



By George Barr McCutcheon

CHAPTER IV.

in the Jade-Room.

Lydia met Brood and Frederic at the top of the stairs. She had received the message through Jones and was on her way to dress for tea. The master of the house greeted her most cordially. He was very fond of this lovely, gentle daughter of John Desmond. Into their association had stolen an intimate note that softened the cold reserve of the man to a marked degree. His chief joy was to chat with her over the work he was doing and to listen to her frank, honest opinions. She regarded herself as his secretary—or his amanuensis, in the strict sense of speaking—but he considered her to be a friend as well, and treated her with a freedom that was not extended to others.

A faint gleam of astonishment lurked in the girl's eyes as she stood before the two men. Never, in her experience, had there been such an exhibition of friendliness between father and son. A curious throb of joy rushed up from her heart and lodged in her throat. For the first time she found it difficult to respond with composure to Brood's lively comments. Tears were lying close to the surface of her eyes—tears of relief and gratitude. The buoyant expression in Frederic's told a new story. Her heart rejoiced.

"Nonsense!" said Brood when she announced that she was going to change her gown. "You never looked so pretty, my dear, as you do at this moment. Come just as you are, to please me."

"A tea party and an autopsy are very much alike, Mr. Brood," said she. "One can learn a lot at either. Still, if you'd like to have Mrs. Brood see me as I really am, I'll appear sans plumage."

"I'd like it," said he promptly. "I am sure you will like each other, Lydia."

"I am glad you did not say we would admire each other," said she quaintly. "You look very happy, Mr. Brood," she went on, her eyes bright.

"I believe I am happy," said he. "Then we shall all be happy," was her rejoinder.

She returned to the jade-room on the upper floor, where she had been at work on the catalogue. Brood had a very large and valuable collection of jade. The jade-room, so called, was little more than a large closet off the remarkable room which James Brood was pleased to call his "hiding place," or on occasion, his "retreat." No one ventured into either of these rooms except by special permission.

Ranjab, his Indian servant, slept in an adjoining room, and it was whispered about the house that not even James Brood had viewed its interior. This silent, unapproachable man from the mysterious heart of India, locked his door when he entered the room and locked it when he came out. No one, not even the master, thought of entering. Mr. Dawes, in his cups or out of them, was responsible for the impression that the man kept deadly serpents there. As a matter of fact,

Ranjab was a peaceable fellow and desperately afraid of snakes. Lydia loved the feel of the cold, oily lumps of jade. There were a few pieces of porcelain of extreme rarity and beauty as well, and several priceless bits of cloisonne, but it was the jade she loved. There were two or three hundred objects of various sizes and color and all were what might be called museum pieces.

She had been at work for half an hour or longer when a noise in the outer room attracted her attention. She had the odd feeling that some one was looking at her through the open door, and she swiftly turned.

Except when occupied by Brood the room was darkened by means of heavy window hangings; the effect was that produced by the gloaming just before the stars appear. Objects were shadowy, indistinct, mysterious. The light from the jade-room door threw a diverging ray across the full length of the room. In the very center of this bright strip sat a placid effigy of Buddha that Brood had found in a remote corner of Siam, serenely stolid on top of its thick base of bronze and lacquer, with a shining shrine for a background. In the dim edge of the shadow, near the door at the far end of the room, Lydia made out the motionless, indistinct figure of a woman. The faint outlines of the face were discernible but not so the features. For a moment the girl stared at the watcher and then advanced to the door.

"Who is it?" she inquired, peering. A low, husky voice replied, with a suggestion of laughter in the tones. "I am exploring the house."

Lydia came forward at once. "Oh, it is Mrs. Brood. I beg your pardon. Shall I switch on the lights?" "You are Lydia?" "Yes, Mrs. Brood."

"I have been prowling everywhere. Your good mother deserted me when my maid arrived with Ranjab a short time ago. Isn't this the dreadful blue-beard room? Shall I lose my head if I am discovered by the ogre?" The girl felt the spell stealing over her. The low voice of the woman in the shadow was like a sensuous caress. She experienced a sudden longing to be closer to the speaker, to listen for the very intake of her breath.

"You have already been discovered by the ogre, Mrs. Brood," said Lydia, gayly, "and your head appears to be quite safe."

"Thank you," rather curtly, as if repelling familiarity. It was like a dash of cold water to Lydia's spirits. "You may turn on the lights. I should like to see you, Miss Desmond."

The girl crossed the room, passing close to the stranger in the house. The fragrance of a perfume hitherto unknown to her separated itself from the odor of sandalwood that always filled the room; it was soft, delicate, refreshing. It was like a breath of cool, sweet air filtering into a close, stuffy room. One could not help drawing in a long, full breath, as if the lungs demanded its revivifying qualities.

A soft, red glow began to fill the room as Lydia pulled the cord near the door. As the light grew brighter and brighter the eyes of the stranger swept the room with undisguised wonder in their depths.

"How extraordinary!" she murmured, and then turned swiftly toward the girl. "Where does it come from? I can see no lights. And see! There are no shadows, not even beneath the table yonder. It—it is uncanny—but, oh, how lovely!"

Lydia was staring at her with wide-open eyes, frankly astonished. The eager, excited gleam vanished from Mrs. Brood's lovely eyes. They narrowed ever so slightly.

"Why do you stare at me?" she demanded. "I expected—" began Lydia, and stopped in pretty confusion.

"I see. You expected a middle-aged lady, is that it? And why, pray, should James Brood marry a middle-aged person?" "I—I don't know. I'm sorry if I have offended you."

Mrs. Brood smiled, a gay, pleased little smile that revealed her small, even teeth. "You haven't offended me, my dear," she said. "You offend my husband by thinking so ill of him, that's all." She took the girl in from head to foot with critical eyes. "He said you were very pretty and very lovable. You are lovely. No one wants to be pretty. Yes, you are just what I expected."

Lydia was the taller of the two women; a matter of two inches perhaps, and yet she had the curious feeling that she was looking upward as she gazed into the other's eyes. It was the way Mrs. Brood held herself. Sending a swift glance around the room, she went on: "My husband delights in having beautiful things about him. He doesn't like the ugly things of this world."

Lydia flinched, she knew not why. There was a sting to the words, despite the languidness with which they were uttered.

Risking more than she suspected, she said: "He never considers the cost of a thing, Mrs. Brood, if its beauty appeals to him." Mrs. Brood gave her a quizzical, half-puzzled look. "You have only to look about you for the proof. This one room represents a fortune." The last was spoken hastily.

"How old are you, Miss Desmond?" The question came abruptly. "I am nineteen."

"You were surprised to find me so young. Will it add to your surprise if I tell you that I am ten years older than you?" "It doesn't seem credible."

"Are you wondering why I tell you my age?" "Yes," said Lydia, bluntly. "In order that you may realize that I am ten years wiser than you, and that you may not again make the mistake of underestimating my intelligence."

The color faded from Lydia's face. She grew cold from head to foot. Involuntarily she moved back a pace. The next instant, to her unbounded surprise, Mrs. Brood's hands were outstretched in a gesture of appeal, and a quick, wistful smile took the place of the imperious stare.

"There! I am a nasty, horrid thing. Forgive me. Come! Don't be stubborn. Shake hands with me and say that you're sorry I said what I did."

It was a quaint way of putting it, and her voice was so genuinely appealing that Lydia, after a moment's hesitation, extended her hands. Mrs. Brood grasped them in hers and gripped them tightly. "I think I should like to know that you are my friend, Lydia. Has it occurred to you that I am utterly without friends in this great city of yours? I have my husband, that is all."

The girl could no more withstand the electric charm of the woman than she could have fought off the sunshine. She was bewildered, and completely fascinated.

"It's—it's very good of you," she murmured, her own eyes softening as they looked into the deep, velvety ones that would not be denied. Even as she wondered whether she could ever really like this magnetic creature, she felt herself surrendering to the spell of her. "But perhaps you will not like me when you know me better."

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Brood, calmly, almost indifferently, and dismissed the subject. "What an amazing room! One can almost feel the presence of the geni that created it at the wish of the man with the enchanted lamp. As a rule, oriental rooms are abominations, but this—ah, this is not an oriental room after all. It is a part of the East itself—of the real East. I have sat in emperors' houses out there, my dear, and I have slept in the palaces of kings. I have seen just such things as these, and I know that they could not have been transported to this room except by magic. My husband is a magician."

"These came from the palaces of kings, Mrs. Brood," said Lydia enthusiastically. "Kings in the days when kings were real. This rug—"

"I know," interrupted the other. "My husband told me the story. It must have cost him a fortune."

"It was worth a fortune," said Lydia. A calculating squint had come into Mrs. Brood's eyes while she was speaking. To Lydia it appeared as if

she could not forget in all those years—until he met me. She grew silent and preoccupied, a slight frown marking her forehead as she resumed her examination of the room and its contents. Great lanterns hung suspended beside the shrine, but were now unlighted. On the table at which Brood professed to work stood a huge lamp with a lacelike screen of gold. When lighted a soft, mellow glow oozed through the shade to create a circle of golden brilliance over a radius that extended but little beyond the edge of the table, yet reached to the benign countenance of Buddha close by.

Over all this fairylike splendor reigned the serene, melting influence of the god to whom James Brood was wont to confess himself! The spell of the golden image dominated everything.

In the midst of the magnificence moved the two women, one absurdly out of touch with her surroundings, yet a thing of beauty; the other blending intimately with the warm tones that enveloped her. She was lithe, sinuous with the grace of the most seductive of dancers. Her dark eyes reflected the mysteries of the Orient; her pale, smooth skin shone with the clearness of alabaster; the crimson in her lips was like the fresh stain of blood; the very fragrance of her person seemed to steal out of the unknown. She was a part of the marvellous setting, a gem among gems.

She had attired herself in a dull Indian red afternoon gown of chiffon. The very fabric seemed to cling to her supple body with the sensuous joy of contact. Even Lydia, who watched her with appraising eyes, experienced a swift unaccountable desire to hold this intoxicating creature close to her own body.

There were two windows in the room, broad openings that ran from near the floor almost to the edge of the canopy. They were so heavily curtained that the light of day failed to penetrate to the interior of the apartment. Mrs. Brood approached one of these windows. Drawing the curtain apart, she let in an ugly gray light, from the outside world.

She looked down into a sort of courtyard and garden that might have been transplanted from distant Araby. Uttering an exclamation of wonder, she turned to Lydia.

"Is this New York or am I bewitched?" "Mr. Brood transformed the old carriage yard into a—I think Mr. Dawes calls it a Persian garden. It is rather bleak in winter, Mrs. Brood, but in the summer it is really enchanting. See, across the court on the second floor where the windows are lighted, those are your rooms. It is an enormous house, you'll find. Do you see the little balcony outside your windows, and the vines creeping up to it? You can't imagine how sweet it is of a summer night with the moon and stars—"

"But how desolate it looks today, with the dead vines and the colorless stones! Ugh!" She dropped the curtains. The soft warm glow of the room came back and she gazed with relief. "I hate things that are dead," she said.

At the sound of a soft tread and the gentle rustle of draperies, they turned. Ranjab, the Hindu, was crossing the room toward the small door which gave entrance to his closet. He paused for an instant before the image of Buddha, but did not drop to his knees as all devout Buddhists do. Mrs. Brood's hand fell lightly upon Lydia's arm. The man turned toward them a second or two later. His dark, handsome face was hard set and emotionless as he bowed low to the new mistress of the house. The fingers closed tightly on Lydia's arm. Then he smiled upon the girl, a glad smile of devotion. His swarthy face was transfigured. A moment later he unlocked his door and passed into the other room. The key turned in the lock with a slight rasp.

"I do not like that man," said Mrs. Brood. Her voice was low and her eyes were fixed steadily on the closed door.

Continued next week

A VERY MYSTERIOUS TRICK. A puzzling trick which will perplex your friends can be performed with an ordinary egg some vinegar, and a bottle. Take an uncooked egg and let it stand for 15 or 20 minutes in pure vinegar. At the end of this time you will notice that the shell of the egg has become so soft that you can make a deep dent in it without making a hole.

Get a bottle, the neck of which is smaller than the egg, and with the fingers draw out the shell until you can insert it into the end of the bottle. After you have done this, pour cold water into the bottle and the egg will resume its original shape. If the vinegar in which the egg is softened is not strong enough, add about two tablespoonsful of acetic acid to a cupful of vinegar. Usually, however, ordinary vinegar contains sufficient strength.

Your friends will wonder how you succeeded in getting the egg unbroken, through the small neck of the bottle. People will sit for an hour examining the bottle and looking for a secret crack where they believe the bottle must have been taken apart.

POLICE FORCE EXAM. "What's a fraction?" "A part of anything, sorr." "Give an example." "The sixteenth of June."

"I must see these wonderful things," she were trying to fix upon the value of the wonderful carpet. "A collector has offered him—how much? A hundred thousand dollars, is not that it? Ah, how rich he must be!"

"The collector you refer to—" "I was referring to my husband," said Mrs. Brood, unabashed. "He is very rich, isn't he?"

Lydia managed to conceal her annoyance. "I think not, as American fortunes are rated."

"It doesn't matter," said the other, carelessly. "I have my own fortune. And it is not my face," she added, with a quick smile. "Now let us look further. I must see all these wonderful things. We will not be missed, and it is still half an hour till tea-time. My husband is now telling his son all there is to be told about me—who and what I am, and how he came to marry me. Not, mind you, how I came to marry him, but—the other way round. It's the way with men past middle age."

Lydia hesitated before speaking. "Mr. Brood does not confide in Frederic. I am afraid they have but little in common. Oh, I shouldn't have said that!"

Mrs. Brood regarded her with narrowing eyes. "He doesn't confide in Frederic?" she repeated, in the form of a question. Her voice seemed lower than before.

"I'm sorry I spoke as I did, Mrs. Brood," said the girl, annoyed at her self.

"Is there a reason why he should dislike his son?" asked the other, regarding her fixedly.

"Of course not," cried poor Lydia. There was a moment of silence. "Some day, Lydia, you will tell me about Mr. Brood's other wife."

"She died many years ago," said the girl, evasively.

"I know," said Mrs. Brood. "Still I should like to hear more of the woman

THE OTHER FELLOW'S JOB. The man behind the harrow, with his jersey full of dirt, Looks with ever-growing envy at the merchant's laundered shirt; But the man behind the counter feels the nagging of the trade And would swap his polished scissors for the farmer's rusty spade. In the night the sleepy doctor hears the clanging of the phone, And, "I wish I were a lawyer," is his aggravated moan, But the lawyer in his nightie hears the doctor's car go past, And he says, "That lucky doctor must be making money fast." The man upon the vessel sees the coast-line slowly dwarf, And he longs for terra firma with the man upon the wharf: While the other marks the vessel, moving out alone and free, And he longs for boundless freedom with the man upon the sea. The little boy in rompers thinks his daddy first in grace, And he wishes he were grown up with some whiskers on his face; But his daddy feels the burden of the mortgage and the debts, And wishes he were Willie in his baby pantslets. The young man sees his sister with her money-spending beau, And he says, "If I were sister I could save a lot of dough." But the young girl sees her brother with his volatile finance, And she longs to be the owner of the ballot and the pants. Says the peasant in his cottage, "What a grand and happy thing To have the mighty sceptre, and the station of a king!"

Yet I have heard it whispered that the man upon the throne Would rather be the peasant with a spirit of his own. So if your lot is irksome, you can set your pulse athrob Just by musing on the virtues of the other fellow's job.

We wouldn't mind conceit half so much if the self-satisfied man actually tried to live up to his high opinion of himself.

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