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Its Your Turn Now

Christmas is past and most of us find we have been so occupied buying gifts for friends that we have quite forgotten our own needs, and there are so many things we require, perhaps urgently.

Around New Year's has therefore come to be a sort of "buy-for-yourself" time.

Perhaps you need a new set of Knives and Forks, some Teaspoons, or probably a larger piece of Silverware such as a Casserole or Sandwich plate. Maybe a handsome piece of Cut Glass is needed or a pretty Mantle or Bedroom Clock.

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The Shining Black Feathers

And How the Lost Gold Was Discovered

By Ethel Holmes

Phil Manton of the Far Eastern bank in Shanghai went out into the streets feeling dull and out of sorts.

Each morning for a week he had found a mysterious envelope on his desk. No one could explain whence it came. It was not in the morning's mail—it was simply there!

The envelope was one of those long, narrow oriental affairs, perhaps two inches in width by twelve inches or more in length. Sometimes it was longer or shorter, to accommodate its contents.

The contents were invariably the same—a black feather, narrow and shining.

The inscription in Chinese was familiar to him now. "A feather from the wing of the black pheasant" was the meaning of the ideographs.

"A feather from the wing of the black pheasant," he was repeating to himself as he went down the Bund, unmindful of the curious glances sent in his direction by friends and acquaintances.

"What's the matter with Manton?" they asked each other, for the president of the Far Eastern bank was normally a practical, well balanced, cool headed business man. "Hope nothing is wrong with the bank."

Manton confided his business to no one. He had lived in the east long enough to guess that some evil influence was working against him, some secret power that was trying to weaken his efficiency, to break down his nerve.

Some one had whispered that Oscar Blare, the former president of the Far Eastern, had committed suicide because "he had seen things."

What had he seen? Money had vanished at the time of Blare's death, but no one could ever trace it or could account for the manner in which it had been spent. The money, gold in canvas bags, had vanished.

Phil Manton could have told another tale—that for two months now there had been a steady pilfering at the bank. One gold piece after another had vanished from the strong room.

Privately he had had the different employees watched, and each one was proved impeccable.

Of course there was Wong Suong, the watchman, but Wong Suong was poor and had a big family to support, and he was proved to be impeccable as well as the others.

And the shadow of the black pheasant's wing darkened the days for the young president of the Far Eastern.

The next morning he found another feather in its envelope and put it away. The accompanying card he studied carefully.

Phil Manton had tried many devices to find if his employees were trustworthy, and, nothing having developed in that line to help him, he was at his wit's end. Even his friends were beginning to take notice of his abstractness, and, worst yet, it was getting on his nerves to the extent of interfering with his heretofore splendidly restful nights. Certainly something must be done, and he was feeling that he must be the one to do it.

Finally, after long deliberation, he made up his mind that in the afternoon when it was time to leave he would secrete himself in the strong room and, revolver in hand, grimly wait for the thief to appear.

From his corner behind a heap of canvas sacks Phil watched the clerks as one by one they came into the strong room to put away cash and books. Each one went about his business in an open, honest way, and the last one locked the steel doors and threw the heavy bolts of the combination lock.

Phil Manton knew that the strong room of the Far Eastern was well supplied with fresh air from a ventilating pipe which ran up to the roof, so that even if his imprisonment had lasted for several days he would not have suffered except for food.

In the dimness of the strong room thoughts crowded heavily upon him. He found himself remembering many things that he had forgotten in the rush of daily life.

One thing was that Oscar Blare had been discovered dead in the strong room, in this very spot, perhaps, with an empty pistol in his lifeless hand.

Then the gold deficiency had been discovered.

A cold horror took possession of him. Was history going to repeat itself? Was he, Phil Manton, unwittingly guilty of the thefts? Would he, too, be found dead in the strong room?

Suddenly he laughed his fears to scorn.

"That wretched black pheasant feather business is getting on my nerves," he muttered. "I wonder if Blare knew the black pheasant?"

Still laughing at his own vague fears and regretting that he had immured himself in the strong room for the night, Phil made himself comfortable behind the pile of canvas sacks, feeling that the president of the Far Eastern bank was lowering his dignity.

He had dozed off to sleep when he was suddenly awakened by a rush of cold air.

The brick wall back of him seemed to vanish, leaving him tottering on the edge of the floor. He fell—fell down a

few feet—and dropped to a heap of soft mats in a perfectly strange place.

Here all was silence—a vague, ominous silence that oppressed his heart. From a lantern in a far corner there were disclosed the outlines of a long room, with a matted floor and many rich rugs. There were some articles of furniture, teakwood chairs and tables and many more mats.

Phil removed his shoes and crept to a screened corner. From the privacy of the screen he watched down the length of the room. There was no visible door in the walls. He could not even see an aperture where he had fallen from the strong room of the bank, but he suspected that the entire back wall of the strong room had pivoted into this strange place and pushed him down.

Suddenly a sound smote the silence, the sharp intake of a Chinaman's breath when he is surprised.

Phil looked from his hiding place. A strange figure was approaching down the length of the room, a human form completely covered with a strong dress of black feathers. It was a small, bent form, and the veil of black feathers hanging before the invisible face fluttered in and out with the breath of its wearer.

In its hand the strange being carried a wicked looking knife.

"Ah, ha!" thought Phil, and his hold on the revolver tightened. "Here is the old Black Pheasant himself! I'm to be unnerved by threats, stirred by thefts, and when I attempt to discover the thefts I am decoyed here and murdered. Well, two can play at that game, my somber bird!"

When the Black Pheasant had reached the spot where Phil had carelessly left his shoes he bent over them for a moment, and then, uttering a shrill staccato yell, he turned and began to search the room. When he poked his evil head around the corner of the screen Phil was ready for him. The pistol spoke, but by a rapid turn of his arm the Black Pheasant sent the bullet flying to the ceiling.

Phil made a rush for the man and grasped the wrist that held the ugly knife, forcing the hand to the floor. There Phil struck it such a blow with the knuckles of his other hand that the knife dropped from the nerveless fingers. Both men made desperate efforts to regain it, but neither could distinguish in the dim light where it was.

Phil in grasping the other's wrist had been made aware that the skin was oiled. The feathered man thus had a great advantage over Phil. The latter had the advantage, however, in being a man of herculean strength.

He threw himself upon his antagonist, grasping his throat. This, too, was oiled, but Phil managed to get a grip of both hands on the muscles of the neck, including the windpipe. That grip he held till one after another he felt the muscles of the body relax, and he knew the man was dead.

Phil crouched there in a listening attitude.

Would the dim shadows of the long room give up any more of these grotesque black feathered pheasants?

He waited until an eternally appeared to have passed; then he crept out cautiously, peering behind screens and searching all the dark corners.

The result of his search was a huge chest filled with canvas bags of gold—the gold which had been stolen during Blare's time and the last thefts. It was all there intact. The thief had stolen but was afraid to spend.

Who was the thief that he or they lacked the courage to spend what they

had stolen?

Phil went back to the prone figure of the Black Pheasant.

He drew aside the veiling black feathers and saw the wizened face of old Wong Suong, the night watchman who had been proved of impeccable honesty because he was openly so poor!

Wong Suong was the Black Phantom. He was the writer of the mysterious messages, he was the thief of gold, the murderer of Oscar Blare, the would be murderer of Phil Manton.

Phil never discovered when the back wall of the Far Eastern had been tampered with, but he suspected that it had been known to Wong Suong for a long time.

No one save the officials of the bank ever knew the history of that night. Phil managed to escape and secure help. The gold was returned to the strong room and the rear wall rendered firm. The mysterious room in the rear was taken for a director's room, and the memory of Oscar Blare was cleared of the stigma of suicide.

People say that the Far Eastern bank must have passed through a financial crisis, for Manton lost his worried look and has ever since then been his genial self.

But Phil smiles and tells himself that the shadow of the Black Pheasant has passed away forever and that the Far Eastern is as firm as the rock of Gibraltar.

But he cherishes a profound respect for old Wong Suong's powers of ingenuity.

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