet of paper from his machine, snatched up the story, and hurried toward the city editor's nook. The lone man in charge of the copy desk, just returned from a bitter argument with the composing-room foreman, watched him sourly as he passed, and grimly sharpened a blue pencil.

"Wha's 'at?" inquired the city editor, as Bill Rankin threw the story down before him.

"Interview with Sir Frederic Bruce," Bill reminded him.

"Oh, you found him, did you?"

"We all found him. The room was full of reporters."

"Where was he?"

"He's putting up at Barry Kirk's bungalow. Kirk knew his son in London. I tried the hotels until my feet ached."

The editor snorted. "The more fool you. No Englishman ever stops at a hotel if he can wangle board and room from

somebody. You've been sent out to find enough lecturing British authors to know that."

"The interview's blah," said Rankin. "Every paper in town will have it. But while I was writing it, an idea for a feature hit me hard. It'll be a hum-dinger—if I can only put it over on Sir Frederic. I thought I'd go back up there and see what I can do."

"A feature?" The editor frowned. "If you happen on a bit of news in the course of your literary work, you'll let me know, won't you? Here I am, trying to get out a newspaper, and all I get from you fellows is an avalanche of pretty little essays. I suspect you're all hoping that some day you'll be tapped for the *Atlantic Monthly*."

"But this feature's good," Rankin protested. "I must hurry along——"

"Just a minute. I'm only your editor, of course. I don't want to pry into your plans——"

Rankin laughed. He was an able man, and privileged. "I'm sorry, sir, but I can't stop to explain now. Some one may beat me to it yet. Gleason of the *Herald* was up there to-day and he'll get the same hunch as sure as fate. So if you don't mind——"

The editor shrugged. "All right—go to it. Hurry up to the Kirk Building. And don't let this sudden attack of energy die there. Hurry back, too."

"Yes, sir," agreed the reporter. "Of course, I'll need a bit of dinner——"

"*I* never eat," growled his charming employer.

Bill Rankin sped across the city room. His fellow reporters were drifting in now from their afternoon assignments, and

the place was coming to life. Near the door, Egbert, black as the night from pole to pole, crossed Rankin's path with haughty, aloof manner and dignified stride.

Descending to the street, the reporter stood for a moment undecided. The Kirk Building was not far away; he could walk there—but time was precious. Suppose he arrived to be met by the news that Sir Frederic was dressing for dinner. With this famous and correct Englishman, the act would be a sacred rite not to be lightly interrupted by panting pressmen. No, he must reach Sir Frederic before the detective reached for his black pearl studs. He hailed a passing taxi.

As the car drew up to the curb, a red-cheeked boy, one of the *Globe's* younger reporters, emerged from the crowd and with a deep bow, held open the taxi door.

"To the Royal Opera, my good man," he shouted, "and an extra gold sovereign for you if we pass the Duke's car on the way."

Rankin pushed the facetious one aside. "Don't interfere with your betters, my lad," he remarked, and added, to the driver: "The Kirk Building, on California Street."

The taxi swung out into Market Street, followed the intricate car tracks for a few blocks, and turned off into Montgomery. In another moment they were in the financial district of San Francisco, now wrapped in its accustomed evening calm. The huge buildings of trust companies, investment houses and banks stood solemn and solid in the dusk; across the doorways of many, forbidding bronze gates were already shut. Gilded signs met Rankin's eye—"The Yokohama Bank"; on another window, "The Shanghai

Trading Company"; one may not forget the Orient in the city by the Gate. Presently the taxi drew up before a twenty-story office building, and Rankin alighted.

The Kirk Building was architecturally perfect, in the excellent taste that had marked the family ever since the first Dawson Kirk had made his millions and gone his way. Now it was the particular hobby of young Barry Kirk, who lived in bachelor splendor in the spacious but breezy bungalow on its roof. Its pure white lobby was immaculate; its elevator girls trim and pretty in neat uniforms; its elevator starter resplendent as an Admiral of the Fleet. At this hour the fever of the day was ended and cleaning women knelt reverently on the marble floor. One elevator was still running, and into this Bill Rankin stepped.

"All the way," he said to the girl.

He alighted at the twentieth floor, the final stop. A narrow stair led to Barry Kirk's bungalow, and the reporter ascended two steps at a time. Pausing before an imposing door, he rang. The door opened and Paradise, Kirk's English butler, stood like a bishop barring Rankin's path.

"Ah—er—I'm back," panted Rankin.

"So I see, sir." Very like a bishop indeed, with that great shock of snow-white hair. His manner was not cordial. Earlier that day he had admitted many reporters, but with misgivings.

"I must see Sir Frederic at once. Is he in?"

"Sir Frederic is in the offices, on the floor below. I fancy he is busy, but I will announce you——"

"No—please don't trouble," said Rankin quickly. Running down to the twentieth floor, he noted a door with Barry

Kirk's name on the frosted glass. As he moved toward it, it opened suddenly, and a young woman came out.

Rankin stopped in his tracks. A remarkably pretty young woman—that much was obvious even in the dim light on the twentieth floor. One of those greatly preferred blondes, with a slender figure trim in a green dress of some knitted material. Not precisely tall, but——

What was this? The young woman was weeping. Silently, without fuss, but indubitably weeping. Tears not alone of grief, but, if Rankin was any judge, of anger and exasperation, too. With a startled glance at the reporter, she hastily crossed the hall and disappeared through a door that bore the sign "Calcutta Importers, Inc."

Bill Rankin pushed on into Barry Kirk's office. He entered a sort of reception-room, but a door beyond stood open, and the newspaper man went confidently forward. In the second room, Sir Frederic Bruce, former head of the C. I. D., sat at a big, flat-topped desk. He swung around, and his gray eyes were stern and dangerous.

"Oh," he said. "It's you."

"I must apologize for intruding on you again, Sir Frederic," Bill Rankin began. "But—I—er—may I sit down?"

"Certainly." The great detective slowly gathered up some papers on the desk.

"The fact is——" Rankin's confidence was ebbing. An inner voice told him that this was not the genial gentleman of the afternoon interview in the bungalow up-stairs. Not the gracious visitor to San Francisco, but Sir Frederic Bruce of Scotland Yard, unbending, cold and awe-inspiring. "The fact is," continued the reporter lamely, "an idea has struck me."

"Really?" Those eyes—they looked right through you.

"What you told us this afternoon, Sir Frederic——Your opinion of the value of scientific devices in the detection of crime, as against luck and hard work——" Rankin paused. He seemed unable to finish his sentences. "I was reminded, when I came to write my story, that oddly enough I had heard that same opinion only a few days ago."

"Yes? Well, I made no claim to originality." Sir Frederic threw his papers into a drawer.

"Oh, I haven't come to complain about it," smiled Rankin, regaining a trace of his jaunty spirit. "Under ordinary conditions, it wouldn't mean anything, but I heard your ideas from the lips of a rather unusual man, Sir Frederic. A humble worker in your own field, a detective who has evolved his theories far from Scotland Yard. I heard them from Detective-Sergeant Charlie Chan, of the Honolulu police."

Sir Frederic's bushy eyebrows rose. "Really? Then I must applaud the judgment of Sergeant Chan—whoever he may be."

"Chan is a detective who has done some good work in the islands. He happens to be in San Francisco at the moment, on his way home. Came to the mainland on a simple errand, which developed into quite a case before he had finished with it. I believe he acquitted himself with credit. He's not very impressive to look at, but——"

Sir Frederic interrupted. "A Chinese, I take it?"

"Yes, sir."

The great man nodded. "And why not? A Chinese should make an excellent detective. The patience of the East, you

know."

"Precisely," agreed Bill Rankin. "He's got that. And modesty——"

Sir Frederic shook his head. "Not such a valuable asset, modesty. Self-assurance, a deep faith in one's self—they help. But Sergeant Chan is modest?"

"Is he? 'Falling hurts least those who fly low'—that's the way he put it to me. And Sergeant Chan flies so low he skims the daisies."

Sir Frederic rose and stepped to the window. He gazed down at the spatter of lights flung like a handful of stars over the darkening town. For a moment he said nothing. Then he turned to the reporter.

"A modest detective," he said, with a grim smile. "That's a novelty, at any rate. I should like very much to meet this Sergeant Chan."

Bill Rankin sighed with relief. His task was unbelievably easy, after all.

"That's exactly what I came here to suggest," he said briskly. "I'd like to bring you and Charlie Chan together—hear you go over your methods and experiences—you know, just a real good talk. I was wondering if you would do us the great honor to join Mr. Chan and me at lunch to-morrow?"

The former head of the C. I. D. hesitated. "Thank you very much. But I am more or less in Mr. Kirk's hands. He is giving a dinner to-morrow night, and I believe he said something about luncheon to-morrow, too. Much as I should like to accept at once, decidedly we must consult Mr. Kirk."

"Well, let's find him. Where is he?" Bill Rankin was all business.

"I fancy he is up in the bungalow." Sir Frederic turned and, swinging shut the door of a big wall safe, swiftly twirled the knob.

"You did that just like an American business man, Sir Frederic," Rankin smiled.

The detective nodded. "Mr. Kirk has kindly allowed me to use his office while I am his guest."

"Ah—then you're not altogether on a pleasure trip," said Bill Rankin quickly.

The gray eyes hardened. "Absolutely—a pleasure trip. But there are certain matters—private business—I am writing my *Memoirs*——"

"Ah yes—of course," apologized the reporter.

The door opened, and a cleaning woman entered. Sir Frederic turned to her. "Good evening," he said. "You understand that no papers on this desk—or in it—are to be interfered with in any way?"

"Oh, yes, sir," the woman answered.

"Very good. Now, Mr.—er—Mr.——"

"Rankin, Sir Frederic."

"Of course. There is a stairs in this rear room leading up to the bungalow. If you will come with me——"

They entered the third and last room of the office suite, and Bill Rankin followed the huge figure of the Englishman aloft. The stairs ended in a dark passageway on the floor above. Throwing open the nearest door, Sir Frederic flooded the place with light, and Bill Rankin stepped into the great living-room of the bungalow. Paradise was alone in the room; he received the reporter with cold disdain. Barry Kirk, it appeared, was dressing for dinner, and the butler went

reluctantly to inform him of the newspaper man's unseemly presence.

Kirk appeared at once, in his shirt-sleeves and with the ends of a white tie dangling about his neck. He was a handsome, lean young man in the late twenties, whose manner spoke of sophistication, and spoke true. For he had traveled to the far corners of the earth seeking to discover what the Kirk fortune would purchase there, and life held no surprises for him any more.

"Ah yes—Mr. Rankin of the *Globe*," he said pleasantly. "What can I do for you?"

Paradise hastened forward to officiate with the tie, and over the servant's shoulder Bill Rankin explained his mission. Kirk nodded.

"A bully idea," he remarked. "I have a lot of friends in Honolulu, and I've heard about Charlie Chan. I'd like to meet him myself."

"Very happy to have you join us," said the reporter.

"Can't be done. You must join me."

"But—the suggestion of the lunch was mine——" began Rankin uncomfortably.

Kirk waved a hand in the airy manner of the rich in such a situation. "My dear fellow—I've already arranged a luncheon for to-morrow. Some chap in the district attorney's office wrote me a letter. He's interested in criminology and wants to meet Sir Frederic. As I explained to Sir Frederic, I couldn't very well ignore it. We never know when we'll need a friend in the district attorney's office, these days."

"One of the deputies?" inquired Rankin.

"Yes. A fellow named Morrow—J. V. Morrow. Perhaps you know him?"

Rankin nodded. "I do," he said.

"Well, that's the scenario," went on Kirk. "We're to meet this lad at the St. Francis to-morrow at one. The topic of the day will be murder, and I'm sure your friend from Honolulu will fit in admirably. You must pick up Mr. Chan and join us."

"Thank you very much," said Rankin. "You're extremely kind. We'll be there. I—I won't keep you any longer."

Paradise came forward with alacrity to let him out. At the foot of the stairs on the twentieth floor he met his old rival, Gleason of the *Herald*. He chuckled with delight.

"Turn right around," he said. "You're too late. I thought of it first."

"Thought of what?" asked Gleason, with assumed innocence.

"I'm getting Sir Frederic and Charlie Chan together, and the idea's copyrighted. Lay off."

Gloomily Mr. Gleason turned about, and accompanied Bill Rankin to the elevators. As they waited for the car, the girl in the green dress emerged from the office of the Calcutta Importers and joined them. They rode down together. The girl's tears had vanished, and had happily left no trace. Blue eyes—that completed the picture. A charming picture. Mr. Gleason was also showing signs of interest.

In the street Gleason spoke. "I never thought of it until dinner," he said sourly.

"With me, my career comes first," Rankin responded. "Did you finish your dinner?"

"I did, worse luck. Well, I hope you get a whale of a story—a knock-out, a classic."

"Thanks, old man."

"And I hope you can't print one damn word of it."

Rankin did not reply as his friend hurried off into the dusk. He was watching the girl in the green dress disappear up California Street. Why had she left the presence of Sir Frederic Bruce to weep outside that office door? What had Sir Frederic said to her? Might ask Sir Frederic about it to-morrow. He laughed mirthlessly. He saw himself—or any other man—prying into the private affairs of Sir Frederic Bruce.

CHAPTER II

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WHAT HAPPENED TO EVE DURAND?

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The next day at one Sir Frederic Bruce stood in the lobby of the St. Francis, a commanding figure in a gray tweed suit. By his side, as immaculate as his guest, stood Barry Kirk, looking out on the busy scene with the amused tolerance befitting a young man of vast leisure and not a care in the world. Kirk hung his stick on his arm, and took a letter from his pocket.

"By the way, I had this note from J. V. Morrow in the morning's mail," he said. "Thanks me very politely for my invitation, and says that I'll know him when he shows up because he'll be wearing a green hat. One of those green plush hats, I suppose. Hardly the sort of thing I'd put on my head if I were a deputy district attorney."

Sir Frederic did not reply. He was watching Bill Rankin approach rapidly across the floor. At the reporter's side walked, surprisingly light of step, an unimpressive little man with a bulging waistband and a very earnest expression on his chubby face.

"Here we are," Rankin said. "Sir Frederic Bruce—may I present Detective-Sergeant Chan, of the Honolulu police?"

Charlie Chan bent quickly like a jack-knife. "The honor," he said, "is unbelievably immense. In Sir Frederic's reflected glory I am happy to bask. The tiger has condescended to the fly."

Somewhat at a loss, the Englishman caressed his mustache and smiled down on the detective from Hawaii. As a keen judge of men, already he saw something in those black restless eyes that held his attention.

"I'm happy to know you, Sergeant Chan," he said. "It seems we think alike on certain important points. We should get on well together."

Rankin introduced Chan to the host, who greeted the little Chinese with obvious approval. "Good of you to come," he said.

"A four-horse chariot could not have dragged me in an opposite direction," Chan assured him.

Kirk looked at his watch. "All here but J. V. Morrow," he remarked. "He wrote me this morning that he's coming in at the Post Street entrance. If you'll excuse me, I'll have a look around."

He strolled down the corridor toward Post Street. Near the door, on a velvet davenport, sat a strikingly attractive young woman. No other seat was available, and with an interested glance at the girl Kirk also dropped down on the davenport. "If you don't mind——" he murmured.

"Not at all," she replied, in a voice that somehow suited her.

They sat in silence. Presently Kirk was aware that she was looking at him. He glanced up, to meet her smile.

"People are always late," he ventured.

"Aren't they?"

"No reason for it, usually. Just too inefficient to make the grade. Nothing annoys me more."

"I feel the same way," the girl nodded.

Another silence. The girl was still smiling at him.

"Go out of your way to invite somebody you don't know to lunch," Kirk continued, "and he isn't even courteous enough to arrive on time."

"Abominable," she agreed. "You have all my sympathy—Mr. Kirk."

He started. "Oh—you know me?"

She nodded. "Somebody once pointed you out to me—at a charity bazaar," she explained.

"Well," he sighed, "their charity didn't extend to me. Nobody pointed you out." He looked at his watch.

"This person you're expecting——" began the girl.

"A lawyer," he answered. "I hate all lawyers. They're always telling you something you'd rather not know."

"Yes—aren't they?"

"Messing around with other people's troubles. What a life."

"Frightful." Another silence. "You say you don't know this lawyer?" A rather unkempt young man came in and hurried past. "How do you expect to recognize him?"

"He wrote me he'd be wearing a green hat. Imagine! Why not a rose behind his ear?"

"A green hat." The girl's smile grew even brighter. Charming, thought Kirk. Suddenly he stared at her in amazement. "Good lord—you're wearing a green hat!" he cried.

"I'm afraid I am."

"Don't tell me——"

"Yes—it's true. I'm the lawyer. And you hate all lawyers. What a pity."

"But I didn't dream——"

"J. V. Morrow," she went on. "The first name is June."

"And I thought it was Jim," he cried. "Please forgive me."

"You'd never have invited me if you'd known—would you?"

"On the contrary—I wouldn't have invited anybody else. But come along. There are a lot of murder experts in the lobby dying to meet you."

They rose, and walked rapidly down the corridor, "You're interested in murder?" Kirk inquired.

"Among other things," she smiled.

"Must take it up myself," Kirk murmured.

Men turned to look at her a second time, he noticed. There was an alertness in her dark eyes that resembled the look in Chan's, her manner was brisk and businesslike, but for all that she was feminine, alluring.

He introduced her to the surprised Sir Frederic, then to Charlie Chan. The expression on the face of the little Chinese did not alter. He bowed low.

"The moment has charm," he remarked.

Kirk turned to Rankin. "And all the time," he accused, "you knew who J. V. Morrow was."

The reporter shrugged. "I thought I'd let you find it out for yourself. Life holds so few pleasant surprises."

"It never held a pleasanter one for me," Kirk answered. They went in to the table he had engaged, which stood in a secluded corner.

When they were seated, the girl turned to her host. "This was so good of you. And of Sir Frederic, too. I know how busy he must be."

The Englishman bowed. "A fortunate moment for me," he smiled, "when I decided I was not too busy to meet J. V. Morrow. I had heard that in the States young women were emancipated——"

"Of course, you don't approve," she said.

"Oh—but I do," he murmured.

"And Mr. Chan. I'm sure Mr. Chan disapproves of me."

Chan regarded her blankly. "Does the elephant disapprove of the butterfly? And who cares?"

"No answer at all," smiled the girl. "You are returning to Honolulu soon, Mr. Chan?"

A delighted expression appeared on the blank face. "To-morrow at noon the *Maui* receives my humble person. We churn over to Hawaii together."

"I see you are eager to go," said the girl.

"The brightest eyes are sometimes blind," replied Chan. "Not true in your case. It is now three weeks since I arrived on the mainland, thinking to taste the joys of holiday. Before I am aware events engulf me, and like the postman who has day of rest I foolishly set out on long, tiresome walk. Happy to say that walk are ended now. With beating heart I turn toward little home on Punchbowl Hill."

"I know how you feel," said Miss Morrow.

"Humbly begging pardon to mention it, you do not. I have hesitation in adding to your ear that one thing calls me home with unbearable force. I am soon to be happy father."

"For the first time?" asked Barry Kirk.

"The eleventh occasion of the kind," Chan answered.

"Must be sort of an old story by now," Bill Rankin suggested.

"That is one story which does not get aged," Chan replied. "You will learn. But my trivial affairs have no place here. We are met to honor a distinguished guest." He looked toward Sir Frederic.

Bill Rankin thought of his coming story. "I was moved to get you two together," he said, "because I found you think alike. Sir Frederic is also scornful of science as an aid to crime detection."

"I have formed that view from my experience," remarked Sir Frederic.

"A great pleasure," Chan beamed, "to hear that huge mind like Sir Frederic's moves in same groove as my poor head-piece. Intricate mechanics good in books, in real life not so much so. My experience tell me to think deep about human people. Human passions. Back of murder what, always? Hate, greed, revenge, need to make silent the slain one. Study human people at all times."

"Precisely," agreed Sir Frederic. "The human element—that is what counts. I have had no luck with scientific devices. Take the dictaphone—it has been a complete washout at the Yard." He talked on, while the luncheon progressed. Finally he turned to Chan. "And what have your methods gained you, Sergeant? You have been successful, I hear."

Chan shrugged. "Luck—always happy luck."

"You're too modest," said Rankin. "That won't get you anywhere."

"The question now arises—where do I want to go?"

"But surely you're ambitious?" Miss Morrow suggested.

Chan turned to her gravely. "Coarse food to eat, water to drink, and the bended arm for a pillow—that is an old definition of happiness in my country. What is ambition? A canker that eats at the heart of the white man, denying him the joys of contentment. Is it also attacking the heart of white woman? I hope not." The girl looked away. "I fear I am victim of crude philosophy from Orient. Man—what is he? Merely one link in a great chain binding the past with the future. All times I remember I am link. Unsignificant link joining those ancestors whose bones repose on far distant hillsides with the ten children—it may now be eleven—in my house on Punchbowl Hill."

"A comforting creed," Barry Kirk commented.

"So, waiting the end, I do my duty as it rises. I tread the path that opens." He turned to Sir Frederic. "On one point, from my reading, I am curious. In your work at Scotland Yard, you follow only one clue. What you call the essential clue."

Sir Frederic nodded. "Such is usually our custom. When we fail, our critics ascribe it to that. They say, for example, that our obsession over the essential clue is the reason why we never solved the famous Ely Place murder."

They all sat up with interest. Bill Rankin beamed. Now things were getting somewhere. "I'm afraid we never heard of the Ely Place murder, Sir Frederic," he hinted.

"I sincerely wish I never had," the Englishman replied. "It was the first serious case that came to me when I took charge of the C. I. D. over sixteen years ago. I am chagrined to say I have never been able to fathom it."

He finished his salad, and pushed away the plate. "Since I have gone so far, I perceive I must go farther. Hilary Galt was the senior partner in the firm of Pennock and Galt, solicitors, with offices in Ely Place, Holborn. The business this firm carried on for more than a generation was unique of its kind. Troubled people in the highest ranks of society went to them for shrewd professional advice and Mr. Hilary Galt and his father-in-law, Pennock, who died some twenty years ago, were entrusted with more numerous and romantic secrets than any other firm of solicitors in London. They knew the hidden history of every rascal in Europe, and they rescued many persons from the clutches of blackmailers. It was their boast that they never kept records of any sort."

Dessert was brought, and after this interruption, Sir Frederic continued.

"One foggy January night sixteen years ago, a caretaker entered Mr. Hilary Galt's private office, presumably deserted for the day. The gas lights were ablaze, the windows shut and locked; there was no sign of any disturbance. But on the floor lay Hilary Galt, with a bullet in his brain.

"There was just one clue, and over that we puzzled for many weary months at the Yard. Hilary Galt was a meticulous dresser, his attire was perfect, always. It was perfect on this occasion—with one striking exception. His highly polished boots—I presume you call them shoes over here—were removed and standing on a pile of papers on top of his desk. And on his feet he wore a pair of velvet slippers, embellished with a curious design.

"These, of course, seemed to the Yard the essential clue, and we set to work. We traced those slippers to the Chinese Legation in Portland Place. Mr. Galt had been of some trifling service to the Chinese minister, and early on the day of his murder the slippers had arrived as a gift from that gentleman. Galt had shown them to his office staff, and they were last seen wrapped loosely in their covering near his hat and stick. That was as far as we got.

"For sixteen years I have puzzled over those slippers. Why did Mr. Hilary Galt remove his boots, don the slippers, and prepare himself as though for some extraordinary adventure? I don't know to this day. The slippers still haunt me. When I resigned from the Yard, I rescued them from the Black Museum and took them with me as a souvenir of my first case—an unhappy souvenir of failure. I should like to show them to you, Miss Morrow."

"Thrilling," said the girl.

"Annoying," corrected Sir Frederic grimly.

Bill Rankin looked at Charlie Chan. "What's your reaction to that case, Sergeant?" he inquired.

Chan's eyes narrowed in thought. "Humbly begging pardon to inquire," he said, "have you the custom, Sir Frederic, to put yourself in place of murderer?"

"It's a good idea," the Englishman answered, "if you can do it. You mean——"

"A man who has killed—a very clever man—he knows that Scotland Yard has fiercely fixed idea about essential clue. His wits accompany him. He furnishes gladly one essential clue which has no meaning and leads no place at all."

Sir Frederic regarded him keenly. "Excellent," he remarked. "And it has one great virtue—from your point of view. It completely exonerates your countrymen at the Chinese Legation."

"It might do more than that," suggested Barry Kirk.

Sir Frederic thoughtfully ate his dessert. No one spoke for some moments. But Bill Rankin was eager for more material.

"A very interesting case, Sir Frederic," he remarked. "You must have a lot like it up your sleeve. Murders that ended more successfully for Scotland Yard——"

"Hundreds," nodded the detective. "But none that still holds its interest for me like the crime in Ely Place. As a matter of fact, I have never found murder so fascinating as some other things. The murder case came and went and, with a rare exception such as this I have mentioned, was quickly forgotten. But there is one mystery that to me has always been the most exciting in the world."

"And what is that?" asked Rankin, while they waited with deep interest.

"The mystery of the missing," Sir Frederic replied. "The man or woman who steps quietly out of the picture and is never seen again. Hilary Galt, dead in his office, presents a puzzle, of course; still, there is something to get hold of, something tangible, a body on the floor. But if Hilary Galt had disappeared into the fog that gloomy night, leaving no trace—that would have been another story.

"For years I have been enthralled by the stories of the missing," the detective went on. "Even when they were outside my province, I followed many of them. Often the

solution was simple, or sordid, but that could never detract from the thrill of the ones that remained unsolved. And of all those unsolved cases, there is one that I have never ceased to think about. Sometimes in the night I wake up and ask myself—what happened to Eve Durand?"

"Eve Durand," repeated Rankin eagerly.

"That was her name. As a matter of fact, I had nothing to do with the case. It happened outside my bailiwick—very far outside. But I followed it with intense interest from the first. There are others, too, who have never forgotten—just before I left England I clipped from a British periodical a brief reference to the matter—I have it here." He removed a bit of paper from his purse. "Miss Morrow—will you be kind enough to read this aloud?"

The girl took the clipping. She began to read, in a low, clear voice:

> "A gay crowd of Anglo-Indians gathered one night fifteen years ago on a hill outside Peshawar to watch the moon rise over that isolated frontier town. Among the company were Captain Eric Durand and his wife, just out 'from home.' Eve Durand was young, pretty and well-born—a Miss Mannering, of Devonshire. Some one proposed a game of hide-and-seek before the ride back to Peshawar. The game was never finished. They are still looking for Eve Durand. Eventually all India was enlisted in the game. Jungle and bazaar, walled city and teak forest, were fine-combed for her. Through all the subterranean channels of that no-white-man's land of native life the search was carried by the famous

> secret service. After five years her husband retired to a life of seclusion in England, and Eve Durand became a legend—a horror tale to be told by ayahs to naughty children, along with the ghost stories of that north country."

The girl ceased reading, and looked at Sir Frederic, wide-eyed. There followed a moment of tense silence.

Bill Rankin broke the spell. "Some little game of hide-and-seek," he said.

"Can you wonder," asked Sir Frederic, "that for fifteen years the disappearance of Eve Durand, like Hilary Galt's slippers, has haunted me? A notably beautiful woman—a child, really—she was but eighteen that mysterious night at Peshawar. A blonde, blue-eyed, helpless child, lost in the dark of those dangerous hills. Where did she go? What became of her? Was she murdered? What happened to Eve Durand?"

"I'd rather like to know myself," remarked Barry Kirk softly.

"All India, as the clipping says, was enlisted in the game. By telegraph and by messenger, inquiries went, forward. Her heart-broken, frantic husband was given leave, and at the risk of his life he scoured that wild country. The secret service did its utmost. Nothing happened. No word ever came back to Peshawar.

"It was like looking for a needle in a haystack, and in time, for most people, the game lost its thrill. The hue and cry died down. All save a few forgot.

"When I retired from the Yard and set out on this trip around the world, India was of course on my itinerary.