

The House of the Sphinx

When I came to the House of the Sphinx it was already dark. They made me eagerly welcome. And I, in spite of the deed, was glad of any shelter from that ominous wood. I saw at once that there had been a deed, although a cloak did all that a cloak may do to conceal it. The mere uneasiness of the welcome made me suspect that cloak.

The Sphinx was moody and silent. I had not come to pry into the secrets of Eternity nor to investigate the Sphinx's private life, and so had little to say and few questions to ask; but to whatever I did say she remained morosely indifferent. It was clear that either she suspected me of being in search of the secrets of one of her gods, or of being boldly inquisitive about her traffic with Time, or else she was darkly absorbed with brooding upon the deed.

I saw soon enough that there was another than me to welcome; I saw it from the hurried way that they glanced from the door to the deed and back to the door again. And it was clear that the welcome was to be a bolted door. But such bolts, and such a door! Rust and decay and fungus had been there far too long, and it was not a barrier any longer than would keep out even a determined wolf. And it seemed to be something worse than a wolf that they feared.

A little later on I gathered from what they said that some imperious and ghastly thing was looking for the Sphinx, and that something that had happened had made its arrival certain. It appeared that they had slapped the Sphinx to vex her out of her apathy in order that she should pray to one of her gods, whom she had

littered in the house of Time; but her moody silence was invincible, and her apathy Oriental, ever since the deed had happened. And when they found that they could not make her pray, there was nothing for them to do but to pay little useless attentions to the rusty lock of the door, and to look at the deed and wonder, and even pretend to hope, and to say that after all it might not bring that destined thing from the forest, which no one named.

It may be said I had chosen a gruesome house, but not if I had described the forest from which I came, and I was in need of any spot wherein I could rest my mind from the thought of it.

I wondered very much what thing would come from the forest on account of the deed; and having seen that forest—as you, gentle reader, have not—I had the advantage of knowing that anything might come. It was useless to ask the Sphinx—she seldom reveals things, like her paramour Time (the gods take after her), and while this mood was on her, rebuff was certain. So I quietly began to oil the lock of the door. And as soon as they saw this simple act I won their confidence. It was not that my work was of any use—it should have been done long before; but they saw that my interest was given for the moment to the thing that they thought vital. They clustered round me then. They asked me what I thought of the door, and whether I had seen better, and whether I had seen worse; and I told them about all the doors I knew, and said that the doors of the baptistery in Florence were better doors, and the doors made by a certain firm of builders in London were worse. And then I asked them what it was that was coming after the Sphinx because of the deed. And at first they would not say, and I stopped oiling the door; and then they said that it was the arch-inquisitor of the forest, who is investigator and avenger of all silvestrian things; and from all that they said about him it seemed to me that this person was quite white, and was a kind

of madness that would settle down quite blankly upon the place, a kind of mist in which reason could not live; and it was the fear of this that made them fumble nervously at the lock of that rotten door; but with the Sphinx it was not so much fear as sheer prophecy.

The hope that they tried to hope was well enough in its way, but I did not share it; it was clear that the thing that they feared was the corollary of the deed—one saw that more by the resignation upon the face of the Sphinx than by their sorry anxiety for the door.

The wind soughed, and the great tapers flared, and their obvious fear and the silence of the Sphinx grew more than ever a part of the atmosphere, and bats went restlessly through the gloom of the wind that beat the tapers low.

Then a few things screamed far off, then a little nearer, and something was coming towards us, laughing hideously. I hastily gave a prod to the door that they guarded; my finger sank right into the mouldering wood—there was not a chance of holding it. I had not leisure to observe their fright; I thought of the back-door, for the forest was better than this; only the Sphinx was absolutely calm, her prophecy was made and she seemed to have seen her doom, so that no new thing could perturb her.

But by mouldering rungs of ladders as old as Man, by slippery edges of the dreaded abyss, with an ominous dizziness about my heart and a feeling of horror in the soles of my feet, I clambered from tower to tower till I found the door that I sought; and it opened on to one of the upper branches of a huge and sombre pine, down which I climbed on to the floor of the forest. And I was glad to be back again in the forest from which I had fled.

And the Sphinx in her menaced house—I know not how she fared—whether she gazes for ever, disconsolate, at the deed, remembering only in her smitten mind, at which little boys now leer, that she once knew

well those things at which man stands aghast; or whether in the end she crept away, and clambering horribly from abyss to abyss, came at last to higher things, and is wise and eternal still. For who knows of madness whether it is divine or whether it be of the pit?