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SHOCK



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... Crypt of the Jealous Queen

His vain wife flew out of his life on butterfly wings . . . strewing her vengeance with a cobra's venom.

DAVE drove up and jumped out of his car. I waited at the ivy covered gate, and we went up the brick walk together.

"I don't get this, Solly," said Dave as we climbed the gray stone steps to the front porch. "I don't get this deal at all."

I pushed the doorbell, kept my voice low.

"There might be something to it. We'll know in a minute."

The man who opened the door was small, lean, about fifty-five, with a jungle of short brown hair. The hairline was low, and the forehead slightly recessive. Steel spectacles framed electric-green eyes.

"Dr. Kreutch?" I asked.

He stared at us a moment, then a shadow of a smile passed across his face and his head inclined courteously.

"I am Dr. Kreutch." The voice was deep, quiet, and the articulation was precise. "Come in, gentlemen. I've been expecting you. Come in."

Dave glanced at me quickly. There had been no advance notice of our call. But Dr. Kreutch had already turned and was walking slowly down the long, gloomy hallway. There was nothing to say, nothing to do but follow him. I heard Dave close the front door as he trailed along.

Dr. Kreutch walked ahead of me as if he were tired, his head and round shoul-

ders bent forward, his long arms relaxed, hanging loose, the hands turned inward and up after the manner of an anthropoid ape. I remembered the hair line, too, and the forehead—but then I thought of the electric-green eyes.

He led us silently through the long hall, and into a spacious drawing room. It was an old room, carpeted in lush olive green, and paneled in a dark hardwood, probably teak.

He walked without pause, and we followed him over the entire length of the drawing room until he came to a heavy, vaulted door. Here he stopped, stood pensively stroking his chin.

"Dr. Kreutch," I said, "perhaps we should introduce—"

He interrupted me with a gesture. Again I saw that peculiar shadow of a smile at his lips.

"Please," he said. "If you will permit me. First, there is something to attend to." He turned, wrenched open the heavy door. "Step in quickly, please." He disappeared into the darkness.

Dave and I pushed after him, stopped short. The door closed ponderously behind us.

The room was dark, very dark. The atmosphere was thick with the musty, torpid odor of decaying leaves or strange jungle blossoms.



She was reaching for the second one, when I took her throat in my hands.

Then a lamp clicked on. We saw him bending over a small desk in the center of a huge, crypt-like room.

We stood motionless, staring.

That room! Walled with the rarest flowers and vines—hundreds of them. Shelf upon shelf of bowls, urns, and elaborate vases, and in front of the shelves, a narrow, continual table burdened with

glass cases and aquariums, some empty, others magnifying delicate submerged plants through whose intertwines swam scores of brilliantly colored fish.

The room's one window was completely blinded by a black shade.

Dr. Kreutch had crossed to stand perfectly still before two glass cases, both of which appeared empty. He sighed.

"My only commoners—these two."

Dave's breath came harshly into my ear. "He's mad. He's utterly mad."

"The cobra requires more than five thousand human lives each year, to justify his existence."

We saw it then, in the near case, rising gracefully from the dirt—the swaying hood of the King Cobra.

"And this little one. . . . Who knows how many lives the Krait requires?"

We stepped forward impulsively, peered into the second case. It was a small, worm-like snake, thick as a cigar, and no longer than fourteen inches. An orange stripe ran the length of him down his back.

"The Krait, gentlemen. After his kiss, a man may survive from forty seconds to as long as two and a half minutes.

I SHUDDERED. For an instant I saw the green eyes of Dr. Kreutch fixed on the Krait with fierce, hypnotic pleasure. Then, gradually, his face softened, and he sighed again.

"Ah well. Business waits upon the eccentricities of the host. Very well. I shan't be long. Come, gentlemen. This is my—" he smiled apologetically—"greatest achievement."

We followed him to the desk where he bent down and opened the bottom drawer. When he straightened, I saw that he was holding carefully an ordinary two-quart jar. He lifted it to his eyes, and then he moved off toward the window, carrying it gently—as gently as though it contained something infinitely precious.

At the window, he set down the jar. He rolled up the blind the pushed open the window in one gesture. Then he lifted the jar, his hands shaking, so that the sunlight slanted sharply, flashed chromatically through the glass.

"Gentlemen," he said very softly. "Gentlemen, the Queen."

As if responding to the introduction,

there arose fluttering from the bottom of the jar, the most beautiful butterfly in the world.

The upper wings measured probably six inches from tip to tip. Beginning close to the body, they were the deepest sapphire blue, fading imperceptibly lighter through all the blues until at the wing edges the color had paled to silver. The wing perimeters were traced with a thin line of arterial red. And the borderline carried completely around the lower wings as well, which were rich gold in color, and were dotted with four pairs of blue pinhead dots.

The body of the insect was silver, patterned with duplicate arabesques of cerise twining upward from the end of the abdomen, and terminating in interlocking scrolls on the thorax at the base of the black, button head. The antennae, as the sunlight struck them, sheened in an iridescence, predominantly purple.

"Magnificent." I breathed, bending close to the jar.

He was pleased.

"Look closely. She is the culmination of twenty years' work. Twenty years. . . cross-breeding. . . inter-breeding. . . failure. Only two of the final eggs hatched into larvae, only two. Only one of the chrysalises matured." He shook his head. His voice carried an overtone of sadness.

"Examine it closely. The *Kreutch lepidopteron*. Notice, I use the singular. The first and last of its species. Perfection, gentlemen. In a manner of speaking this solitary butterfly is the best of me. It has become my soul."

He reached up and began to unscrew the ventilated top of the ordinary two-quart jar.

We stared, fascinated into silence.

Then, very deliberately, he removed the cap and spilled the butterfly out the window into the fresh April air.

We watched, the three of us, as the gorgeous creature beat its wings and

climbed higher. . . higher. . . melting at last into the April sky, vanishing.

Dr. Kreutch remained at the window gazing upward long after the butterfly had disappeared. Then he closed the window, drew the shade, and carried the empty jar back to his desk, handling it as fondly as though it still kept his butterfly.

After replacing the jar, he turned to us, removed his spectacles and began polishing them with his handkerchief, as he talked.

"Now to business. The disappearance of my wife has come to your attention. Very well. You will remember I told you only one of the two chrysalises reached the imaginal stage—matured? My wife was a lovely woman and our affection was genuine. But at times she lost patience with my—ah—preoccupation.

"One evening she became highly emotional. I found her in this room puncturing the other chrysalis of my *Kreutch lepidopteron*—goring it with a brooch pin. And she was reaching for the second one, when I took her throat in my hands.

"In my garden is a rare and extraordinarily beautiful Rosewood tree. Come,

gentlemen, I shall show you her grave."

The blood pulsed powerfully in my head. I heard myself trying to shout, "Dr. Kreutch."

Dave's fingers closed painfully on my arm. The words dissolved in my throat. Dave's voice was almost calm.

"Certainly, Dr. Kreutch. Please show us where she is."

* * *

Two hours later, Dave and I stood once more outside the ivy-covered gate. I looked at him. The lines in his face were deeper. Horror pulled at the corners of his mouth.

"Good Lord!" I said. "Our papers send us for a story of some strange new butterfly, and—good Lord!"

"Yes," said Dave. "The poor devil thought we were the police." Then Dave tried to smile. "He was wrong about his Krait, too. When I went back into the house, I found him sitting in that room, with the snake in his hands. He figured it would take two and a half minutes. It was another twenty seconds, at least, before he died."