THE SIN OF WITCHCRAFT

By GILBERT FRANKAU

ILLUSTRATED BY RALPH PALLEN COLEMAN

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"Rather a commonplace house, isn't it!"

"It's a very well-built house, Sir George."

"A bit big, too, for a bachelor."

"Let us hope you will not always remain a bachelor, Sir George;" and the aristocratic house-agent smiled at his aristocratic client across the mahogany desk of Messrs Graysworth's private office. He was confident, assured, with a comfortable sense of having achieved something in his day's work.

Sir George Grandison, you see, was not only a baronet and a rich baronet, but a baronet who happened, at thirty-five, to be the unmated lion of London's first real post-war Season. The newspapers were full of "New Guinea Grandison." Only that morning Mr. Graysworth had seen in the most prominent position of London's most prominent daily a photograph which reproduced with curious accuracy the lean countenance, the big nose, the close-cropped, slightly curly, slightly faded brown hair, the clean-shaven lips and the gray-green eyes whose unfathomable pupils were even now inspecting him. Only that morning Mr. Graysworth had read, half-scoffing and half-believing, some very strange tales of "New Guinea Grandison's" fifteen years of exile in those mysterious islands of the Arafura Sea, where apparently black magic still flourished and the witch-doctor led a prosperous if evil-smelling existence.

"I suppose the newspaper chaps made most of that up themselves," thought Mr. Graysworth; and, dismissing black magic from his mind, went on: "Perhaps you'd like to have another look over the place, Sir George. Honestly, it's one of the best little properties we have on our books at the present."

"Tell me again, how much did you say you wanted for it?"

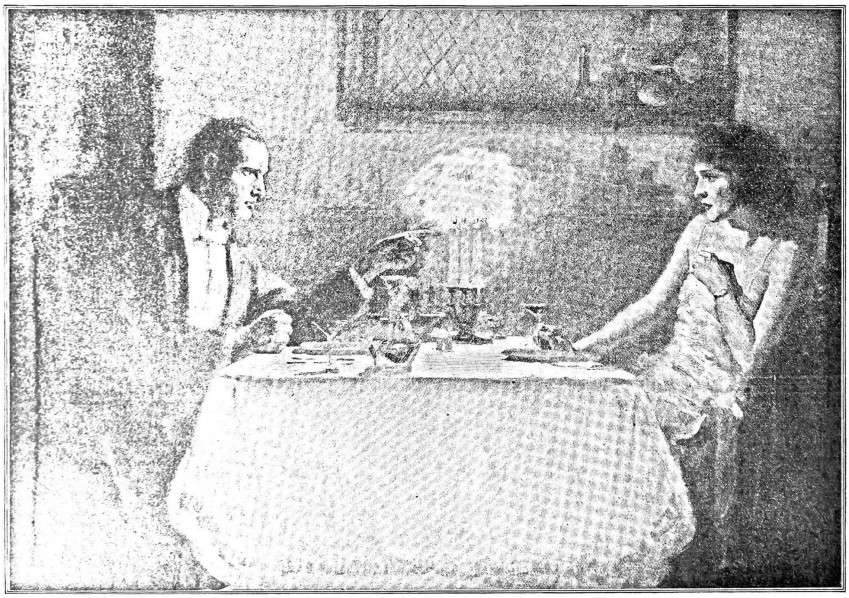
"Our client," Mr. Graysworth toyed with his walrus moustache, "is asking eight thousand for the twenty-two years lease at three hundred and twenty per annum."

"That's rather stiff, isn't it?"

"I don't think so, Sir George. You must remember the state of the market. And then—there's not a penny needs spending on it. Believe me, Sir George," enthusiastically, "if you wanted to do those decorations and put in that panelling today, it would cost you—"

"Not quite eight thousand, surely?" Mr. Graysworth's client smiled, a slow enigmatic smile which told Mr. Graysworth little or nothing of his intentions towards 18a, Curzon Street. Yet after a little further persuasion, he consented to inspect the property again, stipulating only that he should inspect it unaccompanied.

"I think I ought to tell you, Sir George," said Mr. Graysworth, handing over the key as they parted, "that we have already had an offer, quite a good offer, though unfortunately our client has not seen his way to accept it."



Alix, too, was unusually silent that night, so it appeared to him, as though she were fearful of betraying her secret thoughts before their serving-men.

George Grandison, as he walked slowly through Berkeley Square and slowly along Lansdowne Passage into Curzon Street, felt more of a schoolboy back for the holidays than a Rip Van Winkle returned after fifteen years' exile. Much of London had changed (for the worse, it seemed to him) but Mayfair, thank the Lord, was still Mayfair. There was something solid, something eminently sane about Mayfair. And he, George Grandison, had need of the solid and the sane after all those fantastic and unbridled

years when—as he now realized looking back on them—he had lived almost as a savage among the savages of Papua.

Thank the Lord he need never go back to Papua; never again risk his life and health in the pursuit of an orchid for a millionaire's hothouse or a butterfly for a collector-maniac's specimen-case. Since his cousin's unexpected death and his unexpected inheritance of a title and a fortune, all that and all those other uncannier experiences of which he had given but a hint to the news-greedy reporters, lay behind him. "I'll settle down," he thought. "I'll buy this house or some other. I'll marry a white woman and forget. . . ."

Funny that the house-agent chap should have guessed his matrimonial intention. Somehow it reminded him—just when he least wanted to be reminded—of Ka-lu, the witch-doctor, of old, evil-smelling Ka-lu in whose hut he had learned the black magic of the Papuans. . . .

"Pah!" scoffed George Grandison. "Pah! Black magic!" Yet even scoffing he shivered, as men recollecting nightmares shiver.

Then, deliberately, he put Papua and all that Papua stood for out of mind, and strode—a tall figure in his ultra-civilized garb—along Curzon Street till he came to the double brick-front and the mahogany door of No. 18a.

A full week had passed since his last inspection, but his memory of the place, despite all the other houses he had seen, remained accurate enough, so that, even before he entered, he could see, in his mind's eye, each bare room and each twist of the uncarpeted stairs.

"Thank God it's been modernized," he thought as he took the Yale key from his waistcoat pocket, and, letting himself into the square lounge hall, closed the mahogany front-door behind him. Compared with the gloomy, rat-infested residences he had visited during the past week, this well-plumbed, well-panelled, well-parquetried house satisfied, as Mayfair satisfied, his craving for the solid and the sane; and as he climbed the uncreaking staircase so as to begin his inspection in the pleasantly-papered servants' rooms and end it in the white-tiled basement, Grandison felt himself more and more disposed to buy. Here, perhaps, one could wipe out the past; here, in the arms of some clear-eyed white woman, forget the unbridled years. Here, perhaps, the happy prattle of one's own children would banish from one's ears the cries of that other child—the brown baby whom old Ka-lu's knife. . . .

Shivering again, George Grandison recovered his self-control. “The past’s dead,” he said to himself; “*dead*;” and continued his inspection.

“Ripping nurseries those three rooms would make,” he decided descending to the third floor. “Good bathroom, too. Nothing like plenty of bathrooms.”

There were more bathrooms, two of them, between the two luxurious bedrooms on the second floor; and on the first, a double drawing-room with embrasured windows through which the sunshine of a London May came streaming to dispel the momentary darkness which had clouded Grandison’s mind.

A window-seat furnished each of the three embrasures, and seating himself in the centre one, he fell into a day-dream—that same day-dream which had been haunting him ever since the last vague blue of Port Moresby faded to nothingness beyond the steamer-wake, and he could thank God for his deliverance. He dreamed him a woman, a dark-haired, vivid, vital white woman. He dreamed her in that very room.

Still day-dreaming, Grandison rose from the window-seat and made his way downstairs. Oh, but it was good, good to know himself back in England, to know his oath as yet unbroken, to know himself safe, safe at last. . . .

Day-dreaming no longer, yet sentient in every conscious fibre of him that this was the house of his dreams, he entered the dining-room and closed the door of it behind him.

Immediately, as though in confirmation of the secret hopes with which the place had inspired him, his nostrils grew conscious of a perfume, a vague indefinable perfume which hovered, like the wraith of his day-dream in the air. The perfume pleased him—as the red marble chimneypiece pleased, and the pale splendour of the figured cedar and the fretted ceiling and the low embrasured windows. “Jolly scent!” he thought. “I wonder if it’s anything to do with the wood they’ve used for those panels.” Then, smiling at his own obtuseness, he discovered the origin of the perfume—a tiny lace handkerchief which lay, obviously dropped from some feminine reticule, almost in the centre of the polished floor.

George Grandison picked up the handkerchief, and thrust it absent-mindedly into the lapel-pocket of his morning coat. Now, once more, day-dreams haunted him.

Till gradually day-dreams faded from his mind and he saw a vision.

Once more he was back in Papua. Once more he sat at the feet of Ka-lu, the witch-doctor. “Have no fear,” said Ka-lu. “I, even I, will teach you that secret which the foolish gods of the white man withhold from their worshippers’ eyes. You shall be even as the gods themselves—prescient of the future.”

Gradually as it had come, the vision faded. Yet the temptation of the vision, that same temptation to which Grandison had yielded once and only once in the dark unbridled years, remained. He yearned to look beyond the veil, to see what fate this house might hold for him.

Soon he was muttering to himself, muttering as old Ka-lu had taught him to mutter. “By the knife!” he muttered. “By the knife and the innocent blood.”

Presently he became aware of the Power. The Power had not deserted him. He was wise still, wise with the black magic of the Papuans.

And now his eyes, inward-turning, saw Woman-with-a-Broom, who sweeps away the dust from mortal vision; and now he saw that Void-of-Thought which is Mirror-of-Life; and now the Specks, those protoplasmic Specks which have neither form nor shape nor colour, shewed in the Mirror; and now, slowly, Dance-of-the-Specks began; and now, slowly, the Specks took form; and now, slowly, they took colour, that first colour which is the colour of blood; and now, as the glass slides in the slowly-turned kaleidoscope, the Specks slid each in each, till the Picture, even that Picture which is forbidden, was complete.

There were two figures, a man’s and a woman’s, in the picture. The figures sat, obviously dining, at a small rectangular table; and though not even Grandison’s inward eye could see their countenances—for the woman’s head was averted and the man had his back to him, their bodies, the man’s in his black dinner-jacket and the woman’s in its low-bosomed scarlet frock, were sharper than any picture he had ever seen in Papua. Their hands, too, he could see—transparent flesh-colour against the dark of the Mirror—the woman’s quiet on her knee, and the man’s right hand moving.

Very slowly, very cautiously, the man’s right hand moved—from his knee to the pocket of his dinner-jacket—from the pocket of his dinner-jacket to the level of the table. Then, more cautious than ever, it lifted from table-level . . . and horror took Grandison by the throat.

How it had maddened him to press that first triumphant kiss on the scarlet of her mouth!

He called on Woman-with-a-Broom to clear Mirror-of-Life, but Woman-with-a-Broom would not come. The hand—the flat-thumbed hand with the sparse hairs shewing black on its lower finger-joints—moved on; till it seemed to Grandison as though he could actually visualize between its thumb and forefinger, a pinch of that powdered death whose secret he had learned of old Ka-lu. Then, as flat thumb and hairy forefinger hung suspended over the glass of blood-red wine whereto the woman in the blood-red frock had not yet set her lips, he heard his own voice calling, calling desperately out of vast silences, on Woman-with-a-Broom that she should break Mirror-of-Life and give him back unbroken the oath he had sworn to God. But Woman-with-a-Broom would not break Mirror-of-Life, and shuddering as men shudder in ague, Grandison saw flat thumb and hairy forefinger open; saw the white of the powdered death dissolve to ruby in the blood-red of the wine.

The face of the man who, some five minutes later, tottered out into Curzon Street was no longer the face of the morning's photograph, but the face of one who, tottering down the bamboo ladder of Ka-lu's hut, had muttered to himself: "Sin! The sin of witchcraft! May God punish me if ever, even in thought, I spill the innocent blood again."

Some fortnight later, Sir George Grandison, stepping into his new limousine at the Embankment entrance of the Savoy Hotel, said to his new chauffeur in his usual deliberate voice: "One hundred and thirteen Chesterfield Street. And there's no hurry."

He thought, as the car purred slowly up the Embankment—for the lion of the London Season, despite all Mr. Graysworth's endeavours, was still houseless—"I don't think I care for hotels. Even the best of them isn't a home;" and so thinking, remembered for the first time in three hectic over-social days the dining-room of No. 18a, Curzon Street. What a fool he had been not to have taken that place. As if the black magic ran in Mayfair! As if anything but self-hypnosis—most ordinary of mental processes to the imaginative—could have been cause of that curious picture he had seen.

The car purred on till it made Piccadilly, and, swinging right-handed out of Piccadilly along the wall of Lansdowne House, Curzon Street. Passing 18a, Sir George saw that Graysworth's "To Let" board still jutted above the mahogany door. "I'll go and see them tomorrow," he decided; and a few moments later, shaking hands with his mild-eyed, middle-aged, pearl-roped hostess, dismissed the matter temporarily from his thoughts.

"You're taking my most eligible girl down to dinner," murmured the hand-shaker. "Alix Lawley. Such a curious creature. You'll like her, though. Most men," Lady Marchmont grinned matchmakingly, "fall in love with her at first sight. But perhaps," Lady Marchmont grinned maliciously, "that's only because her grandmother's just left her another fortune."

Sir George Grandison, however, did not fall in love with Alix Lawley at first sight. If anything, she repelled him. He found her too tall, almost his own height; too Oriental, almost like a Jewish girl painted by Sargent. She was Jewish, too, in her lack of personal reticence.

All the same, her dinner-prattle amused him. He even experienced a certain vague disappointment when she told him over the fish that she was engaged,—"at least practically engaged" to be married. He asked her chaffingly to tell him the name of the happy man; but before she could answer, his left-hand neighbour, the gray-haired principal of a famous girls'

school, snatched at a conversational pause and started in to enlighten him about the personalities of their fellow-guests.

The dinner-party, a round dozen, contained at least eight "celebrities;" all of whom Mrs. Winterton biographed at such length that Alix Lawley's, "It's unkind of you to monopolize Sir George, Auntie, when you know how I was looking forward to meeting him" came as a positive relief to Grandison.

"But why did you want to meet *me*, Miss Lawley?" he countered. "As far as I can gather from your aunt, I'm the least interesting person at the table by a long chalk."

"Not to *me*." The girl smiled enigmatically. "You see, *I* believe, really do believe—in the supernatural."

To Grandison, the words were a commonplace of his social existence. He had heard them in a hundred drawing-rooms. But the enigma of the girl's smile fascinated him. He began to see her as beautiful, most desirably beautiful. The shoulders under her white frock were exquisite, and her hand, as she reached forward to take an almond from the silver dish, thrilled him with its sensuous delicacy.

"There's nothing supernatural about orchid-coping or butterfly-coping," he smiled back. "It's a very ordinary business, I assure you."

"Never mind the butterflies and the orchids." She lowered her voice conspiratorially. "Tell me about the witch-doctors. I'm sure they're too wonderful for words."

The sensuous hand moved away from the almond-dish and down to the bag on the girl's lap. "I always steal Lady Marchmont's almonds when I come to dinner with her," she explained roguishly.

As the bag opened, George Grandison's keen nostrils were aware ever so faintly of its perfume. The perfume attracted him, even as the girl had begun to attract; but in that surcharged atmosphere of rich food and idle chatter, it stirred no recollection in his mind. He was aware of it only in connection with Alix—as a mere *nuance* which contributed its tiny quota to the sensuous appeal of her dark-haired, vivid, vital personality. "Do tell me about the witch-doctors," she pleaded again.

He yielded, rather less against the grain than was usual with him, to her persuasions, and gave her, half in jest and half in earnest, a *resumé* of those few fairy-tales with which he had stalled off the reporters. Watching her while she listened—those eyes gray-green as his own, those red lips half-parted in breathless expectation, those white shoulders and the hint of draped bosom thereunder—he felt the vague disappointment he had experienced when she first confided her engagement to him growing and growing. . . Till, subconsciously at first, then consciously, all the savage in him—all those instincts to which he had given rein during those fifteen years spent out of sight, almost out of thought of white women—leaped to new life.

"And do you really believe—" she began.

"In black magic? Of course not." Abruptly Grandison broke off his narrative and asked, in a voice which even in his own ears sounded strangely moved: "Tell me—this engagement of yours—is it definite?"

The girl, one eye on her aunt, who was once more plunged in informatory gossip, seemed to perpend his question for quite a while before answering, almost in a whisper: "Of course it's definite. Though my family," with another glance at Mrs. Winterton, "are terribly against it."

"Why?"

"Oh," casually, "various reasons. Charlie's a widower, you see, and his first wife—" She bit off the sentence and went on: "The family will *have* to give in now, because Charlie's bought a new house."

And you're going to marry a man because of his house?" Grandison's tone was still abrupt.

"Rather!" Was he deluding himself, or did the tiniest cloud of doubt in Alix's eyes belie the certainty in Alix's voice? "Rather!" The tiny cloud, if cloud it had been, passed from the gray-green pupils of her eyes as she met his abruptness with banter. "It's such a topping house, you see. The sort of house any woman would sell her soul for. Charlie spotted it nearly a month ago when it first came into the market. We went to see it together. The people were asking a frightful price—people do ask frightful prices for anything decent nowadays, don't they? However, I told Charlie if he wanted to marry me he must make an offer for it at once."

"And the people accepted his offer?"

“Oh, no. Apparently somebody else was after the place, and they thought they’d get a better price. Thank goodness, though, the other man went off. He must have gone off, because Charlie had a letter from the agents this morning. I’m tremendously bucked about it. Houses in Mayfair are so frightfully difficult to get, and I’ve always wanted to live in Curzon Street.”

“Curzon Street?” queried Grandison, and his voice was abrupter than ever. “May I ask what number in Curzon street?”

“It’s 18a,” replied the girl. “I oughtn’t to tell you, really, because Charlie hasn’t paid his deposit yet, and you might go and steal it from him.”

Before Grandison’s astonishment could frame reply, Lady Marchmont rose from the table; and Alix, following her hostess’ example, dropped her handbag. Stooping to recover it for her, his nostrils were again aware of the perfume.

“Thanks ever so much,” she smiled, reaching out for the silk-and-tortoiseshell trinket.

Then their fingers touched, and recollection, like a flood long pent, submerged Grandison’s social consciousness. For the perfume was the perfume of the Curzon Street dining-room; and the hand, the sensuous hand of Alix Lawley, was the hand of the woman in the Picture. . . .

But that’s impossible,” said Grandison savagely to his savage mind. “That’s utterly impossible. The perfume may be the same. It may even have been her handkerchief. Why not? She admitted she went to the house with her fiancé. But her hand . . . No. It couldn’t have been her hand. . . .” For many minutes—his manners and his fellow-men alike forgotten—he pulled furiously at the huge cigar which Lady Marchmont’s butler had pressed on him. The cigar-smoke began to hypnotize him, as the smoke of Ka-lu’s fires had once hypnotized. Vaguely, in the haze of it, hovered some personal premonition. Once more he grew conscious of power. Once more he saw Woman-with-a-Broom. But this time, remembering his oath, he bade Woman-with-a-Broom begone. . . .

A dance was to be sequel to the dinner; and soon Lady Marchmont’s butler reappears to remind the cigar-smokers that “Her Ladyship hoped they wouldn’t be too long over their Port, as the ball was just beginning.”

Moodily, that George Grandison who had once followed Ka-lu, the witch doctor, to where, in the depths of the jungle, the sorcerers of all Papua foregathered to dance that “Dance of Innocent Blood” which only one white

man has ever seen, followed his fellow-guests up the great staircase. Moodily, he eluded his hostess. Moodily, he made his way to the far doorway of the ballroom.

The glare of the place blinded him. The thumping music deafened his ears. Through that thumping music he could hear himself saying to himself: "The whole thing's absurd. I'm not in Papua. The black magic of the Papuans doesn't run in London."

The music stopped and with the comparative silence of its stopping, Grandison regained control of his brain. Not supernatural magic, but perfectly natural sequence of events had brought it about that he should make the acquaintance of the girl who had dropped her handkerchief in the dining-room of 18a, Curzon Street. Alix Lawley's sensuous hand could not be the same hand which he had seen in the auto-hypnotic Picture.

Curiously, he began to speculate about Alix Lawley—about her engagement. Engagements, in post-war London, meant little enough. There was the house though. No man in his senses would buy a house on the off-chance of a girl marrying him. And suddenly, mindful of his decision as he drove down Curzon Street, mindful of that sensuousness which was Alix Lawley's supreme attraction, he thought: "*My* house! *My* woman! Whoever the man is, he shan't have either of them." Now all the unreined instincts, furiously awake, drove him to prowl the ballroom in search of Alix.

The girl, however, had disappeared; and soon the music, recommencing, brought his prowling to a standstill. "What the devil can have happened to her?" he muttered, as his eyes, roaming vainly among the crowd, found only a bewilderment of fox-trotting figures.

Somehow, those fox-trotting figures fascinated Grandison. Somehow they reminded him of another dance—the "Death Dance" of the Papuans, wherefrom a man singled out the enemy who had robbed him of hut and woman. . . .

Up and down the ballroom flickered the fox-trotting figures; up and down the ballroom, following their every movement, flickered the grey-green eyes of George Grandison; till at last, flickering no longer, they concentrated—concentrated on his enemy.

His enemy—Alix at his side—had just entered the ballroom. Grandison watched the girl yield herself to his enemy's arms; watched his enemy's

gloveless hand spread-eagle below the glimmer of her shoulders as the dance took them.

"Looking on, Sir George?" commented a voice—Mrs. Winterton's—at his elbow.

"Yes. Looking on." Grandison's eyes never moved.

"One sees most of the game that way, doesn't one?"

"So they say."

"You're not a dancing man yourself?"

"No. I'm afraid I'm not civilized enough for this kind of dancing. Tell me,"—Grandison's tone was tense, for now his enemy drew closer and closer to where he stood—"who's the man dancing with your niece?"

"Oh, that," the biographer of celebrities burst to chatter; "that's Charlie Smallwood. Alix has been threatening to marry him for months. The family's against it, of course; and small wonder after the way he treated his wife. Poor Irene! Perhaps it was as well she died when she did. He treated her vilely, vilely—" But when—the beckoning Alix safely out of earshot—Mrs. Winterton turned to continue her gossip, Sir George Grandison had disappeared.

For the fingers of Sir George Grandison's enemy—those fingers spread-eagled below the glimmer of Alix Lawley's shoulders—were sparse-haired as the fingers of that hand which had dropped the powdered death at 18a, Curzon Street!

At twenty minutes past eleven on the night of Lady Marchmont's dinner-dance, Sir George Grandison, staggering like a drunken man, let himself into his sitting-room at the Savoy Hotel, and sank heavily to a chair. Mrs. Winterton's last words still rang in his ears. His eyes still saw Alix Lawley and those sparse-haired fingers spread-eagled below the glimmer of Alix Lawley's shoulders. "My God!" he muttered. "My God!" For a long while consecutive thought failed him. His brain felt dazed as though from the blow of the executioner's club. Escaping from Papua, he had thought to keep the oath sworn, to escape from the black magic, from sorcery, and witchcraft and from all those evil, abnormal things which God in His wisdom banishes to the far places of the earth. But for him, apparently, there was no escape. Once spilt, the Innocent Blood might not be unspilt. Once learned, the black magic of Papua remained with a man. "The

sin of witchcraft," he muttered. "I broke my oath to the white man's God. In thought, I spilt me the Innocent Blood. I made me the Mirror. I looked upon the Picture, and the Picture has shewn me that Alix must die. That is my punishment—the punishment I asked of the white man's God if I broke faith with Him."

For now, definitely, George Grandison's dazed soul knew that every fibre in his body desired Alix Lawley for wife.

Still staggering, he rose to his feet and making for the bedroom, undressed. Sleep he knew, would be impossible. Yet the normal action of taking off clothes helped ever so little to clarify his dazed mind.

Gradually his brain, ousting superstition, began to reassert itself. There must be some explanation, some perfectly natural explanation of the auto-hypnotic picture he had seen in Curzon Street, of the strange events which had followed on that seeing. He argued with himself, desperately, savagely, that all men's hands were cast in more or less the same mould; that his own, for instance, though hairless, were almost as flat-thumbed as the hand in the Picture. The argument comforted him; and he began to search for the handkerchief. But the handkerchief, as is the habit of handkerchiefs, had disappeared, and strive as he might, Grandison could not find it. "It *must* have been hers, though," he muttered, returning in his pyjamas to the sitting-room.

But at that he seemed to smell the perfume again, and sheer desire for the girl's beauty took him in every fibre. Civilization and commonsense were torn from him. He saw red. All the unreined instincts of fifteen years blotted out the white man he was, leaving only the primitive he had been. This other, this enemy, must never possess that house of his coveting—must never possess Alix Lawley. Was it not fated—had not he, Ka-lu's pupil, seen it in the Mirror-of-Life which cannot lie—that possessing Alix, this other, this enemy, would slay her with the powdered death?

And now, suddenly, as the girl's own words and the words of Mrs. Winterton echoed in his subconscious mind, it seemed to Grandison as though a great light shone upon the Future. Not for nothing had he spilt the Innocent Blood! Not for nothing had he dared the forbidden things! Not for nothing had the Woman-with-a-Broom swept away that dust with which the gods of the white men seek to blind their meat-fed eyes. Not for nothing had he seen in the Picture that Certainty which is forbidden.

Surely the meaning of the Picture was plain. Surely, it was clear that even as Ka-lu had promised he, George Grandison, was Master of the Days-

to-Come. Surely his enemy, that enemy who had plotted to rob him of his hut and his woman would be foiled in his plotting. Surely, not the black magic of the Papuans but the white magic of an Infinite Wisdom had enabled him to foresee the Future. . .

Her ladyship will be a quarter-of-an-hour late for dinner, Sir George. She says will you please wait?" Alix's maid, the message given, disappeared, leaving her master alone in the book-shelved library of 18a, Curzon Street. "Those ridiculous seances," he thought.

Though scarcely a year had gone by since those delirious weeks whose culmination had been Grandison's capture of the girl now his wife from his enemy, he already knew—as he sat there black-jacketed for the evening meal—that one day his passion for her would wane; foresaw, moreover, with the subconscious foreknowledge of jealousy, that when that day came, some other man would win her from him, even as he had won her from Smallwood. . . .

Yet it was still good to remember that morning after Lady Marchmont's dance when he had sought out the actual owner of 18a, Curzon Street and persuaded him, cheque-book in hand, to break off negotiations with the man Smallwood—that afternoon in Mrs. Winterton's severely furnished sitting-room when he had dangled before Alix's covetous eyes his ownership of the house for which she had admitted she "would sell her soul"—that evening when, all her feigned reluctances to break faith with his enemy abandoned, she had yielded her body to his arms and her mouth to his kisses.

How it maddened him to press that first triumphant kiss on the scarlet of her mouth, and feel every unbridled instinct in him leap in anticipation of her possession. How it had satisfied his madness to know her his—this white woman for whose sake, spilling the Innocent Blood, he had learned him the Power which decreed, as surely as Ka-lu himself, that she should be saved from the powdered death to be mistress of his house and mother of his children . . . God, forsooth! Who was God? In those delirious weeks, he, George Grandison, had been his own god, Master of the Days-to-Come.

How came it, then, that now—now when Days-to-Come were Days-that-Are—now when his subconscious foreknowledge of jealousy most craved the Power—now when he would have sold his soul for certainty of the Future—mastery should have gone out of him? How came it that Alix had never borne him a child? that sometimes, waking in the night, it would seem to him as though there rang from out of those empty nurseries above the

room where they slept together, the cries of that other child—the brown baby whom old Ka-lu's knife . . .

Those were the times when George Grandison shuddered to see the woman sleeping so quietly beside him; when the white glimmer of her shoulders, the dark glimmer of her hair, inspired once more that repulsion of which he had been momentarily conscious at their first meeting. Those were the times when hate and fear and the foreknowledge of jealousy made chaos of his mind; when, passion no longer blinding him, he knew contempt for this faith-breaking woman he had married; for this brainless fool who dabbled with parlour-magic as she dabbled with life, whose chatter crackled endlessly, as thorns crackle under a pot, of "Spiritualism" and "ectoplasmic chords" and "soul-photographs" and all those futile tricks with which fee'd mediums titillate the literary drawing-rooms of London.

"Those ridiculous seances," he thought again. "I wonder why the devil she wastes her time over such balderdash."

The dinner-gong rumbling without broke the trend of Grandison's thought; and as the door of the library opened to reveal Alix, he forgot, as he always did forget, in the delirious ecstasy of her physical presence, all fear, all hatred, all foreknowledge of jealousy. His eyes still saw her as that woman whom, a year since, every fibre of him had desired to madness. Even as then, that vivid, vital personality, those red lips half-parted, those pale shoulders and the hint of draped bosom thereunder, thrilled every savage instinct to which he had given rein during fifteen years spent out of sight, almost out of thought, of white women.

Alix's frock was white as her bridal frock had been, its whiteness faintly redolent with the remembered perfume. Passionately George Grandison kissed her half-parted lips.

And that mood was still on Sir George Grandison as he followed his wife out of the library, across the hall, and through the door the footman held open for them into the pale-panelled, bracket-lit radiance of the dining-room. It seemed to him as though the whole apartment had been fashioned to be shrine to that vivid, vital beauty which was Alix's; as though no flowers save those perfumeless purple orchids which decked the dinner table could have so enhanced the glimmer of her shoulders; no background save the red marble of that chimneypiece so thrown into significance the jewelless bridal-white of her dinner-frock. His lips yearned to tell her these

things, but the constraint of a civilized meal-time was on him. He ate swiftly and in silence, his eyes turning sideways to seek hers.

Alix, too, was unusually silent that night, so that it appeared to him as though she, even as he, were passion-conscious; as though her lips, even as his own, were fearful of betraying her secret thoughts before their serving-men.

But as the meal drew to its end, Alix broke the silence; and began to chatter, half in jest and half in earnest, about the afternoon's seance. "Really, George, it was quite thrilling. We all sat in a circle, holding hands. No lights of any sort—that's forbidden, you know."

"Forbidden?" Grandison, his eyes still devouring her beauty, spoke almost without thought.

"Rather! All sorts of things are forbidden. Two women, for instance, mustn't sit together. You have to have a man next you. That's what makes it so exciting."

At that, for the fraction of an instant, the foreknowledge of jealousy turned to actual suspicion in Grandison's mind. Never before had Alix admitted that in those seances which he held in such contempt certain things were "forbidden"; never before had he realized that those afternoons which took her away from him set her beside some other man—set her hand, that sensuous hand which, seen against the dark of the mahogany, was even now thrilling him, in another's.

The last of their serving-men brought coffee; put the Port-filled decanter between them, and withdrew. Now there was neither foreknowledge of jealousy nor any suspicion but only the yearning that Alix should admit her passion for him, in Grandison's mind.

"I wish you'd give up these seances," he said; and his voice, as he poured the wine into her glass, was hoarse with suppressed emotion.

"Why?" Alix blushed ever so faintly, but Grandison's passion-blinded eyes did not see.

"Because I hate the very thought of any other man touching you."

"But, my dear, that's ridiculous." Alix laughed as she spoke, but Grandison's ears, grown suddenly acute, caught a hint of furtiveness in her laughter.

"Ridiculous or not," he said abruptly, "I hate it, and I forbid it."

“You mustn’t be too jealous of me, George.” Again Alix laughed; and now, though the furtiveness had gone out of her laughter, her words roused all the passionate savage in her husband.

“Jealous? Of course, I’m jealous. Who wouldn’t be jealous at the thought of his wife sitting hand-in-hand with strange men listening to the infernal balderdash of a medium?”

“It isn’t balderdash, George. And the men aren’t strangers. They’re all friends.”

Friends!” snarled Grandison. “And who are these men friends of yours? It’s the first I’ve heard of them.”

She did not answer; and he repeated his question. “These friends of yours—these men friends—who are they?”

“Oh, all sorts of people.” Again Alix blushed, and this time his eyes fastened on her blushes.

“Don’t prevaricate,” he shot at her. “And don’t lie to me. You say these men aren’t strangers. Who are they then? I want to know their names and more particularly I want to know the name of the man you were with,” the words hissed in Grandison’s throats, “this afternoon.”

For a long while, the woman made no answer; for a long while, all his present passion for that which she had been and yet was to him fighting all his foreknowledged jealousy of that which she might some day be to some other man, Grandison watched her. Once more he yearned for the Power, for that Power to which he had won by the spilling of Innocent Blood. If only Woman-with-a-Broom would sweep the dust from his mortal eyes and shew him Enemy-of-the-Future as she had shewn him Enemy-of-the-Past. But the Power had gone out of him; and he could only grope, grope blindly after that Certainty which is forbidden.

At last Alix spoke. “And if I won’t tell you?”

“You *must* tell me.”

“Very well, then, I will tell you. Only,”—she laughed for the third time, and now it seemed to him there could be no doubt her laughter were cloak of some guilty secret—“you mustn’t make a fuss about it. You see,” she was chattering now, and her chatter maddened him, “it never happened before, and if you don’t approve, it shan’t ever happen again. As a matter of fact,

when I went to the seance this afternoon, I didn't even know that Charles was going to be there—"

"Charles? Charles Smallwood?" The words were a wolf's growls between Grandison's teeth.

"Yes. Charles Smallwood. You're not going to be angry about it, are you, George?"

As she spoke, Alix, feigning nonchalance, lifted her glass to her lips, so that the candlelight, shimmering through the ruby of the wine, shewed the white of her bridal frock as blood-red to her husband's staring eyes. Then, as she set down the empty glass and averted her countenance to hide the blushes which she could feel hot in all her veins, some Power, some Evil Power against which he dared not fight, drew Grandison's eyes from her hand, white and sensuous and unmoving, to his own—to the flat-thumbed hand whose fingers already shewed, under the clenched pallor of their skin, a hint of those sparse hairs which he had seen in the Picture.

And at that very moment, crouched red-eyed over the smouldering centre-fire of a pile-built Papuan hut, Ka-lu, son of Ka-lu, listened to the chuckling wisdom of his father.

"Thus," chuckled Ka-lu, father of Ka-lu, fingering the blood-stained knife at his belt, "thus by the spilling of blood art thou Master of the Days-to-Come. Yet remember, remember always—for this is the secret of secrets—that he who spills the Innocent Blood to look upon Mirror-of-Life, sees in that Mirror no man's future save his own."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *The Sin of Witchcraft* by Gilbert Frankau]