

The Green Vapour

By Elliot O'Donnell

Near Bournemouth there is a house called the Caspar Beeches that never lets for any length of time. It has a very remarkable history, which, in the words of Mr. Mark Wildbridge, I now append. (Mr. Mark Wildbridge, by the way, was a clever amateur detective who died about the middle of last century, and many of his experiences, including the following, were narrated to me by one of his descendants.)

I had been attending to some newly planted shrubs in my garden, and was crossing the lawn on my way to the back premises to wash my hands, when the gate was swung open vigorously and a voice called out, "Can you tell me if Mr. Mark Wildbridge lives here?"

I looked at the speaker. He was a tall young man, slim and clean built, obviously an athlete, a public schoolman, and very much the gentleman.

I was by no means in the mood to receive strangers, but as his type especially appeals to me, I decided to be gracious to him. "I am Mark Wildbridge," I replied. "Can I be of any service to you?"

"Are you Mr. Wildbridge?" the young man said in astonishment. "Somehow I had formed such a different picture of you. But, of course, there is no reason why a detective should carry his trade in his face any more than an artist or author."

"Rather less reason, perhaps," I responded dryly. "Have you come to consult me professionally?"

The young man nodded. "Yes," he answered. "May I speak to you in private, somewhere where there is no chance of our being overheard?"

I conducted him to my study, and, after seeing him seated, begged him to proceed.

"Mr. Wildbridge," he began, leaning forward and eyeing me intently, "do you believe in family curses?"

"It depends," I said. "I have come across cases where there seems little doubt a family is labouring under some malign superphysical influence. But why do you ask?"

"For this reason," he replied, sitting up straight and assuming an expression of great intensity. "Two years ago I was living with my parents at the Caspar Beeches, near Bournemouth. My brother was coming home from India on sick leave, and my father and I had gone up to town to meet him, when, the day after we arrived, we got a wire to say that my mother had died suddenly. She had been absolutely well when we left her, so that the shock, as you may imagine, was terrible. Of course we hastened home at once, but the news was only too true—she was dead, and, at the inquest which followed in due course, a verdict of death from asphyxiation—cause unknown—was returned. Well, Mr. Wildbridge, exactly six months later my father was also found dead in his bedroom, and, as everything pointed to his having died in exactly the same manner as my mother, my brother and I had a detective down from Scotland Yard to inquire into the affair. He could, however, make nothing of it. The door of my father's room was found locked on the inside, the windows were all fastened, so that no one could have gained admission; and, besides, as nothing had been touched, and not a single article was missing, there was no apparent motive for a crime. At the same time, my brother and I were far from satisfied. Although, as the detective had pointed out to us, my father was alone when he met his death, it seemed to us that his end must have been brought about by some

unnatural and outside agency. The coroner's verdict was death from asphyxiation, the medical evidence tending to show that he had died from the effects of some poisonous gas. Yet whence came the gas and how was it administered? The sanitary authorities, whom we called in, declared, after a very careful examination, that all the drains were in the most excellent repair, so we simply didn't know what to think. My brother, who had imbibed mysticism in India, at length came to the conclusion that there was some curse on us. He said that my father had on several occasions spoken very gloomily about the parents' sins being visited on their children, and I, too, had noticed that my father at times was very despondent; but I had attributed this despondency merely to moodiness, and at the time pooh-poohed my brother's suggestion that there existed a mystery—something sinister in connection with some member of our own family. But since then I have altered my opinion, for my brother, who inherited the property, has also been found dead—killed by the same diabolical agency that for some unknown reason brought about the deaths of my mother and father. The Caspar Beeches is now mine, Mr. Wildbridge, and I have come to ask you what I had better do."

"You think, of course, that you may share the fate of your mother, father, and brother?" I asked.

"I think it extremely likely," he replied.

"You are the only one left in your family?"

"Yes," he said, "the only one."

"And what are your plans with regard to the Caspar Beeches?" I inquired. "Do you think of residing there?"

"I haven't made up my mind," he replied; "that is one of the points upon which I want your advice. I want to know what you think about these deaths. Do you think they were due to some as yet undiscovered physical cause, as, for instance, some unknown disease, or some gas the sanitary authorities have not been able to trace—or, to the superphysical?"

"I can form no opinion at present," I replied; "I must first have more details. But from what you have said, I think this case presents some novel and very extraordinary features. I should like to see the house. By the way, you haven't told me your name."

"Mansfield," the young man said—"Eldred Mansfield."

"The son of Sir Thomas Mansfield, the Bornean explorer?"

"Yes."

"Then you are the present baronet?"

The young man nodded.

"And in the event of your death," I remarked, "to whom do the title and estates revert?"

"I believe to some distant relative," Sir Eldred replied. "I cannot say definitely, for I have never inquired. I have no first cousins, and I know nothing about any others."

"That is rather odd," I observed, "not to know who succeeds you. Now, tell me—of whom does your household at the Caspar Beeches consist?"

"The butler Parry, his wife, who is housekeeper, and four other servants."

"Have the Parrys been with you long?"

"About four years."

"Do you like them?"

Not altogether," Sir Eldred replied. "Parry is rather fussy and officious, and his wife much too soapy. My father, however, found them honest, and I don't suppose I could improve on them."

"Well," I said, "as I have already remarked, I can't give you an opinion till I've seen the house. Supposing you engage me as your secretary?"

"An excellent idea," Sir Eldred cried, his face lighting with enthusiasm. "To tell the truth, I don't much like the idea of sleeping there alone. Will you go back with me to-night? I will wire to Parry to get a room ready for you."

As my time was my own just then, I agreed, and that afternoon saw me tearing off in a taxi to meet Sir Eldred at Waterloo.

The Caspar Beeches, a large old family mansion, is situated nearer Winton than Bournemouth proper, and in the midst of the most lovely forest scenery. An air of impressive sadness hung around it, which, although no doubt largely due to the season and lateness of the hour, still, I thought, owed its origin, in part, to some very different cause; and when, on entering, I glanced round the big, gloomy, oak-panelled hall with its dim, far-reaching galleries, I inwardly remarked that this might well be the home of a dozen hidden mysteries, a dozen lurking assassins, that could prowl about and hide there, without the remotest fear of discovery.

The door had been opened to us by a tall, thin, bald-headed old man, with small and rather deep-set eyes of the most pronounced blue, and a rather cut-away chin. He expressed himself overjoyed to see his young master back again, and was most emphatic in his assurances that our rooms were quite ready for us.

His wife, an elderly woman with dark, keen, penetrating eyes and slightly prominent cheekbones, met us in the hall. I knew, of course, that she was Mrs. Parry, when she spoke, but her voice came as a surprise. In striking contrast to her appearance it was soft and low, and not altogether unmusical. The other servants did not interest me much—they were the type one sees in all well-to-do establishments and yet I felt that if I were to get at the bottom of the mystery that unquestionably shrouded the deaths of Sir Eldred's three relatives, I must watch everyone very closely for the key to a great secret is often found where least expected.

We dined at eight o'clock, and after dinner I took a brief survey of the house. This enabled me to form some idea of the general arrangement of the rooms and where certain of them were situated. My bedroom, I found, was separated from that of Sir Eldred by the entire length of a corridor, and at my suggestion the room adjoining his own was allotted to me instead. Mrs. Parry demurred a little at the change, remarking that the room next Sir Eldred's had not been aired; but I told her I was not in the least degree likely to catch cold, as I had often slept in queer places, having spent a considerable portion of my life in the backwoods of Canada. Sir Eldred laughed.

"You don't know what care we are taken of here," he said. "I can assure you, if I were to feel even the suspicion of a draught it would be considered a most terrible calamity."

"Yes, indeed," Mrs. Parry said, with a sigh, "after what has happened, Sir Eldred's life is so precious we feel we cannot be too careful."

"Have you any idea what killed your late master and mistress?" I asked her aside. "What terrible times you have gone through!"

"Ay, terrible indeed," she said. "A kinder master and mistress no one could have had. Parry and I always thought something blew in from outside. There is too much vegetation

in the grounds, and it grows so near the house. They do say the place is built on the site of a morass.

“A morass, and in Hampshire!” I laughed. “Why, that sounds incredible. The soil is surely gravel.”

“So it may be—now,” she replied. “I’m speaking of many years ago. The house is very ancient, sir.”

I asked Sir Eldred afterwards if there was any truth in her remark, and he said, “Yes, I believe there was a swamp here once; at least there is mention of one in a very old history of Hampshire that we have in the library. It was drawn off towards the end of the sixteenth century when the house was built. But I’m surprised at the Parrys knowing anything about it, for I’ve never heard anyone allude to it—not even my father.”

“Are the Parrys of the ordinary servant class?” I asked.

“I believe so,” Sir Eldred replied; “but I really know nothing of their antecedents, for I seldom encourage them to speak. As I told you, they both rather get on my nerves.

That night, some hours after the household had retired to rest, I took a rope out of my portmanteau, and, fixing one end of it securely to the bedstead, lowered myself out of the window on to the ground beneath. Then, keeping under cover of the pine trees, and evading the moonbeams as much as possible, I made a detour of the house. The night air smelt pure and sweet. Heavily charged with the scent of pinewood and heather, there was absolutely nothing about it even remotely suggestive of poisonous gas.

As I was about to emerge from the trees to reenter the house, I heard a slight crunching sound on the gravel. I sprang back again into the gloom, and as I did so, two figures—a man and girl—stole noiselessly past me.

The girl I could not see distinctly, as her head was partly enveloped in a cloak, but the face of the man stood out very plainly in the moonlight—it was the face of a black!

What could a black man and a young girl be doing prowling about the grounds of the Caspar Beeches at that hour of night? Who were they?

I did not say a word to anyone, but the following night—at the same hour—I again hid amongst the trees, and the same figures passed me. Then I stole out of my lair and followed them.

On quitting the premises they took the high road to Bournemouth, and finally entered a house in the Holdenhurst Road. Making a mental note of the number of the house, I retraced my steps homeward, and early the next morning I sent the following telegram to Vane, who often accompanies me on my expedition, and to whose quick wits I owe much: “Have an important case on hand. Meet me this evening entrance to Bournemouth pier 7 p.m.”

After dispatching this telegram I returned to the Beeches, and asked Sir Eldred to show me the rooms in which the three deaths had taken place. I then examined these rooms most minutely, but I could discover nothing in them that could in any way help me to form a theory or even get a suggestion.

“When were the deaths first discovered?” I asked.

“Not until the morning,” Sir Eldred replied, “when the servants, getting no reply to their knocks, became alarmed, and eventually the doors were forced open.”

“And in each case death had taken place in bed?”

“Yes.”

“Did you have the same doctor to all three of your relatives after their deaths had been discovered?” I asked Sir Eldred.

“Yes,” he said. “Dr. Bowles. He has attended us for years.”

“What age is he?” I inquired.

Sir Eldred thought a moment. “About sixty-four or five,” he replied. “He attended my father long before he was married.”

“Then he would be a little old-fashioned,” I said. “He might not, for instance, have much knowledge of the newest poisons. New poisons, you know, both in the form of liquid and gases, are constantly being discovered. Many are imported from Germany and the East. Might I see Dr. Bowles?”

Certainly,” Sir Eldred replied; “but I fear he cannot help you much, as all he knew he made public at the inquests.”

Sir Eldred was right practically. In my interview with Dr. Bowles, I found that he could tell me little beyond what I already knew. “Can you,” I asked him, “describe the appearance of the bodies and the effect on them of the gas which you say, in all probability, caused the asphyxiation? Was there anything specially remarkable in the facial contractions or colour of the skin?”

“Yes,” he said, “there was an infinite horror, such horror as I have never seen in human faces before,” and he shuddered as he spoke. Then he gave me a minute description of the bodies, which I took down in my notebook and posted to a specialist in Oriental poisons whom I knew in London.

“Was there nothing else in the three cases that struck you as unusual?” I asked Dr. Bowles. “No peculiarity in common?”

He thought for a moment, and then said, “Nothing beyond the fact that all three died precisely at the same time—ten minutes past two in the morning.”

“The time when human vitality is at the lowest, and superphysical phenomena the most common. Were the victims in a normal state of health? Was there any family or hereditary disease?”

“Yes, valvular weakness of the heart.”

“Which would render them more susceptible to the influence of poison?”

“Poison and shock. The inhalation of certain poisons has a particularly deadly effect on people suffering from cardiac defection.”

“Could the poison have been self-inflicted? Are people suffering with such a disease prone to suicide?”

“Only, as a rule, when the disease is in a very advanced state—you then get delirium, hallucinations, and morbid impulses.”

“And none of these symptoms were noticeable in the deceased?”

“Not in a sufficiently marked degree to warrant the suggestion of suicide.”

“Have you no theory?”

The doctor shook his head. “None whatever,” he said; “and yet I’m sorry to say I can’t help feeling there is something very sinister about it all—something that bodes ill for Sir Eldred.”

Much disappointed, I returned to the Caspar Beeches, and was making another inspection of the room in which one of the tragedies had occurred when, chancing to glance at the mirror over the mantelshelf, I caught the reflection of a pair of dark eyes fixed inquiringly at me. I looked round, and a figure passed along the passage. It was

Mrs. Parry. She had evidently been peeping at me through the slightly open door, which I could have sworn I had closed. This made me careful. If I meant to unravel this mystery, I must on no account be seen doing anything that might arouse suspicion as to my real identity. Hence I determined to confine myself more to the study in future, and the rest of the morning I spent taking down in shorthand letters which Sir Eldred dictated. Walls have ears, and the sound of Sir Eldred dictating to me, I argued, might prove convincing.

A week passed and I discovered nothing. There was nothing in the demeanour of any of the servants to give me the slightest reason for suspecting them; if any of them were “in the know” they kept their secret absolutely to themselves. At night, as soon as I deemed it safe, I slipped on a pair of rubber shoes and crept about the house and grounds, but with no result. On the morning of the eighth day I received two letters—one from Vane, who had taken furnished apartments next door to the house I had noted in the Holdenhurst Road, and the other from Craddock, the poison specialist.

“I have at last found out something about those two people,” Vane wrote. “They call themselves Effie and George Tyson. Tyson is an assumed name; the girl is the daughter of Parry, Sir Eldred’s butler, and the man is Henry Mansfield, nephew of Sir Thomas.”

“Great heavens!” I could not help exclaiming. “This is news indeed. Sir Eldred assured me that he had no very near relatives.”

“Their bedroom is only separated from mine,” the letter went on, “by a very thin wall, and when I had removed a brick I could catch every word they said. There’s some mystery, and I’m going to try and solve it for you. Watch at the Beeches. I believe there is something extra in the wind. Effie has been there already this morning, and she and George are both going there again late this evening.”

The other letter, from Craddock, was as follows:

“There’s only one gas that produces all the effects you describe,” he said, “and that has certainly been hitherto unknown in England; indeed, the knowledge of it has been strictly confined to one region—a district in the south-east of Borneo. The natives there worship a great spirit, which they name the Arlakoo or Hell-faced one, and they never invoke it save when they desire the death of a criminal, or some very aged, useless member of the tribe. They then prepare a mixture of herbs and berries, which they first of all dry, and, at the psychical hour of two in the morning, put in an iron pot and take into the presence of their intended victim. Then, having set fire to the preparation, which, though rather difficult to ignite, burns slowly and surely when once aflame, they close all the openings of the hut or room and beat a precipitate retreat. A few minutes later the spirit they have invoked appears, and, simultaneous with its materialisation, the mixture burns a bright green and emits a peculiarly offensive gas. The result is invariably death: the shock produced by the harrowing appearance of the apparition, coupled with the poisonous nature of the fumes, is more than the human mechanism can stand. Of course all this would be mere moonshine to anyone who is uninitiated in Eastern ways and doesn’t believe in ghosts. The Bournemouth doctors would pooh-pooh it altogether. There is no other gas that I know of that produces the effects you have described. If there is another case, let me know, as I should much like to see the victim.”

A ghost! A ghost employed for the purpose of murdering someone! Even to me, confirmed believer in the Unknown as I am, the idea seemed wildly improbable and fantastic. And yet, what else could have produced that look of horror in the faces? What else could have killed them?

That evening, Sir Eldred and I sat in the smoke-room after dinner and chatted away as usual. We had our coffee brought to us at nine o'clock, and at ten-thirty we retired to bed. Sir Eldred had appeared fidgety and nervous all the evening, and, as we were ascending the stairs, he asked me if I would mind sitting up with him.

"I feel I shan't sleep to-night," he said, "as I've got one of my restless moods on. If it won't be tiring you too much, will you come and sit with me?"

I said I would with pleasure, but I did not join him at once, as I wanted the servants to think we had gone to our respective rooms and to bed as usual. I also wanted whatever there might be in the wind to mature.

On entering my room, I opened the window with as little noise as possible, and was on the verge of lowering myself into the garden when I espied someone among the trees. I was going to draw back, when the figure signalled, and I at once knew it was Vane.

Another minute and I had found him. "He's here," he whispered, "be on the qui vive, and if you want help call. See, I'm armed." And he pointed significantly to his breast pocket. He was going to say something else when we heard steps—soft, surreptitious steps that hardly sounded human—coming in our direction. I immediately withdrew to the house and hastened to Sir Eldred. At my suggestion we both sat by the window, which I noticed was shut—Sir Eldred, I knew, was very susceptible to the cold—and I arranged the curtains so that we could not be seen from the outside. Sir Eldred occupied a sofa and I an easy chair. For some time we talked in low voices, and then Sir Eldred grew more and more drowsy till he finally fell asleep.

It was one of the most exquisite nights I had ever seen—the moon, so full and silvery, and everywhere so calm, so gentle, and so still. Not a breath of air, not a leaf stirring, not a sound to be heard; nothing save the occasional burr of a great black bat as it hurled itself past the window and went wheeling and skimming in and out the tall, slender pines. I sat still, my eyes wandering alternately from the window to Sir Eldred. Whence would come the danger my instinct told me threatened him? How calmly he slept! How marked and handsome were his boyish features!

Suddenly from afar off a distant church clock began to strike two, each chime falling with an extraordinary distinctness on the preternatural bush.

Hardly had the last reverberating echoes ceased before there was a loud click from somewhere near the fireplace, and the next moment came a faint smell of burning. Then I confess—remembering all Craddock had told me—I was afraid. Everything in the room—the big, open fireplace, the dark, gleaming wardrobe, the quaintly carved chairs, the rich but fantastically patterned curtains, the sofa, and even Sir Eldred himself—I hardly dared look at him—seemed impregnated with a strange and startling uncanniness. The green light! Was this the prelude to it? Was the terrible Bornean phantasm getting ready to manifest itself?

I struggled hard, and, at last, overcoming the feeling of utter helplessness that had begun to steal over me, rushed to the windows. Frantically throwing them open, I was preparing to do the same to the door, when a low, ominous wail, sounding at first from very far away, and then all of a sudden from quite close at hand, brought me to a

standstill, and the whole room suddenly became illuminated with a glow, of a shade and intensity of green I have never seen before. Again there came an awful struggle. I felt eyes glaring at me, eyes that belonged to something of infinite hideousness and hate, to something that was concentrating its very hardest to make—to force—me to look; and it was only by an effort that smothered my chest and forehead in beads of cold sweat I desisted. Groping my way across the room, with my eyes tightly closed, I eventually reached the sofa. Thank God! Sir Eldred was still asleep. Tired with a day's hard exercise, he had fallen into the soundest of slumbers. Putting one hand over his eyes, and seizing him by the shoulder with the other, I speedily roused him. "Quick, quick!" I shouted. "For the love of God get up quick! Keep your mouth tightly shut and follow me." Pushing and dragging him along, I made for the direction of the door. The poison fumes now began to take effect; my temples throbbed, my brain was on fire, a tight, agonising feeling of suffocation gripped my chest and throat, and, as I staggered with Sir Eldred across the threshold on to the landing beyond, a sea of blackness suddenly enveloped me, and I knew no more.

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On coming to, I found myself lying on the floor of the corridor with Vane bending over me. "I was just in time," he said. "I saw you at the window, saw you suddenly throw up your arms and stagger away from it, and, guessing what was happening, I ran to the house and, climbing up the rope you had left hanging out of your window, I managed to reach you."

"Sir Eldred?" I panted.

"Oh, he's all right," Vane replied. "He wasn't really so far gone as you. A few minutes more, though, and you would both have been dead. Now keep cool and don't say anything about it.

As soon as the air has cleared—quite cleared mind— go to bed, and come down in the morning as if nothing had happened. Fortunately you made no noise, and I feel sure no one saw me enter the house. If you will let me take the lead in this affair, I think we may ferret the whole thing out. But we must go catefully. You don't mind my playing the part of instructor?

"No," I laughed, "I don't mind how despotic you are so long as we get to the bottom of this mystery. Fire ahead."

"Very well then," Vane said. "Get up now and hurry off to bed. And remember—both of you—not a word to anyone.

Vaulting on to the window-sill as he spoke, he caught hold of the rope and was speedily lost to view.

When we came down in the morning we were very careful to make no allusion to the night's happening before the servants, but strove to appear quite normal and unconcerned.

I watched Parry's face when he first encountered us, but it was quite immobile. "He is either quite innocent," I thought, "or a very old hand."

When we were alone, Sir Eldred was very anxious to hear what I thought. "Have you been able to form any theory," he asked, "because I haven't. I don't see how any of the servants could have let that infernal stuff loose in the room last night. I can swear there

was no one there but ourselves. And for the life of me I can't see any motive. If any living person is responsible for it, he must be a lunatic, for no one here has anything to gain by my death."

"You are quite sure you have no near relatives?" I said.

"Absolutely," he replied. "To the best of my knowledge I am the very last of the Hampshire Mansfields."

Our conversation was abruptly ended by the entrance of a maid with a sealed note. It was from Vane.

"At eleven o'clock to-night," he wrote, "get Sir Eldred to tell the Parrys they must sit up with him and you in his bedroom. See that he doesn't let them off, as they are sure to make excuses. Also get Craddock to come down by an early afternoon train, and tell him to call round and see me immediately he arrives. Leave the rest to me."

This note needing no reply, I hastened off at once to the General Post Office and telegraphed to Craddock. Fortunately he was at home, and wired that he would leave Waterloo by the two o'clock train. The remainder of the day passed very slowly. At ten o'clock that night someone whistled from the pines, and I knew at once that it was Vane. Craddock was with him. I conducted them both into Sir Eldred's room, where they were closeted together for some time, neither Sir Eldred nor I being allowed to enter. At last eleven o'clock arrived, and Sir Eldred went to fetch the Parrys. Both strongly demurred. Parry declared he was unwell, and Mrs. Parry said she had never heard such a thing; but Sir Eldred insisted, and they were obliged at last to follow him upstairs. Vane Craddock had hidden themselves so that the Parrys only saw me.

"What do you want us to do?" Parry asked nervously.

"Merely to sit up with us and watch," Sir Eldred said. "Mr. Anderson" (my alias) "and I have a presentiment that something may happen to-night and we don't relish the idea of facing it alone."

"I'd really rather not, sir," Parry faltered.

"That doesn't matter," Sir Eldred said sternly. "It is my wish. Come, if you talk like that, I shall begin to think you are both afraid. We will arrange ourselves round the fireplace. I've an idea that whatever comes will come down the chimney. You sit there, Parry, next to Mr. Anderson. Mrs. Parry shall sit by me." And without further to do he pushed them both into their seats. I could see they were very much agitated, but they both lapsed into silence, and for some considerable time no one in the room spoke. My thoughts, as I presumed did Sir Eldred's, chiefly centred round the question as to what was the great surprise Vane had in store for us. What had he discovered? What had he been so carefully plotting with Craddock?

On flew the minutes, and at last Sir Eldred struck a match; for the moon was temporarily hidden by big, black, scouring clouds. "Egad!" he said, "It's close on two. The hour fatal to my family. If anything is going to happen to-night it should take place almost immediately."

"If I was you, sir," Mrs. Parry burst out, "I wouldn't sit up any longer. I feel sure nothing will happen to-night, and if it does, our being here can do no good."

"That's the truth," Parry echoed.

“You must wait a little longer,” Sir Eldred said. “See, it’s almost on the stroke!” As he spoke, the moon shone out again in all her brilliant lustre, and every object in the room became clearly visible. Every eye was fixed on the clock.

“I’m going,” Mrs. Parry cried, springing to her feet. “I’m going, Sir Eldred, if you give me notice to leave. I’ve had enough of this nonsense. She was about to add more, when there was a sudden click, exactly similar to the click we had heard the preceding night, the dome-shaped top of the clock flew open, and the smell of something burning, but a far sweeter and more subtle odour than that of the night before, filled the room. In an instant the whole place was in an uproar. Mrs. Parry shrieked for help, and declared she was being choked, whilst Parry, falling on his knees, clutched hold of Sir Eldred and implored his forgiveness.

“Now I’m about to die, sir,” he whined, I’ll confess all. It’s that cousin of yours, George, who you never heard tell of. He’s married to my daughter Effie, and he wanted to come into your property. He put us up to it; we only acted at his bidding.”

“That’s a lie,” a voice called out, and from behind the window-curtain stepped Vane, closely followed by Craddock. “You see, you can’t help lying, Parry, even when death stares you in the face. Open the window a little wider, Mr. Craddock, so that all this smoke, which is quite harmless, by the way, can get out, and I’ll explain everything. The two people who have been in the habit of prowling about your premises at night, Sir Eldred, are Effie, the daughter of these miscreants here, and George Mansfield, the son of your Uncle Richard, whom Parry, truthful for once in his life, said you had never heard of. Your father never mentioned his nephew to you because he was a half-caste, Richard Mansfield, to your father’s undying disgust, having married a native of Borneo. George was brought up in Borneo, and only came to England for the first time three years ago, shortly after his father’s death. He had heard all about the family quarrel, and, arriving in this country with none too friendly feelings towards your parents, sought an interview with Sir Thomas, who, if George’s version of it is correct, was very curt, forbidding him ever again to enter the house. Filled with intense hatred against you all, George Mansfield went to London, and about that time met Effie Parry, who was then on ‘the halls,’ acting under the name of Grahame. In due course of time he married her, and it was she who first suggested to him the idea of contriving by some means or other to come into the family estate. It is easy enough to gather what lay at the back of her brain when she used the euphemism ‘some means or other.’ Life in the south-eastern states of Borneo, from which George Mansfield hails, is held of small account; he at once tumbled to the suggestion, and decided to summon to his assistance a spirit they worship out there called Arlakoo. In order to invoke the Arlakoo it was essential that certain herbs should be procured, and this necessitated time and expense. Eventually, however, through the agency of friends—Borneans—they were obtained. Then came the question of introducing them into the right quarters. Effie’s parents both inherit criminal tendencies Parry’s Uncle James was a notorious forger, and Mrs. Parry’s grandmother was hanged for baby-farming. You needn’t look so indignant, you two, for I’ve been to the C.I.D.—you know what the C.I.D. is—for my information. Well, the Parrys were taken into confidence, and Sir Thomas, being in need of both a butler and housekeeper just then, the two applied for the posts and got them. The rest was comparatively easy. George is an engineer by profession and has a good inventive faculty. Coming to this house when the family were all away, he espied the clock you see on the mantelshelf, in the room your

mother and father slept in, and, on examining the dome, discovered that it opened, and that there was a Cupid inside it which, when in proper working order, bounced out whenever the hour struck. It appears to have been in your family a good many years, Sir Eldred, for George Mansfield had previously come across a reference to it in one of his father's diaries, and his fertile brain now conceived the idea of using it in the process of carrying his scheme into effect. In the place of the Cupid he resolved to insert a miniature brazier containing the herbs and supplied with an electric fuse, the mechanism of which could be so contrived that whenever the clock should strike two, and two only, the dome would fly open, the brazier spring up, and the herbal preparation be ignited. He was only too well aware of the hereditary tendency of the Mansfield family to heart disease, and calculated that the shock of seeing so awful an apparition as the Arlakoo (which he firmly believed he could call up), together with the poisonous fumes that accompanied it—provided the door and windows were shut, which could be accomplished with the assistance of the Parrys—would encompass the deaths he desired. He chose, for his first victim, your mother. The day you and your father went to London to meet your brother, Parry smuggled George Mansfield into the house, and the latter, seizing an opportunity when your mother was out, fitted up the clock with the brazier containing the herbal preparation and the fuse. As you know, his diabolical scheme succeeded only too well, not only your mother, but your father and brother falling victims to it. This morning Mrs. Parry paid a visit to her son-in-law, and I overheard their conversation. Great surprise was expressed at the failure of the clock yesterday, and it was decided to try it again tonight. This is the result. The vapour you saw come out of the clock just now was a quite harmless gas which Mr. Craddock substituted for the original preparation George Mansfield had put there. We caught George nicely in the garden shortly after nine. We threatened to treat him in a thoroughly Bornean fashion—and Vane produced his revolver—and he then confessed everything. He is now in the safe custody of the C.I.D. men.”

“How did you come to suspect the clock, Vane? I asked.

“You forget the hole in the wall,” he said, laughing. “I overheard continual allusion to the clock, and ‘filling and charging’ it again, and as I knew it was not customary to fill and charge clocks, I at once smelt a rat. My suspicions were confirmed when I came to your rescue last night and saw tiny spirals of the green vapour still emanating from the dome-shaped top. I consulted with Mr. Craddock, and with his assistance I was able to carry out this little plot which, I think, we will all agree has succeeded almost beyond expectation. Any more questions? “

“Not for the present, Mr. Vane,” Sir Eldred said. “I must, first of all, express my deep sense of gratitude to you for the clever way in which you have managed to frustrate the plot to take my life. You have captured one villain; it now remains to deal with these scoundrels here. I wish to goodness my cousin had not been involved in it. I suppose, by the way, there is no doubt that this George Mansfield is my cousin?”

“I fear none whatever,” Vane said. “I called at his rooms when I knew he was out, and found documents there which fully established his identity. I’m afraid you must prosecute him with the others.”

But Sir Eldred, fortunately, was spared that degradation; for hardly had Vane finished speaking when one of the C.I.D. men arrived at the house and informed us that George

Mansfield was no more. He had evaded justice by swallowing a poisonous lozenge which he had secreted in his handkerchief.

The Parrys were let go; the law does not acknowledge the supernatural, and Sir Eldred recognised the futility of prosecuting them. They eventually went to Canada and were heard of no more. The Caspar Beeches, however, had got a sinister name; no tradespeople would venture within its grounds after dusk, and no servants would stay there. Sir Eldred himself lived in a constant state of fear, and confided in me that he frequently heard strange noises—doors opening and shutting of their own accord, and soft, inexplicable footsteps. Eventually the house was shut up, and, although it has since been periodically occupied, no one ever cares to remain in it for long.

When once invoked, it seems that spirits, especially evil ones, have an unpleasant habit of clinging to a person or place, and, in spite of what some people assert, can seldom, if ever, be laid.