

THE TEAK-WOOD SHRINE

HERE ends the curse of the teak-wood devil. Its tale of horror is full. I have brought it here to this bridge to throw it into the water before it brings more misery into the world.

I don't wonder that you look amazed at me, sir, for I am much changed since you last saw me, a scant two months ago. I am no longer the same woman, for the power of the teak-wood shrine has dragged me through hell. See how the teak-wood devil grins! How the little rubies of its eyes shine! Do you think it does not know what it has done to me—that it is merely a dead thing of wood and precious stones? It knows only too well. It has turned my hair white and lined my face with suffering. I have forgotten how to smile.

Oh, no, sir, I would rather you did not take it into your hands. Let me hurl it over the railing. Let me destroy it at once. No, I beseech you, sir! Not for all the wealth of the world would I give this jeweled shrine away. It can cause nothing but unhappiness and troubled thoughts—thoughts so terrible that only death can chase them away.

No person has ever looked into this shrine and lived, save only me and one other—but he was a holy man of India, and I am dying. My sands are running out rapidly. I shall welcome death.

This is the Shrine-devil. See how sleek and yellow it is! How fat and smiling! Was it carved thus, think you, to quell suspicion and invite the unfortunate possessor to touch the ruby that opens the sliding door? How unthinkingly that little idol guards its terrible secret!

A thousand dollars? No, sir, not for fifty thousand would I sell it to you, nor for fifty times fifty thousand. Money cannot buy happiness for me. But grief and suffering would attend you if I gave you this shrine. The secret locked in its heart would drive you mad. If death failed to hunt you out, you would go in search of it. For the secret is not to be borne. I have looked into the shrine and I still live, but that is because of my prayers before I touched the jewel that

released the little panel. Woe is me that I prayed! For had I not prayed, I might now be dead, and therefore happy, instead of slowly drowning in the welter of misery that rises ever higher about me.

A holy man of India gave the shrine to a Christian bishop who had done him a great service.

"Ask and you shall receive," he said; but he fell upon his knees and begged release from his promise when the bishop demanded this little teak-wood shrine.

"The bishop knows not what he asks," said the holy man. "Fain would I grant him anything but this, for it will bring him misery and ruin."

"Nay, by my holy faith," said the bishop, "since you have asked me to choose, and it is no small service I have done you, I will be satisfied with nothing else but the shrine. I shall annul the power of the shrine-devil with a Christian prayer, and show you once more the impotency of pagan charms."

"Bishop, bishop," answered the holy man very gravely, "it will take a potent spell indeed to chain the fat devil of the teak-wood shrine. And until you find that potent spell, I conjure you not to examine the shrine too closely, lest you touch by chance the little jewel push-button that opens the door to the mystery within it, for then you will be lost utterly."

"Tonight," said the bishop, "I shall open it."

"Nay," said the holy man, "if I thought you were not jesting, I would kill you now, and count myself your benefactor as having saved you from misery the like of which you cannot dream exists."

So the bishop gave his promise that he would not open the shrine. For months the teak-wood devil smiled at him from behind the big Bible in his study and wrought him no manner of harm at all, for he had not pressed the ruby that opens the sliding door.

Then one day guests came to the bishop's house, and he told them the story of the shrine, even as I have related it to you. One of them took it into his

hands and curiously examined the jewels that were embedded in the teak. As he examined it, his face turned ghastly pale, and he stared like a man whose eyes are fixed open in death, for by chance he had touched the ruby and opened the sliding door.

Then he uttered a laugh so mirthless, so terrible, that one of the women shrieked and fainted dead away. It was plain that the man was a maniac.

The bishop took from his hands the shrine, and touched in his turn the revealing ruby. The panel slid back again, and the bishop found himself looking into the interior of the shrine.

"There is nothing here at all," he exclaimed, "but McRae has gone mad from terror."

Then suddenly the bishop's face went white, as he realized what he had seen. He sank to his knees and prayed. McRae broke away from the group and ran to his lodgings in the English quarter of that native village. When they went for him he lay dead on the floor, grasping tightly in his hand the revolver with which he had slain himself. The bishop never ceased to cry out for death, and he passed away in delirium within a week.

THERE was in the bishop's household a native servant, who had listened to his master's recital and witnessed the tragic results of opening the shrine. He determined to possess the treasure, because of the jewels that shone between the yellow hands of the image. The servant was very cautious, for he feared lest he might himself experience the agony of soul that had killed the bishop and caused McRae to slay himself. He visited a seer, therefore, and paid ten rupees for a spell to bind the teak-wood devil. Then the servant took the shrine from the bishop's study, and fled with it to Singapore, where he tried to dispose of it. But the shops all turned against him, and offered him little or nothing for his treasure, for they said the jewels were of no value.

Disconsolate, the servant took the shrine between his knees and tried to dig out the rubies that lay between the hands

of the guardian image, for he thought they must be large and perfect. Inadvertently, he touched the ruby push-button, and the panel slid back for an instant, and he saw the mystery.

His heart was troubled, but he did not understand what he had seen. This was because of the spell put upon him by the seer. Because he had not understood, he explored the mystery again, and the door slid back a second time. And now he knew.

The power of the incantation was exhausted, for it was purchased with stolen rupees. A veil fell away from the servant's eyes, and he saw into the shrine with a clear brain and full understanding of what he looked upon. He knew now why poor McRae had killed himself, and why the bishop had prayed for death.

Concealing the shrine in a fold of his sash, the servant went down to the waterfront to cast it away. He stood on the wharf and watched a liner about to move away across the ocean. A great envy fell upon him of all those people, because they were ignorant of the secret hidden in the shrine, and could therefore still be happy. With this envy came also a great wave of self-pity, for the teak-wood devil was scourging his brain, and he knew that he could never smile again.

Then he took the terrible thing from his sash, to throw it into the sea. The jewels that were the eyes of the teak-wood image threw out a strange light, and an American, hurrying to board the ship, stopped with a shrill whistle, and demanded to see the curious object. The servant refused, but the American persisted, and offered much money for the treasure. The man shook his head sadly, and told the American the whole history of the shrine, as he had heard it from the bishop, even as I have repeated it to you.

The American forced into the servant's hands a roll of bills, and rushed up the gang-plank with the shrine in his arms, for the men on the ship were calling to him. The servant waved the bills

at him frantically, and struggled to follow him, but the deck-hands stopped him, the gang-plank was pulled up, and the liner moved slowly away.

The American dived into his stateroom and concealed the object in the covers of his berth. Then he returned to the deck. A crowd was gathered on the dock, and there was a great commotion, but of the bishop's servant there was no sign. He had jumped into the sea.

The American was John Aubrey, my late master, who first told me the story of the shrine on his return from India. He told me the tale again two months ago, with madness gleaming from his eyes, and begged me to destroy the thing, to throw it into the river, to let it sink where human eyes would nevermore look upon it.

You were my master's friend, and to you I can talk. It was this teak-wood shrine that killed him. He took it from the mantel to show it to me. Disbelieving its power, disbelieving the entire story told him by the bishop's servant at Singapore—for he had been unable to find the hidden spring of the shrine—he suddenly, by an evil chance, pressed the ruby, and the panel slid open. He tried to prevent it from closing, and inserted the nail of his little finger, but the door slid back into place notwithstanding, after he had caught a fleeting glimpse into the very heart of the shrine.

He laughed triumphantly to think he had at last found the touch-button. He was as excited as a small boy over his discovery. That was because he did not yet know what he had seen. But soon he began to worry, and his face grew slowly more and more drawn, as the terrible truth began to take hold of his brain. His eyes filled with dread. His brows contracted in horror. He made me promise to destroy the shrine. Then he went to his room and locked the door.

I concealed the object, which I now hated with all my soul, for I wanted no more misery brought into the world by its hideous means. I was called at the inquest, with the other servants, but I

told only what the others told, about how we heard the shot, and broke open the door, and found our master lying dead on the floor of his bedroom. But of the teak-wood shrine, and the hidden panel, and the fat devil with the wooden belly and the ruby eyes, I said not a word to anybody.

And then I prayed—God, how I prayed!—that unto me it might be given to release the world from this horror. Then I touched the ruby and saw what it was that the teak-wood image was guarding so complacently. It is because of my prayers that I am undergoing this life in death, this burden of misery, instead of being happy in the grave.

It must be in answer to my prayers that today I have the strength to bring the shrine to this bridge to throw it into the muddy waters. When that is done I shall be ready to die. My life is ebbing, and I am moving swiftly to my grave. I have read the teak-wood devil's secret, and all the sweetness and light have gone from my life.

Give me back the shrine, sir, or else fling it with your own hands, at once and forever, into the blessed depths of the water. No, no, sir, you must not look for the jewel! At once, fling it, or you will be yourself its victim!

Oh, oh! You have done it! You have looked!

What horrid sound is that!—You laugh, but that is because you do not yet know.—Now, do you begin to realize?—You know now what I have suffered. You have entered upon the path that can end only in death.

Oh, oh, oh!—Help me, you at the end of the bridge—Oh, gentlemen, hurry!—That is where they sank!—Look, they are going down for the third time! They are lost, they are gone! He and the teak-wood devil! Heaven be thanked!

And now, sirs, you may take me away—to a hospital, or an asylum for the insane. It matters not where, for my days are numbered. Nothing matters any more, for the curse of the teak-wood devil is ended. Good sirs, take me away.



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