



THE SLEUTH OF
ST. JAMES'S SQUARE

MELVILLE DAVISSON POST



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I. The Thing on the Hearth

"THE first confirmatory evidence of the thing, Excellency, was the print of a woman's bare foot."

He was an immense creature. He sat in an upright chair that seemed to have been provided especially for him. The great bulk of him flowed out and filled the chair. It did not seem to be fat that enveloped him. It seemed rather to be some soft, tough fiber, like the pudgy mass making up the body of a deep-sea thing. One got an impression of strength.

The country was before the open window; the clusters of cultivated shrub on the sweep of velvet lawn extending to the great wall that inclosed the place, then the bend of the river and beyond the distant mountains, blue and mysterious, blending indiscernibly into the sky. A soft sun, clouded with the haze of autumn, shone over it.

"You know how the faint moisture in the bare foot will make an impression."

He paused as though there was some compelling force in

the reflection. It was impossible to say, with accuracy, to what race the man belonged. He came from some queer blend of Eastern peoples. His body and the cast of his features were Mongolian. But one got always, before him, a feeling of the hot East lying low down against the stagnant Suez. One felt that he had risen slowly into our world of hard air and sun out of the vast sweltering ooze of it.

He spoke English with a certain care in the selection of the words, but with ease and an absence of effort, as though languages were instinctive to him—as though he could speak any language. And he impressed one with this same effortless facility in all the things he did.

It is necessary to try to understand this, because it explains the conception everybody got of the creature, when they saw him in charge of Rodman. I am using precisely the descriptive words; he was exclusively in charge of Rodman, as a jinn in an Arabian tale might have been in charge of a king's son.

The creature was servile—with almost a groveling servility. But one felt that this servility resulted from something potent and secret. One looked to see Rodman take Solomon's ring out of his waistcoat pocket.

I suppose there is no longer any doubt about the fact that Rodman was one of those gigantic human intelligences who sometimes appear in the world, and by their immense conceptions dwarf all human knowledge—a

sort of mental monster that we feel nature has no right to produce. Lord Bayless Truxley said that Rodman was some generations in advance of the time; and Lord Bayless Truxley was, beyond question, the greatest authority on synthetic chemistry in the world.

Rodman was rich and, everybody supposed, indolent; no one ever thought very much about him until he published his brochure on the scientific manufacture of precious stones. Then instantly everybody with any pretension to a knowledge of synthetic chemistry turned toward him.

The brochure startled the world.

It proposed to adapt the luster and beauty of jewels to commercial uses. We were being content with crude imitation colors in our commercial glass, when we could quite as easily have the actual structure and the actual luster of the jewel in it. We were painfully hunting over the earth, and in its bowels, for a few crystals and prettily colored stones which we hoarded and treasured, when in a manufacturing laboratory we could easily produce them, more perfect than nature, and in unlimited quantity.

Now, if you want to understand what I am printing here about Rodman, you must think about this thing as a scientific possibility and not as a fantastic notion. Take, for example, Rodman's address before the Sorbonne, or his report to the International Congress of Science in

Edinburgh, and you will begin to see what I mean. The Marchese Giovanni, who was a delegate to that congress, and Pastreaux, said that the something in the way of an actual practical realization of what Rodman outlined was the formulae. If Rodman could work out the formulae, jewel-stuff could be produced as cheaply as glass, and in any quantity—by the carload. Imagine it; sheet ruby, sheet emerald, all the beauty and luster of jewels in the windows of the corner drugstore!

And there is another thing that I want you to think about. Think about the immense destruction of value—not to us, so greatly, for our stocks of precious stones are not large; but the thing meant, practically, wiping out all the assembled wealth of Asia except the actual earth and its structures.

The destruction of value was incredible.

Put the thing some other way and consider it. Suppose we should suddenly discover that pure gold could be produced by treating common yellow clay with sulphuric acid, or that some genius should set up a machine on the border of the Sahara that received sand at one end and turned out sacked wheat at the other! What, then, would our hoarded gold be worth, or the wheat-lands of Australia, Canada or our Northwest?

The illustrations are fantastic. But the thing Rodman was after was a practical fact. He had it on the way. Giovanni and Lord Bayless Truxley were convinced that the man

would work out the formulae. They tried, over their signatures, to prepare the world for it.

The whole of Asia was appalled. The rajahs of the native states in India prepared a memorial and sent it to the British Government.

The thing came out after the mysterious, incredible tragedy. I should not have written that final sentence. I want you to think, just now, about the great hulk of a man that sat in his big chair beyond me at the window.

It was like Rodman to turn up with an outlandish human creature attending him hand and foot. How the thing came about reads like a lie; it reads like a lie; the wildest lie that anybody ever put forward to explain a big yellow Oriental following one about.

But it was no lie. You could not think up a lie to equal the actual things that happened to Rodman. Take the way he died!....

The thing began in India. Rodman had gone there to consult with the Marchese Giovanni concerning some molecular theory that was involved in his formulas. Giovanni was digging up a buried temple on the northern border of the Punjab. One night, in the explorer's tent, near the excavations, this inscrutable creature walked in on Rodman. No one knew how he got into the tent or where he came from.

Giovanni told about it. The tent-flap simply opened, and the big Oriental appeared. He had something under his

arm rolled up in a prayer-carpet. He gave no attention to Giovanni, but he salaamed like a coolie to the little American.

"Master," he said, "you were hard to find. I have looked over the world for you."

And he squatted down on the dirty floor by Rodman's camp stool.

Now, that's precisely the truth. I suppose any ordinary person would have started no end of fuss. But not Rodman, and not, I think, Giovanni. There's the attitude that we can't understand in a genius—did you ever know a man with an inventive mind who doubted a miracle? A thing like that did not seem unreasonable to Rodman.

The two men spent the remainder of the night looking at the present that the creature brought Rodman in his prayer-carpet. They wanted to know where the Oriental got it, and that's how his story came out.

He was something—searcher, seems our nearest English word to it—in the great Shan Monastery on the southeastern plateau of the Gobi. He was looking for Rodman because he had the light—here was another word that the two men could find no term in any modern language to translate; a little flame, was the literal meaning.

The present was from the treasure-room of the monastery; the very carpet around it, Giovanni said, was worth twenty thousand lire. There was another thing that

came out in the talk that Giovanni afterward recalled. Rodman was to accept the present and the man who brought it to him. The Oriental would protect him, in every way, in every direction, from things visible and invisible. He made quite a speech about it. But, there was one thing from which he could not protect him.

The Oriental used a lot of his ancient words to explain, and he did not get it very clear. He seemed to mean that the creative Forces of the spirit would not tolerate a division of worship with the creative forces of the body—the celibate notion in the monastic idea.

Giovanni thought Rodman did not understand it; he thought he himself understood it better. The monk was pledging Rodman to a high virtue, in the lapse of which something awful was sure to happen.

Giovanni wrote a letter to the State Department when he learned what had happened to Rodman. The State Department turned it over to the court at the trial. I think it was one of the things that influenced the judge in his decision. Still, at the time, there seemed no other reasonable decision to make. The testimony must have appeared incredible; it must have appeared fantastic. No man reading the record could have come to any other conclusion about it. Yet it seemed impossible—at least, it seemed impossible for me—to consider this great vital bulk of a man as a monk of one of the oldest religious orders in the world. Every common, academic

conception of such a monk he distinctly negated. He impressed me, instead, as possessing the ultimate qualities of clever diplomacy—the subtle ambassador of some new Oriental power, shrewd, suave, accomplished.

When one read the yellow-backed court-record, the sense of old, obscure, mysterious agencies moving in sinister menace, invisibly, around Rodman could not be escaped from. You believed it. Against your reason, against all modern experience of life, you believed it.

And yet it could not be true! One had to find that verdict or topple over all human knowledge—that is, all human knowledge as we understand it. The judge, cutting short the criminal trial, took the only way out of the thing.

There was one man in the world that everybody wished could have been present at the time. That was Sir Henry Marquis. Marquis was chief of the Criminal Investigation Department of Scotland Yard. He had been in charge of the English secret service on the frontier of the Shan states, and at the time he was in Asia.

As soon as Scotland Yard could release Sir Henry, it sent him. Rodman's genius was the common property of the world. The American Government could not, even with the verdict of a trial court, let Rodman's death go by under the smoke-screen of such a weird, inscrutable mystery.

I was to meet Sir Henry and come here with him. But my train into New England was delayed, and when I arrived