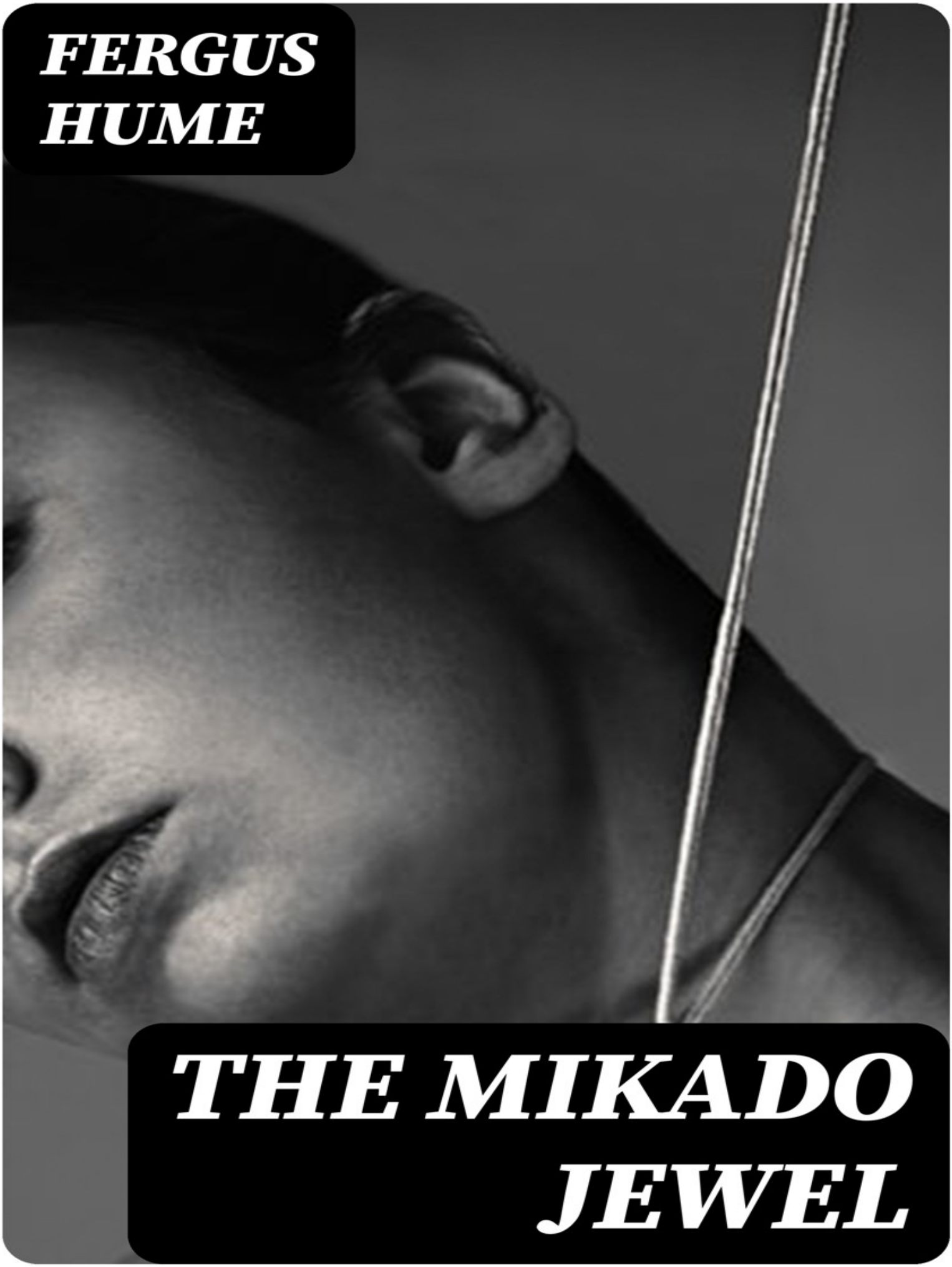
FERGUS HUME



THE MIKADO JEWEL

Fergus Hume

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CHAPTER I

A MYSTERIOUS MISSION

From the main thoroughfare of Bayswater, where the shops display their goods and the tides of life run strongly, Crook Street extends its long line of ugly dwellings to a considerable distance. Its shape suggests a shepherd's crook,--hence undoubtedly the name--as it finally terminates in a curved *cul de sac*, the end of which is blocked by Number One hundred and eleven. This is an imposing, if somewhat dilapidated mansion, standing in its own limited grounds, which are surrounded by a high crumbling wall of brick, more or less overgrown with grimy ivy. There is a small front garden, planted with stunted shrubs; a narrow passage on either side of the house, screened midway by green-painted trellis-work, and--at the back--a worn-out lawn, dominated by a funereal cedar. Beneath this, through rain and sunshine, is a rustic table and a rustic seat, where the boarders have afternoon tea in summertime. Everywhere there is a feeling of dampness.

The mansion is of Georgian architecture, square and heavy, greatly in need of a coat of paint, which it has not received for years. With its discoloured surface, once white, its cheap stucco scaling off in leprous patches, its trails of moss and soot, never to be washed off by any rain, however violent, it looks a tumbledown, ruinous sort of dwelling. Or, as an imaginative boarder once suggested, it is like a derelict hulk, stranded in a stagnant backwater of Life's

mighty River. It is certainly doleful, and infinitely dreary, only securing inhabitants by reason of the unusually cheap board and lodging to be obtained under its weather-worn roof.

Mrs. Sellars, who rented this sad suburban dwelling, euphoniously called it "The Home of Art," and in a seductive advertisement invited any male or female connected with music, literature, painting, poetry, and more particularly with the drama, to enjoy the refinements of an æsthetic abode at the moderate cost of twenty shillings a week, inclusive. As the house was shabbily comfortable, and its mistress was a retired actress of cheery manners, still indirectly connected with the stage, the bedrooms of The Home of Art were generally occupied by youths and maidens, ambitious of renown. There were very few really old people, as Mrs. Sellars--although elderly herself--did not care for the aged, who had no future, but loved to gather the young and aspiring round her hospitable table. And that same table truly deserved the kindly term, for the slatternly, good-natured woman supplied far better food in far larger quantities than the rate of payment allowed. Indeed, it is questionable if Mrs. Sellars made any profit whatsoever, as nearly all the boarders were juvenile and hungry. But what they paid, together with the landlady's small private income, kept things going in a happy-go-lucky fashion, which was all that was necessary. The children--as Mrs. Sellars called her boarders--adored "Ma," as the boarders called Mrs. Sellars, and with good reason, for she gave one and all largely what money could not buy. She advised, she sympathized, she nursed, she scolded, and to her the

children came with their troubles, great and small, for aid and consolation. It was no wonder that with such a blessed helper of humanity, the ruinous old suburban boarding-house was usually filled to its greatest capacity.

But full as The Home of Art was last November, on one night of that foggy month it was empty from seven o'clock until midnight of all the boarders. A third-floor lodger--the lean youth with bright and bird-like eyes--had not only written a play, which Ma pronounced magnificent, but the same was to be produced on this very evening at a suburban theatre. Of course, this was a red-letter day--or, rather, night--at The Home of Art, and equally of course, Mrs. Sellars led forth her children to occupy boxes and stalls and pit and dress-circle on the great occasion. By her advice the friends of the playwright were thus fairly distributed throughout the house so that they might applaud vehemently at the right moment and stir up the public to enthusiasm. Even the cook and the parlour-maid, the housemaid and a decayed butler, who had fallen, through drink, from Mayfair to Bayswater, put on their best clothes and departed for the night's entertainment. Already the supper--and a very good supper, too--was laid out in the shabby dining-room, and would be eaten at midnight by the boarders, when they returned with Ma and the successful playwright. And assuredly he would be successful--no one had any doubt on that point, for Mrs. Sellars had long since infected all her lodgers with her constant optimism. With Ma as the head of the house, the atmosphere could scarcely fail to be cheerful. Even debts, duns, difficulties, disappointments and suspense could not, and never did,

damp the hopeful spirits of the little community. And Ma, with her unfailing good humour and helpful nature, was responsible for this happy state of affairs.

When the occupants of The Home of Art departed for the Curtain Theatre, two people remaining behind had the entire house to themselves. One was Mrs. Pentreddle, who had sprained her ankle on the previous day, and could not leave the sofa on which she lay in the drawing-room with any degree of comfort, and the other was Patricia Carrol, the out-of-work Irish governess, who had arranged to stop and look after the old lady. And Mrs. Pentreddle was really old, being not far short of sixty. She was the landlady's sister, who had come up from Devonshire on a visit six days before the exodus to the theatre: a tall, gaunt, grim woman, wholly unlike Mrs. Sellars in looks and disposition. No one would have believed the two women to be sisters had not the relationship been vouched for by Ma herself. "Martha never was like me," said Mrs. Sellars, when her boarders commented on the dissimilarity, "always as heavy as I was light. Comedy and Tragedy, our Pa called us in the old days. Not that Martha ever had any turn for the stage. It was only Pa's way of talking. Martha's a killjoy, poor dear, as her late husband was drowned at sea and her only child's a sailor also, who likewise may find his grave in the vast and wandering deep. She's housekeeper to Squire Colpster, of Beckleigh, in Devonshire, and knows more about managing servants than I've ever forgotten." And, as usual, she finished with her jolly laugh.

Mrs. Pentreddle certainly was no favourite with the boarders, as her lean and anxious, wrinkled and pallid face,

her hard black eyes and melancholy dark garments impressed them unpleasantly. She spoke very little, but constantly maintained a watchful attitude, as though she was expecting something to happen or someone to tap her on her shoulder. As a rule she kept to Mrs. Sellars' private sitting-room, which pleased everyone, as the dour woman was such a wet blanket. But on the night of the play she insisted upon being carried down to the drawing-room in spite of the sprained ankle, which should have kept her in bed. Mrs. Sellars remonstrated, but the sister from Devonshire had her own way, saying that the first floor was preferable to the second, as it was less dismal and more comfortable. "One would think that Martha expected something to happen," said cheerful Mrs. Sellars, when she set out for the theatre with her train, "and was afraid to be too far away from the nearest policeman!" This remark was afterwards remembered when something did happen, as emblematic of Ma's prophetic powers.

The drawing-room was a large apartment with a fire-place at one end and a door leading from the hall at the other. One side was taken up by the windows, heavily curtained, and the other by large folding doors, usually closed, which gave admission to the dining-room. Outside, a narrow iron-railed balcony ran in front of the three windows from the entrance door to the corner of the house, and below this was the basement. Within, the room was fairly comfortable in a shabby, slatternly sort of way, although overcrowded with furniture of the Albert period, which had been picked up at various sales. Indeed, the entire house was furnished with the flotsam and jetsam of auction-room

derelicts of prosperous days. In the drawing-room were rep-covered chairs, two horse-hair sofas, several round tables, each poised on its shaky leg, fender-stools, Berlin-wool screens, a glittering glass chandelier, and on either side of the handsome marble time-piece which stood on the mantel-shelf, antique green ornaments with dangling prisms of glass. The walls were covered with faded scarlet flock paper, the floor with a worn red carpet, bestrewn with bunches of poppies mingled with wheat-ears, and the three windows were draped with stained, ragged, crimson curtains of rich brocade. Mrs. Sellars was very proud of those gorgeous curtains, but they were distinctly out of date--a matter of indifference to those who occupied The Home of Art, in spite of its name.

One of the horse-hair sofas had been drawn to the fire, and Mrs. Pentreddle lay thereon, with her hard black eyes fixed on the leaping flames. Outside, the night was chilly and damp, the air was thick with fog, and even in the drawing-room could be heard the dripping of water from the ivy clothing the surrounding wall. In spite of its being in London, the house was markedly isolated, and only occasionally did a policeman venture down the curved *cul de sac*. But within, all was shabbily warm and comfortable, and Mrs. Pentreddle's grim face relaxed into more pleasant lines. Nothing could be heard but the dripping of the water, the ticking of the clock and the occasional fall of a morsel of coal from the grate. But shortly the almost silence became oppressive, and Mrs. Pentreddle spoke in her harsh voice.

"It's very kind of you to stay with me, Miss Carrol," she said, glancing sideways at her companion; "few young

ladies would do that when a theatre-treat is offered to them."

The girl addressed raised her eyes from the evening paper which she had been reading and smiled. Patricia Carrol's smile was delightful, and displayed such white teeth that her beauty was enhanced. But even when her face was in repose, she looked an extremely pretty girl, and was one of those richly-coloured Irish brunettes, who remind the observer of a peach ripening against a mellow brick wall. Her hair was bluish black, of a wavy quality which lent itself admirably to the style of coiffure which she affected, and her eyes were sea-blue, of that wonderful Irish tint which goes so well with dark tresses. Her admirable figure was clothed plainly, but tastefully, in a Prussian blue serge dress, perfectly cut, and worn with a charming natural grace. Her hands and feet were slim and aristocratic, and her whole air was one of repose and good-breeding. She was a flower of civilization, and should have bloomed amidst more fitting surroundings than the shabby drawing-room could afford. Yet she was only a poor little governess seeking for employment, and even when Mrs. Pentreddle spoke to her, she had been searching the columns of the newspaper in the hope of finding a situation.

"Oh, I am very pleased to stay with you, Mrs. Pentreddle," she said, with her charming smile. "I have too many troubles to care about going to a play. I would only take them with me, and then would scarcely enjoy the performance."

"That is true," replied the elder woman, examining the girl closely; "and yet you should have no troubles at your

age and with your looks."

Patricia coloured and shook her head. "My looks are really against me," she said, somewhat sadly; "ladies don't like to engage me on that account. If I were ugly and old I should be better able to get what I want."

"What do you want, Miss Carrol?" asked Mrs. Pentreddle, abruptly.

"Fifty pounds a year as a nursery governess if I can get it," replied the girl promptly, "or even thirty, so long as I can get a situation. If it were not for dear, kind Mrs. Sellars I don't think I could hold out. She's an angel, and lets me stay here for ten shillings a week until I can get something to do. Bless her!"

"How did you come to this?" asked Mrs. Pentreddle, still abruptly.

Miss Carrol coloured, for she did not like to whimper about her misfortunes to strangers. "It's a long story," she said evasively; "all you need know is that my father was a Colonel in the army, and that when he died his pension ceased and I was left penniless. But I have had a good education, and I hope to get a situation as a governess."

"Won't your friends assist you?"

"I have no friends," said the girl simply; "when I left the world I was brought up in, I left my friends for ever."

"I don't think so; you will go back to them some day," said Mrs. Pentreddle encouragingly, although the expression of her iron face did not soften; "but, meanwhile, if you wish to earn a five-pound note----" she hesitated.

The newspaper slipped from Patricia's lap to the ground and she looked surprised. "I don't understand!"

"If you will do an errand for me I will give you five pounds."

"Oh, I can do an errand for you without taking money."

"I don't ask-you to: this is rather a dangerous errand. But I think you are brave, and I know that you are hard up----"

Patricia interrupted. "I have enough money to go on with," she said, flushing.

"At ten shillings a week!" retorted Mrs. Pentreddle, unpleasantly. "Well, please yourself!"--she turned over on the sofa--"I have given you the chance."

Miss Carrol thought hard during the silence which ensued. Certainly, in her pauper condition, five pounds would be a god-send, and, as she had determined to lay aside all pride when she gave up the position to which her birth entitled her, she considered that she might as well take what she could get at this difficult stage of her fortunes. For five pounds she would do much, but---- "Is the errand an honest one?" she asked suddenly with a catch in her voice. The thought had just struck her.

"Perfectly honest," said Mrs. Pentreddle coldly. "What is there about me that you should think me capable of asking you to do something wrong?"

"Nothing at all," confessed Miss Carrol frankly; "but if you wish me to go on a mysterious errand, it is only natural that I should desire to hear everything about it."

Mrs. Pentreddle carefully lowered her injured foot to the ground, and sitting up very straight, folded two thin hands on her lap. "You shall hear," said she quietly, "only I must request you to keep your own counsel."

Patricia nodded. "That goes without the saying," was her answer, and she again wondered if the five pounds could be earned honestly.

"I came up to London to go on this errand myself," explained the old lady slowly, "but this sprain has prevented my keeping an appointment which must be kept to-night. As the matter is important, I am willing to pay you the money on your return with It."

"It? What is 'It'?"

"A small deal box you can easily carry in your hand. A man will give it to you if you will stand at nine o'clock by the right-hand corner of that bridge which crosses the Serpentine. On this side, remember, before you cross the bridge. Nine o'clock, and you must hold this"--she fished amongst the cushions of the sofa and produced a small bull's-eye lantern, the glass of which was pasted over with red paper. "This is the signal."

"The signal?" echoed Miss Carrol, rather nervously, for all this mystery did indeed hint at something criminal.

"Oh, you needn't turn so white," said Mrs. Pentreddle scornfully. "What I ask you to do is perfectly straightforward. There is nothing wrong about it."

Patricia still hesitated, vaguely afraid to be implicated in such unusual doings. "If you will explain further, Mrs. Pentreddle----"

"There is nothing more need be explained just now," interrupted the other woman imperiously; "when you return with the box, you shall know all. What I am requesting you to do can harm no one, but can benefit someone."

"Yourself?"

"No! That is, in a way, perhaps. But you can judge for yourself when I am able to tell you my reason. That will be when you return. If five pounds is not sufficient, I can give you ten, although I can ill afford it."

"I am satisfied with five," said Patricia quickly, and flushing again, for even in her poverty she shrank from taking money. "I don't like mysteries, and only accept your offer as I need money very badly. But for all the wealth in the world I would not go if I thought that there was anything wrong," and she looked searchingly at her companion.

"How many times do you need me to assure you that there is nothing wrong," said Mrs. Pentreddle, impatiently; "you are singularly suspicious for a girl of your years. All that is necessary is for you to receive this tiny box from the man who will hand it to you."

"How shall I know the man?"

"There is no need for you to know him at all. The red light of the lantern will assure him that you are the person who is to receive the box. Well?"

Miss Carrol rose nervously and ran her fingers through her hair, as she walked up and down the long room. Her instinct told her to refuse a mission about which she knew so little, but the prospect of earning five pounds in this easy manner was so alluring, that she could not find it in her heart to decline. After all, Mrs. Pentreddle was the sister of the woman who had been, and was, so kind to her, and in every way appeared to be an almost aggressively respectable person. It was worth risking, she thought, and at this moment, as though to clinch the matter, Mrs. Pentreddle's voice broke in on her uneasy meditations.

"I can't wait much longer," said the old woman; "if you won't do what I ask, perhaps you will telephone to the nearest office, asking that a messenger-boy may be sent to get what I want. It will certainly be cheaper."

This proposal banished Patricia's last scruple, as, if a messenger-boy could be employed, the errand, mysterious as it seemed, could not have anything to do with criminal matters. Miss Carrol picked up the lantern, with its faked red glass. "I shall go at once," she declared hurriedly, for now she feared lest she should lose the money, "but who will attend to your foot while I am away, Mrs. Pentreddle?"

"I can stay here, as I am doing. Rest is the sole thing which can cure my sprain. You will only be away an hour, more or less. It is a quarter past eight now, and the distance to the Serpentine bridge is not far. Nine o'clock is the hour. You know exactly what you have to do," and she repeated her instructions, to which the girl listened carefully.

"I am to show the red light standing on this side of the Serpentine at the right-hand corner of the bridge," she said slowly, to be sure that she knew what she had to do. "I understand. What shall I say to the man?"

"Nothing. He will simply place a box in your hand and walk away. All you have to do is to bring the box to me, and then you shall know all about the matter which strikes you as being so strange. Don't lose any time, please."

Indeed, there was no time to be lost, as it would take Patricia some minutes to get her out-of-door things on. She ran up the stairs, and assumed boots in place of slippers, a heavy cloak as the night was damp, a plain cloth toque, and gloves. She then took her umbrella in one hand, the lantern,

unlighted, in the other, and descended to say a few last words to Mrs. Pentreddle; or, rather, to hear them, for the old lady gave her no opportunity of speaking. For such a grim, unemotional woman, Mrs. Pentreddle seemed quite excited, although she tried to keep herself calm. But a vivid spot of red was certainly showing itself on either pale cheek.

"Show the red light and wait in silence," she directed; "do nothing more, and say nothing at all. Then when you receive the box come back with it at once to me. You thoroughly understand?"

"I thoroughly understand."

"I am glad. Finally, let me assure you once more that there is nothing dishonest or even wrong about the errand I am sending you on."

There was nothing more to be said, and Patricia departed. When she closed the front door of The Home of Art, and found herself in the street, she became aware that the night was damp and dense with fog. The gas-lights, however, shone blurred and vague through the white mists, so there was no need for her to use the lantern. No one was about, not even a policeman--in the curve of the *cul de sac* at all events; but when she passed into the straight line of Crook Street, she almost fell into the arms of a constable who was standing under a lamp. Patricia paused to ask a question.

"Will the fog get worse, officer?"

"I think it will, miss," said the man, touching his helmet and bending to look at her face. "I should advise you not to go far."

"I am only going to the Park to see a friend," answered Miss Carrol, heedlessly; and then remembering that it was a complete stranger whom she had to see, and one to whom she was not even to speak, she regretted having been so doubtfully truthful. "What is the time?" she asked, to cover her confusion.

"Half-past eight o'clock, miss," said the constable, consulting a fat silver watch. "Best go home again, miss. You might get lost in this fog, and in the Park there are some rough characters about."

"Oh, I am all right, thank you," said Patricia with a bright smile, and passed along. All the same she now began to feel uncomfortable, and to realize that Hyde Park on a foggy November night was not exactly the place for a young lady. Only the desire to earn the coveted five pounds nerved her to do that which she had agreed to do.

Crook Street is not far from the main entrance to the Park on the Bayswater side, and, as the fog grew thin further on, Patricia found herself speedily on the broad path which leads directly to the Serpentine bridge. She knew this portion of the Park extremely well, as, having much time on her hands, she frequently wandered about the grassy spaces on idle afternoons. There were few people about, as the night was so disagreeable, and those she saw moved swiftly past her. Occasionally she caught a glimpse of vague forms under the trees: but she never looked closely at these night-prowlers, but, keeping in the middle of the path, moved steadily to her destination. At last she came to the bridge and took up her station at the right-hand corner on

this near side. Having come to the end of her journey she lighted the lantern.

Across the water the broad bridge stretched weirdly, vanishing into the fog, which here grew denser, like the Bridge of Life in the Vision of Mirza. Patricia had read Addison's fantastic story in some school-book, and it was suggested to her again by the sight before her. People came out of the mist and disappeared into it again: some passed, unconscious of the quiet figure at the corner, while others peered into her face. But no one addressed her, much to her relief, and the ruddy light of her lantern shone like an angry star. Then the expected happened in one moment and quite without preparation.

A man came swiftly over the bridge--so swiftly, that it might have been said that he was running. She had no time to see what he was like in looks, or how he was dressed, before he caught sight of the red light and stopped for one moment to thrust a small box into her hand. Then he darted away to the left and disappeared along the bank on the Bayswater side. That was all!

CHAPTER II

WHAT HAPPENED

For some moments Patricia stood still, with the box in her hand, and stared into the gloomy fog, behind which the man was retreating. Another man passed her swiftly, as if in pursuit of the first, but halted for one single moment to look at her. She was an indistinct figure in the misty air, but she could feel that his eyes were piercing her through and through. A few seconds later and he disappeared also, but whither he went she could not tell. The whole oddity of the episode startled her, although much that had taken place had been anticipated and described by Mrs. Pentreddle.

As the name flashed across Miss Carrol's brain, she remembered that she had yet to complete her mission by taking back the box to the old lady. Almost mechanically, and with the lantern still burning, she began to retrace her steps in the direction of Bayswater. The fog was growing denser, but by her knowledge of the path and the feel of the hard gravel under her feet, she was enabled to avoid getting lost. A sudden sense of weariness, which no doubt came from the slackening of her nervous tension, overcame her, and she was glad to sink down on the first bench she came to. This was near a gas-lamp, and in the blurred circle of light she felt safe from the attentions of any night-bird. Then a strange thing happened.

It was a sensation and nothing more: one connected with the small box she held so tightly clasped in her hand. As she gripped it, she felt--with her sixth sense, no doubt--that waves of force were radiating from its interior. Patricia's body being Celtic, was strung with extraordinarily delicate nerves, and by these she was made aware of many influences which passed by less highly organized mortals.

Nine human beings out of ten would not have felt the radiating influence of whatever was contained in the box, but she did. And as wave after wave extended outward, she felt as though some invisible force was driving back invisible evil. The nervous fears she had hitherto felt--and no wonder, considering the hour and the place and the mission--vanished entirely, and she smiled to think that anything could ever have frightened her. A warm light, felt rather than seen, seemed to envelop her, and within its charmed circle no evil could come. Had a robber attacked her, had an earthquake happened, had a storm of thunder and lightning devastated the air, she would not have felt the least fear. The regular waves of this strange force passed ever outward, repelling all harm, all fear; her body thrilled to the pulsations. It was as though some unseen being was draping her in his mantle of power.

Naturally she connected these weird manifestations with the box, and that with Mrs. Pentreddle. How came it, she asked herself, that so commonplace a woman should be connected with so extraordinary an object? And then she recollected that she had not set eyes on the object, whatever it might be; yet to do so she had only to look into the box. Opening the shutter of the lantern in which the glass was set, so that she could see by the natural light and not by the red glare, she examined the box. It was a common deal case, very small and very roughly made, with the lid held down by a thin wire. In fact, it was only one of those boxes furnished by shopkeepers to customers, so that delicate goods--china, glass, and such-like--might be carried away without danger of breakage; it was not even swathed

in paper or bound with string. It seemed strange that if what the box contained were valuable or dangerous more precautions had not been taken in rendering its contents safe. Then, again, the man who had delivered it in so odd a way had been overcome with fear. Patricia guessed that when she remembered his laboured breathing, the backward glance he had thrown over his shoulder, and the hurried way in which he had made off, after thrusting the box into her hand. Finally, there was no doubt that the other man, who had halted for the moment, was in pursuit. Patricia looked up when she arrived at this point of her meditations, but could see no one, although she heard some footsteps dying away and others approaching on the hard gravel. And all the time she was considering things, the waves of power still continued to radiate. As they had banished her fears, they had also stimulated her limbs, and she no longer felt weary. This being the case, she half rose to return to The Home of Art, since there was no longer any reason for delay.

But, being a woman, she was curious, and desired to see what it was that produced these queer sensations. And, indeed, a less inquisitive person would have also acted as she now did, for it is the desire of all to learn the why and the wherefore of the unknown. Almost without thinking, and certainly without consideration, Patricia untwisted the wire and peered into the depths of the box. In the vivid light of the lamp a green radiance flashed upward and outward, and she uttered an exclamation of surprise and delight.

She would scarcely have been a woman had she not done so. At the bottom of the tiny box, and as if it had been

hastily thrown in, was a jewel, the like of which she had never set eyes on. With a gasp of pleasure she took it in her hand, never casting a thought to the danger of that public examination, at that dark hour, in that lonely locality. She might easily have been robbed and rendered insensible by a blow, as she sat there spell-bound, gazing at the brilliant object which just covered the palm of her gloved hand. A more lovely thing she had never seen.

The luminous green poured from the heart of a large emerald, perfectly cut and polished. It formed the centre of a flower, the petals of which were cut out of some hard, dull green stone, with exquisite art. As the girl stared, entirely fascinated by the sight, she became aware that the whole lovely jewel represented a chrysanthemum blossom, of which the emerald was the central glory. From this radiated the regular petals of the blossom, layer upon layer in perfect circles, until the outward round extended in delicate points to all quarters of the compass like the corona of the sun. And as this wonderful object lay on her open hand, Patricia felt still more strongly the waves of invisible force which radiated therefrom. It was as if some glorious power was welling up from the depths of the emerald to stream off from every carved petal. It was no wonder that she stared half hypnotized by the marvel. Suddenly even a stranger thing happened.

In a single moment, as it seemed, the force appeared to falter and weaken; the light which she felt was around her died away, and the darkness of the night closed in with uncomfortable swiftness. The radiance vanished from the jewel, and with a rush all her fears came back, as though

some magic no longer kept them at bay. She felt no sensation at all; in the carved chrysanthemum, she saw no glory, no charm; it was simply a beautiful ornament and nothing more. Just as she realized this with a murmur of dismay, someone suddenly leaped lightly forward and snatched the jewel from her hand. Before she could rise to her feet, the robber disappeared into the mist, running as delicately and swiftly as a startled cat. The terrified girl was left alone in the fog with the empty box.

For a single moment she remained stunned and motionless, and then, leaving lantern and umbrella and empty box behind, she started to run wildly after the thief, vaguely guessing the direction he had taken. In a few minutes she had completely lost herself amongst the trees, and then became aware with a shock of fear that she had left the path for the grassy spaces of the Park. There was no sign of the robber, peer as she might, here, there and everywhere into the surrounding gloom, and she sank down on the wet sward under a dripping tree, to weep with shame at the failure of her mission. She had betrayed her trust; she had lost the treasure. How could she face Mrs. Pentreddle without that which she had been sent to fetch? But for her curiosity in opening the box, the valuable jewel would not have been stolen. Some thief of the night must have seen her examining its beauty by lantern light, and forthwith had secured it for his own. Or it might be--and this was a second thought--the man who had followed the other, the man who had paused to look at her, piercing the darkness with cat-like vision, was the thief. In that case, there might be a chance of recovering the jewel, as Mrs. Pentreddle might

know the name of the person who desired her property. But was it Mrs. Pentreddle's property, and if it was, why should it have been delivered in so mysterious a fashion? And why should the first man have been afraid of the second man who pursued him? Finally--presuming that the pursuer had snatched the ornament from her hand--why should he have done so? Patricia's head buzzed with these questions, and she sat on the watery grass, almost weeping at her inability to answer any one of them. The position was terrible: she had lost the jewel and the five pounds also, as Mrs. Pentreddle certainly would not pay her the money.

But this was not the time for weeping, nor was Patricia Carrol a very tearful person. The only thing to be done was to return to Mrs. Pentreddle and make a clean breast of the whole occurrence. The old lady might know how to deal with the matter, seeing that there was some strange tale connected with the deal box and its contents of which Patricia was unaware. Such knowledge would probably enable Mrs. Pentreddle to take steps for the recovery of her property. The police would be called in, and--but here the girl paused. Would the police be called in, considering the mystery of the whole affair? Patricia, on swift reflection, thought not; but she thought--here her patience gave way, and she rose hastily, unable to put up further with the torment of her vexed brain. The most obvious thing to be done was to see Mrs. Pentreddle at once and explain. There was no other course open to her. But the girl's nerves quivered at the thought of the very unpleasant quarter of an hour she would probably have.

However, it was no use being a coward, and she stumbled as quickly as she could towards the broad path, anxious to reach the bench upon which she had left her umbrella, the lantern and the empty box. But the night was so gloomy and the fog so dense, that she became confused amidst the multiplicity of trees. With some violence she ran against one and falling half stunned to the ground, lay there quite unable to rise. Patricia was a clever and self-reliant girl, accustomed to act immediately and firmly in all emergencies. But this adventure had robbed her of calmness and of all will-power. She felt as though the end of the world had come, and in the cold, damp, lonely darkness she could have cried for help and comfort like a frightened child. But she retained sufficient self-command not to do so, and even exerted her will sufficiently to again stagger to her feet, and strive to find her bearings. With outstretched hands she wandered, trying to gain a glimpse of some light, but all in vain.

Then began a nightmare journey through the gloomy woods. Here was a girl in the heart of London, as wholly lost as a babe in some primeval forest. She stumbled here and groped there in an aimless fashion, until her senses became so confused that she did not know what to do. Several times she dropped, several times she rose, and for hours, as it seemed, she moved onward towards an ever-receding goal. Doubtless she was moving in a circle after the fashion of the lost, and in her vague wanderings she lost all count of time. In her heart she began to wish that the dawn would come to reveal her whereabouts, as in this darkness she certainly would never succeed in escaping from the enchantments of

this urban wood. And so Patricia dragged on and the night dragged on, and the effort to get back to light and humanity became a journey in eternity towards--as it seemed to her now bewildered senses--a goal which had no actual existence.

How long she wandered she did not know, having lost count of time, but finally her instinct moved her in the right direction, and she gained the broad path. But it was not the one she had strayed from, as she speedily ascertained when she chanced upon a policeman.

"The path to Bayswater, miss," he said, turning the bull's-eye light on her face and wondering at her haggard looks and bedraggled dress. "Why, you're right on the other side of the Park, miss, near the statoo."

Patricia knew that this was so, for above her in the foggy air rose the lofty pedestal of the Achilles statue. She must have wandered deviously across the vast space of the Park, and said so. The policeman readily accepted her explanation and added one of his own:

"I dessay you've got lost in the fog, miss, and no wonder, for it's as thick as pea-soup hereabouts. Not the night for a young lady to be out, miss," he ended inquisitively, and with a note of interrogation in his voice.

"I came out on an errand," said Miss Carrol faintly, for the adventure had left her weak, "and wandered off the Bayswater path near the Serpentine."

"And it's a mercy, miss, that you didn't fall in. What will you do now, miss?"

Patricia walked with him towards the gate, near the clock. "Call me a cab," she said, for although she could ill

afford it, she decided to drive, as it was quite impossible to walk. The fog forbade pedestrianism, let alone that she was much too weary to trudge all the way to Crook Street.

"What; a cab, miss? Certainly, miss, although it will be hard to find one in this fog," and the constable whistled shrilly.

"What is the time, please?" Patricia asked the same question as she had put to the other policeman.

"Half-past eleven, miss."

The girl uttered a cry of astonishment, and well she might. Having left The Home of Art at half-past eight, she must have been wandering about for at least three hours. It seemed centuries, and she hastily made for the cab which drove slowly up, looking like a spectre in the fog. What would Mrs. Pentreddle think of her being absent for so long? But this question was nothing beside the one which the old lady was bound to ask with respect to the lost emerald. "Tell the man to drive to No. III, Crook Street, Bayswater," said Patricia feverishly, and bestowed herself in the hansom; "and here!"--she handed the kindly policeman one of her precious coins, which he accepted with a salute, and gave the necessary direction to the driver. In a few minutes Patricia was on her homeward way, thankful that her strange adventure had not cost her her life, as it might have done.

But her thoughts were extremely unpleasant. She had lost her umbrella, which she could ill afford to do; also the lantern of Mrs. Pentreddle, and, worst of all, the extraordinary jewel she had been sent to fetch. How could she explain? The only answer she could find was the very

obvious one, that it would be best to tell the truth. Then she began to think what words she would use, until her head became confused and she dropped into an uneasy sleep. Meanwhile the cab crawled slowly and cautiously through the fog, towards The Home of Art. Patricia was made aware that she had arrived at her destination by the sudden jerk of the vehicle, as it came to a standstill. Then, still sleep-bemused, she alighted in a stumbling manner to find herself in the arms of Mrs. Sellars.

"Oh, my dear! where have you been? It's terrible; it's terrible!" and the good lady wrung her fat hands. "Oh, what is to be done?"

"What is terrible?" asked Patricia stupidly, for her head ached.

"Mrs. Pentreddle, my own sister; poor dear Martha is dead!"

"Dead!" Patricia felt her weary legs give way with sheer terror.

"Dead!" repeated Mrs. Sellars, weeping. "Murdered! Oh, dear! oh, dear!"

"Dead! Murdered!" Patricia echoed the words faintly, then fell unconscious at the feet of the weeping, distracted old actress.

"Why did you go out? Where have you been? Martha is dead--murdered!" she babbled incoherently.

CHAPTER III