

Alan Sullivan



*The Jade
God*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I THE OLD HOUSE

CHAPTER II PERKINS

CHAPTER III THE MAN FROM THE EAST

CHAPTER IV JEAN

CHAPTER V THE PAPER-KNIFE

CHAPTER VI GOD—OR DEVIL?

CHAPTER VII A MYSTERIOUS PEDDLER

CHAPTER VIII THE POWER OF THE UNKNOWN

CHAPTER IX THE ESCAPE

CHAPTER X A NIGHT OF TRAGEDY

CHAPTER XI A STRANGE CONFESSION

CHAPTER XII “I LOVE YOU!”

CHAPTER XIII THE SACRIFICE

CHAPTER XIV A BROKEN TILE

CHAPTER I

THE OLD HOUSE

[Table of Contents](#)

MR. JARRAD was a tall, lean man, with very quiet eyes, an observant air, and an impassive face. His clothing was unobtrusive and seemed to have arrived at that point of age at which clothing shows no further sign of wear. He was standing near the fireplace of an old-fashioned, oak-paneled room, and from his expression one might assume that he beheld its entire contents at a glance. Presently he fingered a bowl on the gray stone mantelpiece.

“One blue six-inch Delft, slightly chipped in two places on the upper edge,” he drawled.

Another man, rather younger, somewhat fatter, was seated at a table. He had something of Mr. Jarrad’s world-weary manner, but the process had not been carried quite so far, and he looked rather less diffident. He raised his eyes from a large book spread open before him and nodded.

“On the upper edge,” he repeated mechanically.

Mr. Jarrad put his ear to the clock. “One black marble timepiece, apparently in good order, lower left-hand corner damaged, complete with key. Keyhole slightly scratched.”

“Yes, we have that.”

The older man paused, took a swift inspection of his surroundings, pulled in his lower lip, and nodded thoughtfully. “Matter of fact, Mr. Dawkins, when I compare this room with several thousand others I’ve inspected, I

rather like it. Wouldn't mind having it myself, and in our profession that's about as far as one can go."

Dawkins put down his pen. "I had an idea that by this time you were past liking anything in the line of furnishings."

"Two twelve-inch pewter candlesticks, all feet bent. You're not right there. After thirty years of inventory work one sometimes becomes thankful in a sort of negative way for the things one does not see. This is one of those times. I generally look about, take the whole show in with one squint, and ask myself why people commit such crimes. Did you ever reflect how much humanity is run by things, just things?"

"No, I haven't, and I don't think they are. Things have no influence, no effect. They can't run anything."

Mr. Jarad grunted, "Matter of fact, they do. You think again. The getting together of things makes jobs for you and me in the first place. Therefore they run us. There was no inventory work in prehistoric days. And, apart from that, the collecting of them is the finish of at least half the entire number of what we call civilized women."

Dawkins laughed. "It'll never finish my woman. We haven't got any to speak of."

His companion nodded approvingly. "Keep on like that, if you can, and you'll do; but it isn't as easy as you think. It's the bargain that you really don't want here, and the job lot there—the gradual accumulation of things—that makes life drag and anchors their souls as well as their bodies. Stop and think a minute. First of all, when a girl is married she starts collecting. Children may come, but she goes on with

the collecting in between. It takes her mind off the children. The collection grows and grows. As a general rule about half the articles are not ornamental, and about half are never used. That makes no difference; she goes on. At middle age, Dawkins, they've got her; she's surrounded by them. Carved wood from Uncle John in Burma, Birmingham brass from Egypt, assagais from her brother in Africa, deer heads from Scotland, and perhaps an elephant's foot from Ceylon, all as ugly as ugliness can be. Some of these things may have certain virtues, or"—here Mr. Jarrad hesitated a little—"or certain disadvantages, but she can't appreciate that, because they are lost in the general ruck. After a while she dies; the new generation comes along, holds up its hands, says what a frightful collection, throws it all out, and begins the same process over again under new rules."

Having delivered himself of these sentiments, Mr. Jarrad indulged in a smile that was a little quizzical. His face, though shrewd, had no touch of cynicism, and this in spite of the fact that he had spent thirty years in estimating other people's property. This interminable procession produced in his mind rather a curious effect, and he had acquired the habit of estimating his fellow-men by the things the latter owned and apparently treasured. Experience enabled him to form an excellent appraisal of the individual by merely walking through his house. He could visualize the owner. And if sometimes the job bored Mr. Jarrad, he never disclosed it.

"I said just now," he went on with a wave of the hand, "that I rather liked this room. These things are good and not too numerous. They practically all fit. Of course they belong

to Mr. Thursby, except the portrait, but, if they could, I've an idea they'd sooner still be owned by Mrs. Millicent. Mr. Thursby made his money very quickly during the war, and Mrs. Thursby isn't the kind to collect such as this." He touched a bit of lacquer with what almost amounted to a caress. "Ever hear the story? It's short, but not pretty. It rather got hold of me, because there's more in it than meets the eye."

Dawkins shook his head. "I've never been in this part before."

"Well, Mr. Millicent, who lived here for years with his wife and daughter, died very suddenly in this very room. He was a strange, remote sort of gentleman, so I'm told, and a great traveler. About middle age, he was. Had a habit of sitting up late, reading and writing, enjoyed perfect health, enough money to live on so far as people knew, and apparently without an enemy in the world. At ten o'clock one evening he was found lying across that desk with a wound in his throat big enough to put your hand into."

"Why?" said Dawkins, startled.

Mr. Jarrad shrugged his shoulders. "That's what the coroner and the local police and the London detective tried to find out, and failed. No proof against any one; no strange characters about, no clues, nothing found afterward, nothing whatever to go on; but it happened in this sleepy old place where there's nothing but roses and scenery. It's never been cleared up to this day, and probably never will be."

Dawkins glanced about rather uncomfortably. "Then the place was sold?"

“Mrs. Millicent couldn’t get out quickly enough. The Thursbys came along in their car, offered half its value, and got it. They said they didn’t mind a murder or so if the drains were good. When they moved in they intended to stay; but they moved out in less than six months, and I’m told that Mrs. Thursby said that nothing on earth would induce her to stay. Interesting, isn’t it?”

“It’s a queer old house anyway. Not haunted, is it?”

“I never heard a whisper of that, and it’s the sort of thing you can’t keep quiet if tongues start wagging.”

“I wonder,” murmured Dawkins reflectively, “if my client knows about this.”

Mr. Jarrad’s brows went up. “In our profession it does not concern us what our clients may or may not know. Our business is to establish the physical condition of a lot of infernally uninteresting things. But, believe me, every house has its secret. We can’t report on that; we can’t even read it, because we’re not there long enough.”

Dawkins nibbled the end of his pen. “I wonder!”

“Why not? Every room I go into seems to want to say something to me, something it’s tired of keeping to itself, but I hurry through because I don’t want to be burdened. When you’ve been an inventory clerk a few years longer, it will come to you. You can’t escape it.” He paused, his gaze traveling round the oaken walls, then peered under the clock, swung out a picture, and examined the surface behind it. He touched this with a moistened finger.

“Condition in general I should say is excellent.”

It struck the younger man that for some time he had been accepting Mr. Jarrad’s conclusions without comment;

so he got up and made a businesslike inspection on his own account.

“Only fair, I should say.”

Mr. Jarrad made a little noise in his throat. “There’s not much to disagree about. Shall we arbitrate?”

“Of course!”

The older man felt in his pocket, produced a coin, and tossed it.

“Heads,” said Dawkins.

“It’s tails,” Mr. Jarrad smiled blandly. “Make a note of that, will you?”

Dawkins moved back to the table and began to scribble. The next moment he became aware that some one had entered the room and stopped short. Mr. Jarrad was regarding a woman who stood just inside the door and surveyed them with grim attention. Neither man had heard her come. Her face was well formed but sallow; the chin rather square, the nose long and thin. Her lips were immobile and slightly compressed. It was the eyes that held the two appraisers, being large and black and filled with a kind of slow, smoldering light. Her figure, tall, spare, and angular, carried with it an odd suggestion of menace. Her air was one of distinct animosity. Dawkins gave a slight start. A short silence followed, and he wondered how long she had been there, also how much she had seen and heard.

“Mr. Derrick is just coming up the drive,” she said crisply.

Mr. Jarrad rubbed his hands as though they were cold.

“Excellent,” he replied with obvious relief. “My colleague and I have just completed our work. I understand you are

the housekeeper, Miss Perkins?"

"No, I am the housemaid; at least, I was."

"Then it may interest you to know that we find the place in admirable condition."

Perkins seemed unimpressed, took a slow glance round the room, and disappeared. Nor did Mr. Jarrad appear to expect any reply. Dawkins did not speak but whistled softly. Since the history of this room had been unfolded, it had become rather oppressive, and the sudden advent of this strange woman added mysteriously to his uncomfortable sensations. He experienced a swift longing for light and air. Mr. Jarrad had crossed to the fireplace and was staring at an oil portrait over the hearth. Presently he stroked his long chin.

"That woman, I believe, came here soon after Mr. Millicent first came. She was here when he died, then stayed with the Thursbys during their occupancy, took charge of the house when they decided they had had enough; and, Dawkins, I don't mind betting she'll stay with your clients too, as long as they stay."

Dawkins gave an involuntary shiver. "What holds her in such a lonely place?"

"Every house has its secret," said Mr. Jarrad.

At this moment quick steps sounded in the hall, there was an echo of a young, strong voice, and the new tenant of Beech Lodge entered the room. Dawkins jumped up, while Mr. Jarrad assumed an air of professional dignity.

"Good afternoon, sir," he said. "My colleague and I have just finished our work, and you will be glad to know that all

is in excellent order. You may be assured that your interests have been well looked after."

Derrick, a tall young man with restless eyes, nodded casually. He did not seem much impressed, being busy with a swift scrutiny of the study. The mellow paneling, big fireplace, wide oak-planked floor, the large, companionable desk, and the French window opening to the smooth lawn all gave it an atmosphere at once restful and intimate. He felt as though he could turn out good stuff here. Then he nodded contentedly.

"Thanks very much, but I think you'd better see Miss Derrick about these things."

Mr. Jarrad and Dawkins made two stiff little bows which were absurdly alike and gathered up their papers. Derrick, left alone, moved automatically to the fireplace and stood staring at the oil portrait. He was in this attitude when his sister entered, short, alert, and businesslike. He glanced at her with a slow, provocative smile.

"Well, here we are. Am I forgiven for a snap decision?"

"Really I don't know yet. I've hardly seen the place, but it seems very comfortable, and I know what took your eye. Isn't getting settled an awful feeling? When will the Thursbys be here?"

He consulted his watch. "They should be here now; early in the afternoon, Thursby said. Did you inquire about servants?"

"Yes, and I wanted to speak to you about that maid. Did you notice her?"

"Rather; who wouldn't? She mesmerized me when I came here the first time." He laughed. "Do you want her?"

“My dear Jack, the question is the other way. If you insist on renting a house two miles from anywhere, the first thing to decide is whether your prospective servants want you. As to this one I don’t exactly know. She rather gives me the creeps.”

“What’s the matter, old thing?”

She sent him an odd smile in which there was no comfort. “I can’t say; probably nothing at all but the move, and this house, and all the rest of it. Jack, why were you so keen on it?”

He looked about, almost as though he saw something more than pictures and furniture. There was something more; he had been sure of that the first time he put foot in the room, but it was not the sort of thing one could explain or even justify.

“I really don’t know,” he said slowly, “but I was, and without any question. The rest of this house is what one might expect to find, but this room, well, I took a special fancy to it, and here we are. That’s about as much as you can expect from the ordinary man. I can do good work here from the feel of the place.”

She examined the study with curious interest. Comfortable? Yes. Workmanlike? Yes. A man’s room with nothing in it that was not completely livable. A few books in corner cases; a few good prints framed in harmony with the walls; the big, flat desk, leather-covered as to the center, with its dark mahogany edge showing long and careful usage; the leather chairs, men’s chairs, large and inviting; the great fireplace in its dull, oaken setting; all this dominated by the oil portrait, from which a pair of quiet

brown eyes looked out with a gaze at once striking and contemplative.

“But did you find anything unusual about this room?”

“I’m not so sure now; but, yes, I did. You know my weakness for jumping to conclusions.”

Her brows wrinkled. “I’m glad you admit that at the very start. You were tired with a flat in town, passed this place, and saw the sign. You walked through it and fell a victim, as you often have before. The immediate result is that we’ve made an extra effort to gratify your whim, though I’m afraid it’s really more than we should have attempted. You’ll be much happier, Jack, if you admit this at once.”

“I do,” grinned Derrick, “but I’d never have fallen had I not a very competent sister who I knew would save the situation. You’re quite right, Edith; I really can’t afford it, but the place was dirt cheap.”

“Well, I’m afraid it’s going to be something of the same sort with that maid, who will want more than you can really afford to pay; just another luxury we’ll have to live up to. In a lonely spot like this a servant asks top wages; and we’ll need two.”

Derrick hardly heard this. There was an odd little singing in his ears, as though a myriad of tiny voices, long held silent, had suddenly found a myriad of minute tongues. Well, he could wait for the rest. He went back to his discovery of Beech Lodge, the inspection under the guidance of its silent caretaker, the interview with the agent, and the growing conviction that he must take this house at once.

“How much does the maid ask?” he hazarded.

"I don't know. I'm almost afraid to inquire."

"She is a bit formidable," he admitted; then, slowly, "I wonder whether we've taken the house, or the house has taken us."

His sister glanced at him, puzzled. "I don't quite follow; but isn't the result the same in either case?"

He shook his head. "I'm not so sure about that."

Edith Derrick was prone to confess that she had never quite understood her brother, but had so far maintained that she was better able to look after him than any other woman. He was the only man in her life, and she was not ready to surrender him; but of late the going had become more difficult. She did, however, understand well enough not to attempt to fathom his moods and with a certain placid good nature put them down to the vagaries of the creative mind.

For the past few months he had been caught up in the ambition to write the one great book of his career. This would demand solitude and concentration and, above all things, a garden of his own. So when he returned from a prospecting trip and announced that the abode of his dreams was discovered and secured, Edith packed their belongings and journeyed into Sussex, determined not to be disappointed, yet prepared for the worst. In Beech Lodge she found but little to criticize, so little that she wondered mutely why the terms were so low. The place was comfortable but to her in no way fascinating, and her chief thought was of her own responsibilities in keeping the domestic wheels turning smoothly. If there were anything else behind this, anything that exercised a peculiar fascination on her brother, it would doubtless be apparent

later on. Meantime he was in one of his moods. She glanced at the placid features above the mantel, wondering whose they were.

"It's quite obvious that Mr. John Derrick has one of his preoccupied sensations to-day."

He nodded. "As a matter of fact I do feel a bit queer, but there's no anxiety in it, just the preliminary quiver to settling down." He paused and glanced at her oddly. "I had no alternative."

"From what?"

"From coming here. I mean I was meant to come."

She smiled indulgently. The thing about him was that he was different from all the men she knew. A good deal of the boy, a touch of the woman in his gentle persistence, whimsical, sensitive, calling her to aid him in a thousand ways he never saw, his mind open to winds of influence that she could only guess at; how much and how constantly he needed her! She admired his work, which she could not fully appreciate, and believed him capable of anything. Something of this was in her look, and he put an arm caressingly on her shoulder, then perched on the corner of the big desk.

"I think we're going to be jolly happy and comfortable here, and I'll certainly get a lot of work done. That's a man's way of putting it, and if you only—"

He broke off suddenly, jerked up his hand, and stared at it strangely. "Well, I'll be dashed!"

She bent forward quickly. "What's the matter, Jack?"

He flexed his fingers, shook his head with some confusion, and, turning, leaned over and examined the big

desk. "Don't know," he said awkwardly; "probably only writer's cramp; but it never took me before. Perhaps I'd better get a typewriter, though I hate the things."

Edith was about to speak when there came an almost inaudible knock at the door, and Perkins entered.

"If you please, madam, Mr. and Mrs. Thursby are walking up the drive."

"Thank you; please bring them in here. And, Perkins—"

"Yes, madam?"

"It—it doesn't matter now. I'll see you afterward."

The woman went out, and Derrick glanced at his sister with genuine curiosity. This was very unlike her.

"I say, Edith, what's up?"

She blinked and pulled herself together. "Nothing at all, Jack."

"Don't think of keeping that person if you don't fancy her. There must be others available."

"What an extraordinary expression she has! It made me feel a little cold."

The coming of the Thursbys reduced the atmosphere of Beech Lodge to an undoubted normal. Mr. Thursby was short, brisk, alert, and highly colored both as to clothes and complexion. He spoke in a sharp staccato voice that carried unfailing self-assurance. A manufacturer in a small way before the war, he had seized opportunity with both hands and made his fortune by sending in regular supplies of handgrenades, of which, though they were unloaded when they left his works, he seemed at first almost afraid. This uncertainty, however, soon left him, and after the Armistice he made an excellent settlement in respect of partially

completed orders, winding up his business with a credit balance that surprised even himself.

And if her husband's rotund person was eloquent of commercial success, his feminine counterpart reflected no less this satisfactory *dénouement*. She had a round, plump face; stubby and equally plump fingers, weighted with rings of varying value and brilliancy; full, red cheeks, and a penetrating, high-pitched voice. She wore all she could, and on top of this a mountain of glossy furs. The Thursbys, man and wife, reeked of money; but were naturally good-hearted people whom money could not quite spoil. And from their present manner it would seem that they were genuinely interested in Derrick and his sister. Mrs. Thursby glanced round, nodded at the sight of familiar things, and settled herself comfortably.

"I'm very glad to meet you, Miss Derrick," she said cheerfully, "and isn't it odd to come into one's own house and find some one else sitting there?"

Miss Derrick smiled. "I suppose it is."

"I do hope you like the place, and if there's anything I can tell you about it you're very welcome."

"It's a good deal larger than I expected, but it seems very homelike, and my brother evidently fell in love with it at first sight. The things in it are charming."

"Glad they appeal to you, but as a matter of fact I chose hardly any of them."

Mr. Thursby nodded complacently. "That's so! I picked up the place just as it stood, with practically everything in it. We were motoring past, just like your brother, saw the sign,

took a fancy, and bought it the very next day. I don't believe in haggling over prices when you see what you want."

"And, what's more, we took it over with the servants just as they stood, too," chimed in his wife. "The only trouble was that they stood too much; in fact, all of them except Perkins."

"Really," said Edith.

"Yes," replied Thursby genially, "she couldn't get a job on the strength of her looks, but I never knew a servant do so much work and make so little fuss over it. The thing is to forget her face, if one can. How do you like Beech Lodge, Mr. Derrick?"

"Very much; but I suppose that since I'm the guilty party in taking it, I couldn't say anything else. This room appeals to me, especially."

As he said this, he intercepted a glance that Mr. Thursby darted at his wife, and experienced a curious conviction that these two were trying hard to conceal their satisfaction at having unloaded the house on some one else. He saw the plump lady on the sofa shake her head ever so slightly. Mr. Thursby stiffened, got a shade redder in the face, and his eyes rested for a fraction of a second on the features over the mantel, as though asking their late owner whether he required any publicity. The features evidently telegraphed back that he did not. Whereupon Mr. Thursby looked more genial than ever.

"It's a good, comfortable room," he agreed, "but I generally used the little one off the dining-room. It's warmer."

Mrs. Thursby gave a slight shiver and regarded the Derricks with renewed and unaffected interest. "I dare say it will sound very queer to you, but neither of us cared much for this room. For my part I like something brighter than old wood and old pictures. Never cared much for leather, either."

Edith betrayed no surprise. She quite understood. But what did puzzle her was that people of the Thursby type should ever have bought this ancient mansion.

"You weren't here very long, were you?" she ventured.

"Six months," said Mr. Thursby; "six months, then we went off to France. I wanted to see some of the places where they used my grenades."

"Did you make that stuff?" asked Derrick, amused.

"Tons of it. Ever use them?"

Derrick smiled. "Rather, but," he put in hastily as his visitor brightened and prepared to talk shop, "one doesn't say anything on that score now."

"I'd be awfully obliged if Mrs. Thursby would show me something about the house up-stairs," said Edith.

Thursby laughed. "Your sister is as practical as my wife, Mr. Derrick, so I'll take the opportunity of showing you one or two things outside that may be useful."

He seemed in an odd way glad to get out of the room, and Derrick listened to a disquisition on roses and mulch, Thursby being an authority on both. Beech Lodge had a reputation for its roses.

Meanwhile Mrs. Thursby, left alone with her hostess, glanced at the latter rather uncertainly.

"As to Perkins, Miss Derrick, I really don't know that I can tell you very much. She isn't the sort about whom one can say much."

"I'd really be very grateful for anything you can tell me. Might I ask how long you had her?"

"Only six months or so. We weren't in the house any longer than that."

"Then did you ascertain anything about her before that? I mean, had she satisfactory references?"

Mrs. Thursby shook her head with what seemed unnecessary decision. "No, we found her here, just as you found her, or your brother. She was practically part of the house, and, looking back at it, I can't imagine the house without her. Of course she had been with Mrs. Millicent, whom I have never seen, though she lives near here."

Edith experienced a sudden curiosity about the Millicents, but something in Mrs. Thursby's expression suggested that information on this subject would be forthcoming before long.

"And you found Perkins quite satisfactory? It would help me a good deal to know, because, frankly, I don't see what keeps a woman in such a lonely spot."

"She is absolutely clean and superior, very superior. As for being lonely, I saw no sign of it. She never once left the place, even to go to the village."

Miss Derrick smiled. "That's very good news, but I was just wondering if she isn't too superior for us. We're going to live very quietly. My brother can't stand interruptions when he's writing."

The other woman sent her a look of candid scrutiny, then shook her head. "Miss Derrick, I'm going to tell you something that will sound queer, but it's perfectly true. Perkins will like you a good deal better than she liked us. She made no pretense of that, though she was always most respectful. But I felt it just the same. I got the idea, and still have it, that she looked on us as intruders. I can't for the life of me say why such a thing should be, but there you are, and I know it seems ridiculous. But Beech Lodge is too far from anywhere for its occupants to be over particular about trifles, and I put the thing out of my head—or tried to, anyway."

"That's curious," said Edith reflectively; "she seems very respectful."

"She's the soul of respect, but I'm not sure what it's for. Also she was too reserved for me. And she appeared to be afraid she'd say too much and let something slip she didn't mean to. You asked about her references, but as a matter of fact I hadn't the cheek to inquire for any, and took it for granted that she went with the house, whoever took it. I didn't even write to Mrs. Millicent."

"Who is Mrs. Millicent?"

Edith put the question impulsively, and Mrs. Thursby's eyes sought the portrait that hung just above her head. She did not answer at once but seemed to be debating how much she might say. When finally she did speak, it was with a reluctance that was gradually overcome by the interest of her subject.

"We bought the place from her but only saw the agent. Mrs. Millicent herself was ill at the time and on the south

coast with her daughter. Mr. Millicent had just died here, very suddenly, and she did not want to come back. She's never been back since."

"I didn't know that," said Edith slowly.

"Yes, and it happened in this very room." Mrs. Thursby spoke more confidently now, warming a little, as though it was good to remember that it was now some one else's room. "Mr. Millicent was found at that very desk and, I'm told, found by Perkins, who was devoted to him. Then his wife put the house on the market at once."

Edith took a long breath. "I wish I'd known that," she said thoughtfully, "but I'm glad somehow that I've heard it at once."

"Would it have made any difference? I thought every one hereabouts knew it. Didn't Perkins say anything about it to your brother?"

"Nothing whatever, and, Mrs. Thursby, please, I don't want him to know just yet. I hope your husband won't say anything. Jack is so sensitive and imaginative that it would divert him completely from his work, which at the present is very important."

The stout woman laughed. "My husband is probably talking hard about roses and garden-mold. He's got that on the brain now instead of grenades, and it's much healthier. And if I were you I wouldn't worry about Mr. Millicent. So now you know how we found Perkins, and I must say she kept the house spotless. But she was so quiet that it did get a bit on my nerves. She went about as though expecting something or some one, till I used to feel like asking her to

shout out who or what it was. And, as I said, she never liked me.”

“How very strange!”

“I’m afraid I’ve rather let myself go on the subject, but I’ve told you all I know. It may be that Perkins likes things old and subdued like this, while I confess that I like them more new and shiny. Perhaps that’s why she wants to stay, if she does want to. I know how you can find out without asking.”

“How?” said Edith curiously.

“If she smiles at you, it will be all right. She never smiled at me.”

“I’m afraid I should need rather more than that.”

Mrs. Thursby shook her head impulsively. “I don’t believe you will. It’s a queer sort of house, if I do say it.”

“Did you ever imagine it was haunted?” Miss Derrick knew the question sounded childish, but it came out involuntarily. Much to her surprise Mrs. Thursby took it quite seriously.

“I did at first, but soon got over that. No, we’ve never been bothered. There’s a bit of creaking now and then, but not more than in any house of this sort, and certainly we never saw anything.” She paused, then went on quite frankly. “The real reason I came here to-day was to see whether it was likely that you and Perkins would hit it off, and if not I would have advised you to get rid of her, if you could; but whether the queerness is in the house or in her I really don’t know. It’s somewhere, not the sort of thing that can hurt, but that one just feels without knowing why.” She paused a moment.

“As to your brother, I’d advise you to say nothing at all if he’s the kind of man you describe. He’s bound to find out for himself. And if you’re wondering, Miss Derrick, why we should have let you take the house and then talk about it like this, the reason is that I may be misjudging Perkins altogether, and the whole affair may just be the result of my own imagination. Don’t take any notice of her, and everything should be all right. Now tell me: does it seem to you that I’ve said a lot of foolish things?”

“Not at all. I think you’ve been extremely kind, and, if I may say so, very honest, and it should all help very much, especially with Perkins. My brother had to have a quiet place to work in, and this should do admirably. I really don’t believe in ghosts; neither does he.”

“He’ll find it quiet enough here,” replied Mrs. Thursby significantly.

Voices sounded in the hall, and Derrick entered with his landlord. He looked pleased, as though Beech Lodge had revealed unexpected attractions.

“We’re going to have lots of roses next summer, Edith. Never saw a better lot of trees. Mr. Thursby has shown me everything. Place out there I can work in, too, when the decent weather comes.”

Edith nodded. “How very nice!” She turned to Mrs. Thursby. “One of my principal duties is to keep out of the way of a toiling author, yet to be on hand when wanted. Jack has always pictured himself working in a garden. Now we’ll have some tea.”

“That’s true, but who’s going to look after the roses? What about your late gardener, Mr. Thursby? Is he available

for a man of moderate means?"

"I'm afraid I don't know where he is. There should be somebody in the village who'd like the job."

"And I'm sorry we can't stay for tea," put in his wife; "we have rather a long way to go." She stole a glance at the portrait, her expression suggesting to Edith that there were already too many in the room.

"So thanks just the same," said Thursby, "but as a matter of fact we have to be back in town within the hour, and that means hustling. We're off to France for a while next week, but not the battle-fields this time. If you're ready, Helen, we'll make a start now. Good-by, Miss Derrick, and I hope you'll be comfortable. My agent will look after any repairs, if you let him know. It may be we'll pass here again, and if so I'll drop in. And I want to read that book when it comes out."

He spoke so abruptly that Miss Derrick was a little startled and felt now that while Mrs. Thursby had told her a good deal it was probably not all. Her first impulse was to betray nothing to her brother.

"Can't you really stay for a few minutes? Tea is ready." She rang the bell.

"We'd love to," Mrs. Thursby assured her hastily. "But it's quite impossible. I hope we'll have better luck next time." She put out a plump hand.

Derrick indulged in a puzzled glance. The manner of their departure was unmistakably hasty. He intercepted another wordless signal and felt suddenly amused.

"Would you like tea in the other room?" he hazarded.

The little man shook his head with decision. "It isn't that at all, I assure you." Then the door opened, and Perkins stood motionless on the threshold, her eyes fixed on Miss Derrick. She seemed unaware there were others present. Mrs. Thursby busied herself with her gloves and did not look up.

"You rang, madam?"

"Yes, Mr. and Mrs. Thursby are not staying for tea."

Derrick had a strange conviction that Perkins knew this without being told, but the severe face of the maid changed not at all. She disappeared into the hall, followed shortly by the young man and his visitors. There were a few words of good-bye and a final assurance that Beech Lodge would be found homelike and comfortable. Edith looked after them in silent wonder. Why were they so anxious to leave? The excuse had sounded something more than hollow. The whole affair had been queer and unnatural. Then she too stared at the portrait, as though asking what it all meant. Presently sounded the horn of a car and the dwindling note of an engine.

Derrick came back, and she regarded him expectantly. How much of it had he caught? It was the dream of his life to write his biggest book in a place like Beech Lodge. But he was sensitive, imaginative, and subjective, and she dreaded the impression this strange and mysterious atmosphere might produce. The uncertainty made her feel a little cold.

"Well, that's done!" he said, rubbing his hands. "And I've nothing more to learn about the grounds. Thursby must have spent a good deal of money on the place. It's odd that he left it, because in a way he seems still keen on it. Funny

chap, that. He was almost apologetic about what he had done in the way of improvements. Anyway, here we are in full possession."

"That's just what I feel, and, Jack, I do hope it will be just what you want."

"It is absolutely. I know that already, if you don't find it too slow and remote. I'm a bit guilty on that score. I suppose there are some of the right sort in the neighborhood, and the Millicents are not far off. Did you learn anything satisfactory about that maid?"

"Yes," she said slowly. "Mrs. Thursby's report is that she's very competent and trustworthy and possibly willing to do the whole thing herself. So I think I'll keep her if she'll stay."

"Good. I thought you would. A bit out of the common, that woman."

The door opened as he spoke, and Perkins came in with the tray. The two glanced at each other, and watched her silently. The long, deft fingers moved with a sort of definite precision, lingering over the silver as though the touch of it conveyed an actual pleasure. This deliberate procedure was marked by a noiseless precision. One could not imagine a woman like this making a mistake. Her face, absolutely impassive, betrayed nothing. While she was in the room she seemed part of it, and from her there spread something that almost suggested ownership. Then she went out, as silent as themselves. Derrick sat up.

"By George!" he said softly.

"What is it, Jack?"

He laughed. "Hanged if I know yet; something in the air. Probably it's only the new and rather ideal surroundings that